

PROTECTION STATUS AND CONTEMPORARY FUNCTIONS OF LINGNAN GARDENS IN GUANGDONG, CHINA: A CASE STUDY OF YUYIN GARDEN*

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Abstract

Lingnan gardens, an important component of the classical Chinese garden system, are currently facing increasing pressure from urbanization, tourism development, and the preservation of living heritage. This study takes Yuyin Garden in Guangdong Province as an example, exploring the current state of preservation and contemporary functions of Lingnan gardens through a qualitative case study. The research focuses on two dimensions: the current state of preservation and the garden's contemporary uses and functions. Data collection methods include literature review, field visits, photographic documentation, and interviews with garden managers, staff, and users, and qualitative interpretation methods are used for analysis. The results show that Yuyin Garden has been effectively protected within a multi-layered heritage protection framework, and its material structure, spatial structure, and core landscape features have been largely preserved. Simultaneously, the garden has successfully transformed from a traditional private garden into a public cultural

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space integrating tourism, cultural display, education, and leisure activities. However, the study also found that the garden still faces many challenges, including tourism pressure, the coordination between preservation and utilization, and how to better protect intangible cultural values and spatial atmosphere. Overall, the case of Yuyin Garden demonstrates that the sustainable development of Lingnan gardens depends on maintaining the authenticity of the heritage while considering contemporary adaptive use. This study provides practical reference for the protection and management of similar historical gardens in Guangdong and other regions.

Keywords: Lingnan gardens, Yuyin Garden, heritage conservation, contemporary functions, adaptive reuse

Introduction

Lingnan gardens constitute an important branch of the Chinese garden system and are distinguished by strong regional characteristics shaped by the natural, historical, and cultural environment of southern China. As one of the three major traditions of Chinese classical gardens, alongside northern imperial gardens and Jiangnan private gardens, Lingnan gardens embody distinctive spatial organization, architectural craftsmanship, and aesthetic principles, while also serving as a material expression of Guangfu culture. Compared with Jiangnan gardens, Lingnan gardens place greater emphasis on the relationship between architecture and the subtropical environment, reflecting local adaptation in plant arrangement, spatial layout, and climatic responsiveness. In the context of rapid urbanization and the expansion of cultural consumption in China, the preservation and appropriate utilization of traditional gardens have become increasingly important issues in both academic research and heritage practice. Among the surviving examples of Lingnan gardens, Yuyin Garden is one of the most representative and well-preserved historic sites. Built during the Qing

dynasty in Panyu District, Guangzhou, it retains the essential features of a traditional Lingnan private garden in terms of architectural style, spatial composition, and landscape design. Its plant arrangement also reflects the well-known Lingnan garden characteristic of “flowers in all seasons and tropical scenery,” demonstrating how classical gardens in subtropical regions responded to local ecological conditions. In recent decades, Yuyin Garden has gradually shifted from a private garden into a public heritage site that supports tourism, cultural display, education, and leisure activities. This transformation makes it a valuable case for examining how traditional Lingnan gardens are preserved and reinterpreted in the contemporary urban context. At the policy level, the conservation of traditional gardens has been increasingly incorporated into China’s broader heritage protection strategy. In Guangdong Province and Guangzhou City, a number of regulations and administrative measures have strengthened the institutional framework for the protection of historic gardens, and Yuyin Garden has been identified as a key protected site within this framework. As a result, its conservation practices are significant not only for understanding the management of a single heritage garden, but also for illustrating how Lingnan gardens are being repositioned within local cultural development and public cultural life. However, heritage protection in contemporary society is not limited to preserving physical form alone. Gardens such as Yuyin Garden also face growing pressures related to tourism intensity, everyday public use, authenticity management, and the preservation of intangible cultural meanings and spatial ambience. Existing studies on Lingnan gardens have mainly focused on their historical value, artistic characteristics, cultural symbolism, or selected conservation issues. Although such studies provide an important foundation, integrated research that examines both the protection status and the contemporary uses and functions of Lingnan gardens remains relatively limited. In particular, there is still a need for empirical case

based analysis showing how heritage conservation and modern public utilization interact in practice. Addressing this gap, the present study takes Yuyin Garden as a qualitative case study and investigates it from two interrelated dimensions: protection status and contemporary functions. By doing so, the study seeks to clarify the current situation of Lingnan gardens in Guangdong, China, and to provide practical reference for the conservation, adaptive use, and sustainable management of similar historic gardens.

Objectives

1. In order to examine the current state of preservation of Yuyin Garden, a typical Lingnan garden.
2. In order to Know the contemporary uses and functions of Yuyin Garden within the context of urban cultural heritage preservation and public utilization.

Literature Review

Lingnan gardens are an important component of the classical Chinese garden system, exhibiting strong regional characteristics in their spatial layout, architectural forms, and plant design. Compared to northern imperial gardens and Jiangnan private gardens, Lingnan gardens are more closely integrated with the subtropical environment and southern cultural identity (He, 2025; Liang, 2024). Among them, Yuyin Garden is widely recognized as one of the most representative and best-preserved private gardens in Lingnan, possessing significant value in terms of artistic features, heritage preservation, and spatial composition (Chen, 2022; Liu, 2018). Its plant layout also reflects the Lingnan garden's characteristic of "flowers in all seasons, tropical style" (Wang, 2023). Recent research further indicates that Yuyin Garden has gradually transformed from a traditional private garden into a public cultural heritage site integrating tourism, cultural display, and leisure functions (Zhang, 2021).

Meanwhile, local policy research shows that the institutionalization of historical garden protection in Guangzhou is increasing, providing stronger support for the protection and management of Yuyin Garden (Li, 2024). However, existing research still focuses more on individual aspects such as artistic value, conservation, or adaptive reuse, while few studies have comprehensively examined Yuyin Garden from the perspectives of both its current state of preservation and its contemporary function (Li, 2020). Therefore, this study takes Yuyin Garden as an example to fill this research gap.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study approach, using Yuyin Garden in Guangdong Province, China, as the research case. The study focuses on two dimensions: current state of conservation and contemporary uses and functions. The qualitative research design is appropriate because it allows for an in-depth examination of Yuyin Garden within its authentic cultural heritage context. Data collection methods include literature review, semi-structured interviews, field observation, and photographic documentation. Literature reviews establish the research background and policy environment, while interviews with garden managers, staff, and users provide information on management status, usage patterns, and existing problems. Field observation and photographic documentation document spatial characteristics, facilities, plant arrangements, and actual site use. The collected data are qualitatively analyzed according to the two research dimensions mentioned above.

Results

This study is divided into two parts based on its research objectives: the current state of preservation of Yuyin Garden and its contemporary uses and functions. Overall, the results indicate that Yuyin Garden has been preserved

under a relatively stable multilayered heritage protection system, while simultaneously transforming into a multifunctional public cultural space. Its physical structure, core spatial layout, and representative landscape elements have been largely preserved; however, increasing tourism pressure and intensifying public use have presented new challenges to coordinating preservation and utilization. At the same time, Yuyin Garden has evolved from a traditional private garden into a public space integrating tourism, cultural display, education, and leisure, demonstrating the adaptive transformation of Lingnan gardens in the contemporary urban context.



Figure 1 Yuyin Garden Archway. Source: Photo by the author, 2026.

4.1 Current Status of Yuyin Garden's Protection

The survey results indicate that Yuyin Garden has established a relatively complete heritage protection system. Its protection level has gradually increased from the municipal level to the provincial level, and ultimately reached the level of a national key cultural heritage site, reflecting the increasing importance that institutions place on this site. In terms of management, Yuyin Garden has shifted from a traditional maintenance model to a professional governance model characterized by government leadership and formal administrative management. Modern protection measures, including digital recording, monitoring systems, and

emergency management facilities, have also enhanced Yuyin Garden's protection capabilities.

Regarding restoration practices, Yuyin Garden has generally adhered to the principle of maintaining its original historical appearance. Multiple restoration activities have been carried out within the garden, repairing architectural structures, protecting materials, and restoring damaged landscape elements. A typical example is the phased restoration of missing doors and windows using traditional techniques, which not only restored the practical function of the space but also strengthened the artistic and cultural value of Lingnan garden architecture. Furthermore, daily maintenance mechanisms such as ancient tree protection, pest and disease control, and security patrols have also contributed to the continued protection of the site. However, the research also revealed several challenges, including the pressure from the ever-increasing number of visitors, the difficulty in balancing conservation and public use, insufficient attention to intangible cultural elements, and the long-term sustainability of funding for refined conservation.

Table 1 Protection Status of Yuyin Garden

Analysis Dimension	Specific Performance	Key Measures	Existing Challenges
Protection Grade & System	Multi-level protection system;government-led management	Upgraded to Major National Historical and Cultural Site (2001);managed by Panyu Tourism Bureau since 2002	/
Digital & Management Protection	Modernized protection capacity; coordinated with public use	3D digital archives, monitoring and emergency systems	Insufficient attention to non-material elements
Renovation Practice	Adheres to "repair the old to its original	Three major renovations; restoration of 74 doors/windows with	Humid-hot climate; shortage of traditional artisans

	state"; localized craftsmanship	traditional craftsmanship	
Daily Maintenance	Regular maintenance mechanism	Ancient tree conservation, pest control, safety	/
Balance of	Key tourist spot; realizes public use	Monitoring Open as a tourist scenic spot for	Tension between
Protection &	value	appreciation and cultural	protection and
Utilization		communication	growing tourist numbers
Funding Guarantee	Government-led funding model	Government financial support for protection work	Unsustainable for long-term refined protection

4.2 Contemporary Uses and Functions of Yuyin Garden

The research results further demonstrate that the functions of Yuyin Garden have undergone significant changes over time. After more than 150 years of historical evolution, it has transformed from a private garden serving a single family into a multifunctional public cultural space. Its functions are no longer limited to aesthetic appreciation and heritage display, but encompass tourism, public education, cultural exchange, urban leisure, and community-oriented public activities. This functional expansion reflects a trend from a single purpose private garden to a comprehensive model encompassing exhibitions, education, leisure, and cultural dissemination.

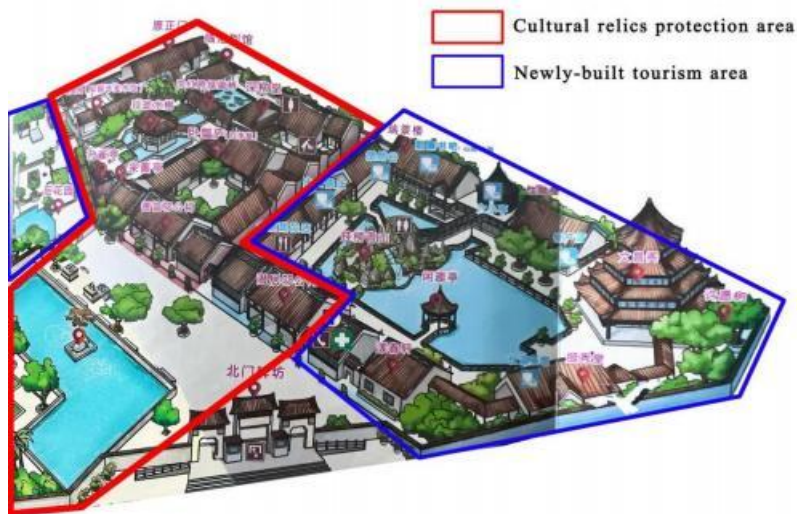


Figure 2 Yuyin Garden Guide Map

Source: Photo by the author, 2026.



Figure 3 Family Tradition and Integrity Culture Base

Source: Photo by the author, Jan 2026.

Tourism and exhibitions remain Yuyin Garden's most prominent and influential functions. As a national 4A-level tourist attraction, Yuyin Garden utilizes its relatively complete spatial layout, historical buildings, and representative landscapes to showcase Lingnan garden culture to the public. Simultaneously, through lectures, learning programs, themed exhibitions, and media promotion, Yuyin Garden has also acquired stronger educational and cultural exchange functions, helping visitors better understand garden history, family traditions, and Lingnan cultural values. Furthermore, Yuyin Garden has now become an urban public cultural space, hosting people's daily leisure activities as well as public activities such as festivals, performances, and exhibitions. These changes indicate that Yuyin Garden's value orientation has diverged significantly from that of traditional private gardens: it has shifted from private enjoyment to public service, and from a single function to a multifaceted socio cultural role.

Despite these positive developments, research has also found that contemporary uses have brought new contradictions. Exhibition and tourism oriented uses have enhanced Yuyin Garden's public visibility and social impact, but may also simplify its cultural connotations and put pressure on the garden's historical atmosphere and authenticity. Therefore, the current state of Yuyin Garden reflects both the success of living heritage preservation and the ongoing challenge of striking a balance between cultural transmission, public participation, and long-term heritage protection.

Table 3 Main Sites in the Old Area of Yuyin Garden (National Cultural Heritage Site)

Site Name	Photo	Description
Hongyu L ü yun (Red Rain and Green Clouds)		One of the famous scenes in Yuyin Garden. It combines flowers, plants, and water, showing the Lingnan garden style with rich plants and layered space.
Huanhong Kualü (Bridge over Red and Green)		A bridge landscape that connects different spaces in the garden. It is an important visual point and shows the idea of “garden
Shenliu Cangzhen (Deep Willows Hide Treasures)		Willow trees are used to create a quiet and secluded space, with plants shaping the style of the space.
Shenliu Hall		One of the main buildings in the garden. It has fine wood carvings and decorations and shows the high level of Lingnan garden architecture in the Qing Dynasty.
Linchi Bieguan (Waterside Pavilion)		A building built near the water for viewing and resting. It shows the close relation between buildings and water in Lingnan gardens.
Wopiaolu (Wopiaolu Studio)		A small and simple building with a human scale. It shows the living and relaxing function of a traditional private garden.
Linglong Shuixie (Linglong Waterside Pavilion)		A light structure near the water. It works with water and plants to create an open and clear space feeling.
Wenchang Pavilion		A traditional-style building with cultural meaning. It is used as a place for visiting and cultural display.
Guabang Qingshan (Hanging List Green Hill)		A landscape area with rocks and plants that adds depth and layers to the garden space.
Xianqu Pavilion (Leisure Pavilion)		A small pavilion for resting and viewing. It creates a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere for visitors.

Source: Photo by the author, Jan 2026.

4.2 Contemporary Uses and Functions of Yuyin Garden

The research further indicates that Yuyin Garden has undergone a significant functional transformation over time. After more than 150 years of historical evolution, it has transformed from a private garden serving a single family into a multifunctional public cultural space. Its functions are no longer limited to aesthetic appreciation and heritage display, but encompass tourism, public education, cultural exchange, urban leisure, and community-oriented public activities. This functional expansion reflects a trend from single-purpose private use to a comprehensive model encompassing exhibitions, education, entertainment, and cultural dissemination. Tourism and exhibitions remain the garden's most prominent and influential functions. As a national 4A-level tourist attraction, Yuyin Garden utilizes its relatively complete spatial layout, historical buildings, and representative landscapes to showcase Lingnan garden culture to the public. At the same time, through lectures, learning programs, themed exhibitions, and media promotion, Yuyin Garden's educational and cultural dissemination functions have been strengthened, helping visitors better understand the garden's history, family traditions, and Lingnan cultural values. Furthermore, Yuyin Garden has now become an urban public cultural space supporting daily leisure and hosting public events such as festivals, performances, and exhibitions. These changes indicate that Yuyin Garden's current value orientation is distinctly different from that of traditional private gardens: it has shifted from private enjoyment to public service, and from a single function to a multifaceted socio-cultural role. Despite these positive developments, research has also found that contemporary uses have brought new contradictions. Uses oriented towards exhibitions and tourism have enhanced the garden's public visibility and social impact, but may also simplify its cultural connotations and put pressure on its historical atmosphere and authenticity. Therefore, the current state of Yuyin Garden reflects both the success of living heritage preservation and

the ongoing challenge of striking a balance between cultural transmission, public participation, and long-term heritage protection.

Discussion

The research results indicate that, through multi level institutional support, professional management, and restoration practices guided by historical authenticity, the heritage protection level of Yuyin Garden has reached a relatively stable level. This helps explain why its main architectural features, spatial layout, and representative landscape elements have been largely preserved. However, the study also shows that the protection work has not been without its challenges. The increasing number of tourists, the development of tourism, and intensive public use have continuously put pressure on the protection of authenticity management, spatial atmosphere, and intangible cultural heritage. Therefore, the case of Yuyin Garden demonstrates that the protection of Lingnan gardens should not be limited to material restoration but should also include long-term governance, cultural interpretation, and achieving a better balance between protection and public participation. This view is consistent with previous studies emphasizing the heritage value of Yuyin Garden and the importance of policy and institutional protection for historical Lingnan gardens (Chen, 2022; Li, 2024). The study also shows that Yuyin Garden has transformed from a traditional private garden into a multifunctional public cultural space integrating tourism, cultural display, education, and leisure, with a significant change in its function. This transformation indicates that contemporary use is not necessarily contrary to heritage protection; on the contrary, it can provide new channels for the inheritance and continuous exploration of Lingnan garden culture. However, the research also points out that expanding public use may lead to superficial cultural consumption, meaning that while awareness may increase, deeper cultural understanding may be diminished. In this sense, Yuyin

Garden embodies both the success and complexity of adaptive use of heritage in contemporary society. Its experience shows that the sustainable development of Lingnan gardens depends on achieving a balance between authenticity, cultural connotation, and adaptive public function, so that heritage can be both protected and retain its social significance in a constantly changing urban environment.

Recommendation

Based on the findings, it is recommended that Yuyin Garden further strengthen the balance between heritage conservation and contemporary public use by paying greater attention not only to physical preservation, but also to intangible cultural values, spatial ambience, and cultural interpretation. Management strategies should also improve visitor guidance, educational activities, and public communication to support the sustainable transmission of Lingnan garden culture. From an international perspective, multilingual interpretation, cross cultural communication, and international academic cooperation should be enhanced so that Yuyin Garden can serve not only as a local heritage site, but also as a platform for presenting Lingnan garden culture to a broader global audience. Future studies may compare Yuyin Garden with other Lingnan gardens and similar historic gardens abroad to explore wider approaches to adaptive conservation and international heritage exchange.

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