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"Wind" and "Earth" Dialogue: A Study on the Connotation and Protection Strategy of "Water-Distributing Shrine" Landscape Structure—Taking Taiyuan City as an Example

Ruijie Zhang [1], Xinyuan Jiang [2], Haoran Li [3] and Zhe Zhang [4,*]

[1] Department of Architectural, Building Construction and Urbanism Technology, Escola Tècnica Superior d'Arquitectura de Barcelona, Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, 08034 Barcelona, Spain; zhangruijiee@outlook.com
[2] School of Architecture and Urban Planning, Huazhong University of Science and Technology, Wuhan 430074, China; xinyuanjiang_hust@outlook.com
[3] Department of Philosophy, Universitat Autònoma of Barcelona, 08193 Barcelona, Spain; 1677027@uab.cat
[4] Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Melbourne, VIC 3000, Australia
* Correspondence: s3705625@student.rmit.edu.au

Abstract: In the dialogue between "wind" and "earth", terroir-built heritage and the natural environment together construct the cultural landscape of agrarian civilization. Understanding historical heritage within the broader landscape system and recognizing the cultural connotations and collective spatial memory embedded in this dialogue are crucial for identifying the value of heritage, excavating urban history, and promoting high-quality development. This article examines the Water-distributing Shrine landscape structure (WSLS)—a Japanese model comprising four spatial elements: focus, boundary, direction, and domain—and explores its relevance for interpreting the spatial logic of Chinese historical cities. The study adopts a visual-analytical method combining literature review, historical document analysis, field observation, and diagrammatic interpretation. Through a case study of Taiyuan, a city shaped by the Fen River and surrounding mountain systems, this study analyzes the historical characteristics of WSLS elements, reconstructs Taiyuan's cultural landscape structure, and proposes integrated heritage conservation strategies. Rather than treating cultural relics as isolated objects, the approach emphasizes structural relationships between nature and culture, revealing how spatial configuration encodes collective values. This study aims to preserve the spatial logic and symbolic landscape system of agrarian civilizations and offers a reference for other Chinese cities seeking to rediscover and protect their historical landscape heritage.

Keywords: terroir landscape; heritage conservation; landscape elements; landscape structure

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1. Introduction

In the agrarian period, people had a unique perception of the land and other natural environments in the processes of production and life, which gave rise to the customs and cultural characteristics of a place. In Japan, more than 80% of the land area is mountainous. Compared to countries with vast plains or deserts, mountains are much more important in the construction of urban landscapes. The precious cultivated land also enables the Japanese people to have a unique perception and common emotion of "earth (土)" in the farming society and gives this perception a cultural connotation, thus creating a unique "wind (风)" custom culture [1]. In the dialogue between "wind" and "earth" (风与土), the typical terroir landscape in the period of Japanese farming civilization was formed,

in which the built heritage, as the crystallization of civilization, became a key element of the terroir landscape. Currently, with an emphasis on rapid economic development, it is particularly important for heritage preservation and the improvement of the human environment to explore the cultural connotations behind the dialogue between "wind" and "earth" and to apply them to the planning of contemporary landscape structures.

Japanese scholar Tadahiko Higuchi [2] summarized seven types of terroir landscape structures[1] in Japan in his book The Construction of Landscape, and "Water-distributing Shrine[2]" is one of the seven landscape structures. Higuchi emphasizes that "People can find meaning in the smallest undulations and folds of the land, and their beliefs are based on topography", highlighting the terroir landscape created by human interaction with the natural environment. He discusses the influence of human activities on landscape shaping, describing the content of the "wind" and "earth" dialogue with four elements: "focus", "boundary", "direction", and "domain". Higuchi expanded "imagery" from "people's orientation in urban space" to "group cognition of landscape culture [3]," both as an induction of typical terroir landscapes from the era of Japanese farming civilization and as a preservation of the related remains of Japanese farming culture.

China and Japan have inherited the same farming culture in history, and the working people's belief in the land, the perception of terrain and climate, and the desire for a smooth life are similar. In the process of urban planning in China, the authors found that the cultural heritage of some cities with a long history often appears in succession, and the geographical location has a certain relationship with the structure of the landscape and habitat. For example, in Taiyuan, historical heritage sites tend to cluster near the West Mountain and the Juewei Mountain Pass, reflecting how geography influences the spatial structure of cultural heritage. However, the urban plans often protect these cultural heritages independently and ignore the logic behind the selection and significance of these sites in the overall landscape structure of the city.

To understand historical and cultural heritage in the context of the overall landscape pattern and to enhance the perception of heritage value, this article takes the WSLS as a representative and explores its potential applicability in the context of Chinese cities. At the same time, it is found that many Chinese cities and their surrounding landscape environments share similar elements with the WSLS. Analyzing the typical WSLS provides a reference for other cities of this type in terms of landscape construction, as well as a theoretical basis for the preservation of agrarian-period terroir landscape heritage. This study unfolds in three key phases: theoretical framework development based on Japanese WSLS theory, case investigation including field surveys and historical document reviews in Taiyuan, and spatial analysis to interpret the correlation between cultural heritage sites and natural landscape elements. These phases collectively form the empirical and analytical basis of this research.

The theoretical significance of this research lies in its introduction of the Japanese "Water-distributing Shrine" landscape structure (WSLS) model, offering a new holistic perspective for understanding the historical and cultural heritage of Chinese cities. Compared to traditional research methods that protect cultural heritage in isolation, this study emphasizes the analysis of historical sites within their overall natural geographical context, revealing the inherent logic and cultural connotations of "terroir-built heritage" formed through the long-term interaction between "wind" (cultural customs) and "earth" (natural environment). By drawing on the four key elements of the WSLS model—focus, boundary, direction, and domain—this research aims to construct a systematic analytical framework to deeply understand the interrelationship between urban site selection, the evolution of spatial morphology, cultural accumulation, and the natural environment in historical periods. On the level of practical application, the case study analysis of Taiyuan City in this

research demonstrates that the WSLS model can effectively identify and integrate important historical and cultural nodes and natural environmental elements within a city. This provides a theoretical basis and methodological reference for formulating more holistic and sustainable heritage conservation and urban development strategies. For example, by associating landscape structural elements, the urban landscape construction strategies for Taiyuan proposed in this research aim to break through the limitations of previous independent protection efforts, promote the coordinated development of historical and cultural heritage and the natural environment, and reshape urban cultural spaces with regional characteristics. This not only helps enhance the recognition and inheritance of heritage values but also provides feasible ideas for landscape planning and heritage conservation for other cities with similar natural geographical characteristics and historical and cultural accumulations.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Dialogue Content of "Wind" and "Earth": Structural Elements of WSLS

The meaning of WSLS is that a mountain shape surrounds a basin, a body of water flows through the area, and the shrine, which is an expression of faith, is built at the place where the water comes out of the mountain (the mountain pass) or in the middle and lower reaches of the water (closer to the center of the cultivation area), while the town is located in the basin between the mountain and the river [2]. There are two basic types of structures. In the first type, the confluence of the mountains and the water, which is also the water outlet, becomes the focal point of beliefs, which are often expressed through the installation of ceremonial buildings. In the second type, the structure is located in a small basin surrounded by mountains and hills through which the river flows and differs from the first type in that it is built closer to the middle and lower reaches of the river and closer to the center of the cultivation basin than in the former type (Figure 1).

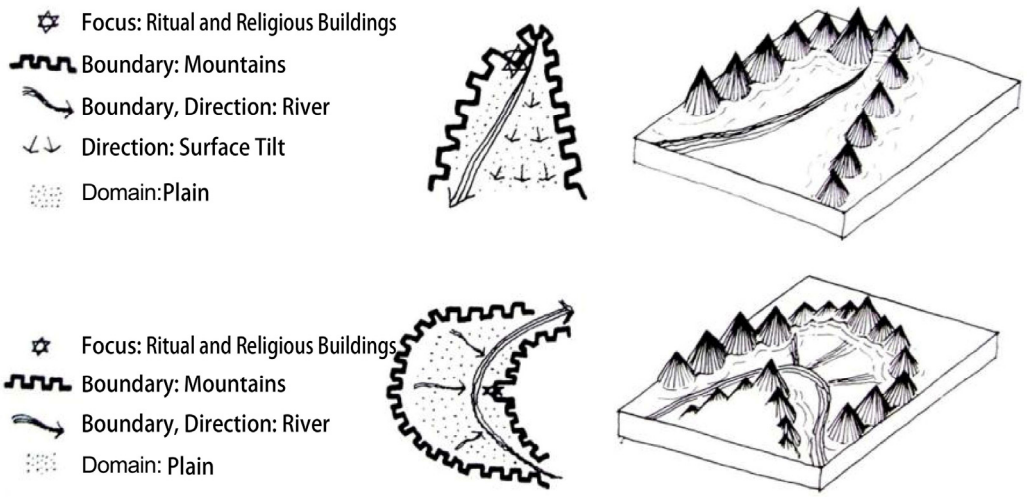


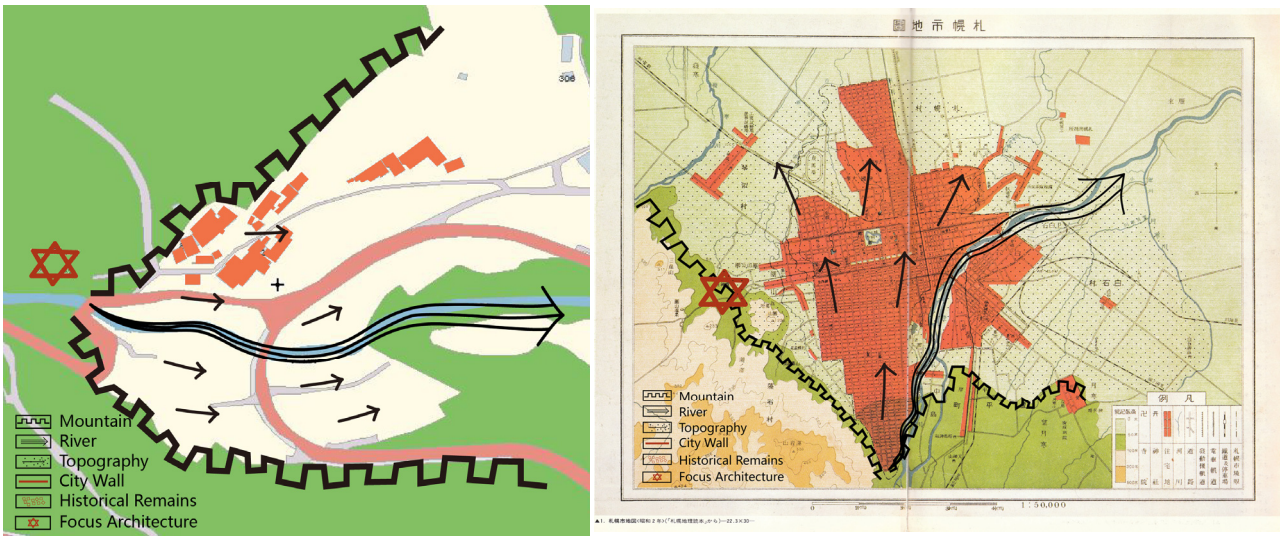
Figure 1. Two basic types of WSLS.

Tadahiko Higuchi describes the pattern of topographical imagery created in the landscape space of the farming society through four elements and summarizes seven typical structures of terrestrial landscapes under the Japanese farming civilization. In WSLS, the "focus" of the four elements is the ceremonial or religious buildings in the connection of mountains and water, which is one of the main types of built heritage; the "boundary" is the surrounding mountains and the river in the middle; at the same time, the direction of the river also serves as a marker of "direction" in the urban landscape space; the fields and

plains between the mountains and the water form the "domain", which is also the main space for people to carry out production and life.

2.1.1. Landscape Faith: "Focus"

"God always looks down at the rice fields and people's dwelling places, and people look up at God, and there is a close relationship of mutual gaze" [2]. Irrigation water was the lifeline of human beings in the farming era. People who admired water sources also revered religion, land, clan, etc. Therefore, important local religious buildings were often built where rivers gushed out of mountains or places with high terrain so that the "gods" could overlook the earth. It is also convenient for farming people to look up to and admire "God". Religious buildings are often formed at the focal points, and the local belief space is spread out around the focal buildings. People's beliefs and common emotions towards the natural environment are the basic logic of human activities and construction in the WSLS. For example, the Karagi Water-distributing shrine[3] in Japan is located in the upper reaches of the Suikoshi River flowing from Mount Karagi (Figure 2a). In Sapporo, the capital city of Hokkaido, Japan, the "focus" is located closer to the center of the basin, in a natural environment typically surrounded by two mountains and one body of water, while Hokkaido Jingu Shrine[4], which represents the highest religious belief in the region, is located on the edge of a mountain in the middle and lower reaches of a river, close to the center of human activity (Figure 2b).



(**a**) (**b**)

Figure 2. (**a**) Japanese case: Karagi Water-distributing shrine area (the shrine is located at the entrance of a river). (**b**) Japan case: Sapporo City (Hokkaido Jingu shrine is located closer to the center of the farming area in the middle and lower reaches of the river, the figure is adapted from the map of Sapporo City, 1967).

2.1.2. City Guard: "Boundaries"

"The ridge around the basin is the boundary demarcating the rice field, and the basin is slightly inclined" [2]. In the WSLS, the mountains on both sides surround the basin, forming the boundary of defense and protection. In the agrarian period, the ruling class achieved the ritual effect by shaping the spatial language and often built religious buildings on the two mountains. The buildings were commanding, serving as the commanding heights of the city and forming a line-of-sight connection with the mountain below, becoming the objects people looked up to. The mountain and religious buildings together constituted the belief space in the city. The mountain is the absolute boundary, and the water

system becomes the relative boundary. "Water" is another important boundary element in the WSLS. In the area of Kamigui Shrine Water-distributing shrine, the water system and the mountain together form the boundary of the town and have a certain impact on a series of activities such as human production and life (Figure 2a).

2.1.3. City Orientation: "Direction"

"The river flowing from the paddy fields upstream to the river downstream is considered to be the path of the gods, and people living by the river are favored by the gods" [2]. The river in the WSLS affects the direction of the city's development. At the origin of civilization, the high-quality soil and terrain conditions in river basins created unique conditions for the development of early farming civilizations, and the early cities were born [4]. The scale of urban construction expanded with the increase in population and the complexity of urban functions, and roads also extended [5]. The extension of roads was mostly influenced by rivers and appeared parallel or vertical to the river course. In addition, further enhancing people's perception of direction in the city (Figure 2a).

2.1.4. Pattern of Land: "Domain"

The so-called domain, in addition to the natural terrain and landform, also refers to the spatial domain constructed by people. People express symbolic meaning through the construction of space and give cultural connotations to the land [6]. The WSLS typically features a tilted basin where the river emerges from the meeting point of two mountains, creating a natural division of space. The mountain and the river entrance create a natural barrier that characterizes the earth pattern of the "Water-distributing Shrine"—the impact plain. The flat terrain and fertile soil create a unique natural geographical environment for the birth of early settlements. The urban space where people lived was sandwiched in the "realm" between mountains and rivers, so the realm became the place where "heaven, people and gods" gathered and also the concentrated embodiment of human construction activities (Figure 2b).

2.2. Comparative Analysis of Water-Related Sacred Landscapes

2.2.1. WSLS and Chinese Urban Planning: A Feng Shui Perspective

China has a long tradition of integrating water systems with sacred landscapes, particularly in Buddhist and Daoist temple planning. Scholars have extensively studied water-related sacred landscapes, focusing on temple hydrology and Feng Shui principles.

Several studies highlight the critical role of water in traditional religious sites in China. Temples and shrines were often built near water sources, symbolizing purity, spiritual cleansing, and geomantic significance. A notable case study supporting this is the examination of the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal during the Qing Dynasty, where the distribution of water god temples along the canal reflects the cultural and spiritual importance of water in these regions [7]. This case study provides insights into how water was integral to religious practices and societal development in China.

The application of Water-distributing Shrine Landscapes (WSLS) in Chinese urban planning necessitates a comparative analysis with traditional Chinese spatial theories, particularly feng shui (风水). Feng shui, an ancient Chinese geomantic system, emphasizes the dynamic relationship between natural elements—wind (风) and water (水)—and human settlements, ensuring prosperity and balance [8]. Similarly, WSLS is structured around the interaction of water sources, terrain, and sacred sites, reflecting an integrated approach to environmental and spiritual harmony. However, key differences exist in their theoretical foundations and spatial implementations.

In feng shui, water is considered a carrier of qi (气, vital energy), shaping the prosperity of a location. Traditional urban designs in China, such as Beijing's Imperial City, utilize

water strategically, with moats, canals, and artificial lakes placed to regulate energy flow and provide protection [9]. This aligns with the hydrological planning of WSLS, which integrates water channels and shrines to manage natural forces. However, while WSLS emphasizes the ritualistic and religious aspects of water management, feng shui incorporates a broader cosmological framework, linking water placement with the Five Elements (五行) and Yin-Yang balance [10].

From a practical perspective, several historical sites in China exhibit characteristics similar to WSLS. For instance, Hangzhou's West Lake, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, integrates water management with cultural and religious symbolism, featuring temples and pavilions designed to harmonize with the natural hydrology [11]. Similarly, Suzhou's classical gardens incorporate water courtyards, following feng shui principles while fulfilling both aesthetic and functional needs [12]. These examples demonstrate that while WSLS originates from Japan, its core principles resonate with traditional Chinese water landscapes, supporting its adaptation within China's urban heritage conservation strategies.

By examining the connections between WSLS and Chinese feng shui-based urban planning, this study bridges the gap between East Asian cultural landscapes, providing a framework for integrating sacred water management principles into modern heritage conservation and sustainable urban planning in China.

2.2.2. International Comparison: WSLS and Similar Concepts in Other Countries

Sacred landscapes associated with water exist in various cultural and religious traditions worldwide. While the Water-distributing Shrine Landscape System (WSLS) has unique characteristics rooted in Japanese history, its core principles—such as the integration of water with spiritual spaces, ritual purification, and hydrological functionality—can be observed in different regions, such as in European monasteries and Indian step wells, highlighting both similarities and distinctive cultural adaptations.

The role of water management in European monastic communities has been widely studied, particularly in the context of medieval Cistercian monasteries. Water is often associated with purification, renewal, and spiritual transformation in religious contexts. For instance, the use of water in baptismal rites and liturgical practices underscores its role in spiritual rebirth and regeneration [13,14]. Scholars such as Mays, L. W., highlight how monastic settlements strategically harnessed natural water sources to sustain agricultural activities, sanitation, and religious practices [15].

Step wells in India have been recognized as architectural and hydrological marvels, deeply intertwined with religious traditions. Research by Shirole, S., explores the historical evolution of step wells, emphasizing their role in water conservation and their association with temple complexes [16]. Additionally, Livingston, M. analyzes the thermal and climatic advantages of step wells, noting how their design provided passive cooling in arid regions while serving as sacred retreats for pilgrims [17]. These studies collectively highlight the multifunctional nature of Indian step wells, where religious devotion, community utility, and hydrological sustainability converged.

Despite cultural differences, WSLS, European monastic hydrology, Indian step wells, Hydrological Systems, and Fengshui culture in China share common principles: the integration of water for both practical and spiritual purposes, its role as a purifying and life-sustaining force, and the use of architectural planning to enhance ritualistic and hydrological functions. By comparing WSLS with these global analogues, this study underscores the universal significance of water in sacred landscapes and highlights the necessity of its conservation in heritage management.

3. Methodology

This research adopts a mixed-methods approach that integrates theoretical analysis, case study investigation, and spatial mapping to examine how the "Water-distributing Shrine Landscape Structure" (WSLS) model can be applied in the context of Chinese urban heritage. The study was conducted in three interrelated phases: theoretical model construction, empirical investigation, and spatial analysis.

In the first phase, the WSLS framework was abstracted from the writings of Japanese scholar Tadahiko Higuchi, with particular focus on the four spatial elements of focus, boundary, direction, and domain. Drawing on literature in landscape theory, urban morphology, and geomantic traditions, this phase established the conceptual foundation for analysis.

The second phase centered on Taiyuan as a case study. Historical records, urban planning archives, and previous scholarship provided essential context on the city's spatial and cultural evolution. Fieldwork was carried out to document key heritage sites, visual corridors, and spatial relationships between natural and built elements. Observational data—including site photographs, sketches, and orientation notes—were used to interpret landscape perception and spatial symbolism.

In the final phase, spatial relationships were analyzed through interpretive mapping and diagramming using Adobe Illustrator CS3 and Photoshop CS3. Historical maps were overlaid with contemporary spatial data to reconstruct the correlation between natural topography, river systems, and cultural heritage sites. Diagrams illustrating sectoral space, visual corridors, and landscape structures were manually composed based on field observations and archival interpretations. This visual-analytical approach enabled a structural reading of the landscape without reliance on computational geospatial modeling.

4. Conceptual Framework

4.1. The Connotations of WSLS

Heidegger's idea that "settlement" brings together the fourfold whole of "heaven, earth, man, and god" through the act of "buildings" (1950s) [18] is consistent with the concept of "humans interacting with nature to shape the landscape" as expressed by Tadahiko Higuchi in "The Construction of Landscape" (1970s) [2]. By integrating the natural environment, social organization, and productive activities into a process of unconscious spatial shaping, people form a shared cultural identity. This identity serves both as a fundamental source of value for terroir-based built heritage and as the conceptual foundation for Higuchi's abstraction of landscape into four spatial-perception elements [6].

"People's dwelling place should be based on the earth, mountains and rivers" [19]. The natural patterns formed by mountain and river systems provide the spatial foundation for terroir landscapes, while the city becomes a concentrated manifestation of human constructive activity [20]. The WSLS model proposed by Higuchi reflects historical layering, illustrating the evolving relationship between human construction and nature in agrarian societies. As urban space continues to develop, the dynamic interaction between the city and the four WSLS elements also transforms. Therefore, tracing the relationship between urban spatial development and the four WSLS elements throughout historical evolution becomes essential to uncovering the cultural connotations embedded in the dialogue between "wind" and "earth".

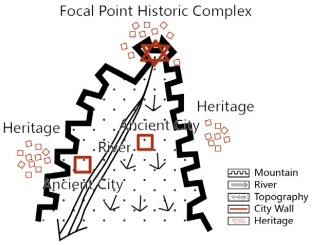
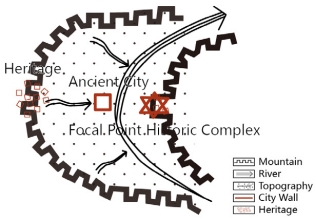
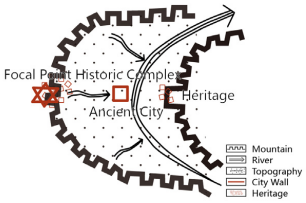
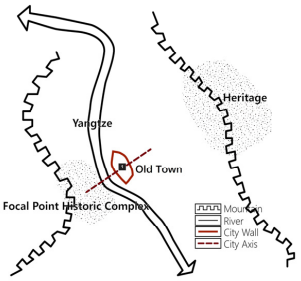
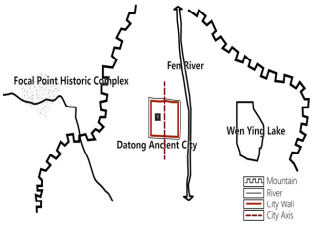
While WSLS was originally conceptualized based on Japanese rural settlements and mountain temple landscapes, its core principles—hydrological organization, spatial hierarchy, and sacred landscape structures—are also applicable to Chinese cities with significant water-related cultural heritage. Given China's diverse topographical and urban development patterns, WSLS provides a valuable framework for analyzing the relationship between natural water systems, historical city structures, and focal religious sites. In this study, WSLS is applied to three Chinese cities—Taiyuan, Yichang, and Datong—each exhibiting distinct land-water interactions and spatial configurations that align with the WSLS model while reflecting regional historical and urban characteristics. This comparative analysis demonstrates the adaptability of WSLS beyond its original context and its relevance to the study of China's cultural landscapes and urban hydrology.

Higuchi divides the "Water-distributing Shrine" landscape structure into two categories, distinguished by the location of the focal buildings. In this paper, the authors refer to these two types based on their focal positions. The first type of WSLS is the "mountain and river connecting" type, represented by the Chinese city of Taiyuan, surrounded by three mountains in the north and west, the Fen River flowing in the middle, and the Jinyang ancient city and Taiyuan Fu old town located on both sides of the Fen River. The focus position of the second type of landscape structure has two situations; the author named them the "water-close" type and "mountain-close" type. The former is represented by Yichang, which is surrounded by mountains on three sides to the north and west. The focus building is located on the west bank, while the ancient city of Yichang lies on the east bank of the Yangtze River. The latter is represented by Datong. The ancient city is located on the west bank of the Fen River, and the Yungang Grottoes, along with other focal buildings, are situated on the adjacent west hill. Together, the ancient city and its focal landmarks form a concentrated cultural zone on the river's western side (Table 1).

This section compares the relationship between historical cities and the four WSLS elements across the identified types. The "mountain-and-river-connecting" type establishes multiple spatial linkages: between city and boundary (mountains, river), city and focus (focus group), city and direction (river), and city and domain (urban area). Historical heritage sites are distributed on both sides of the river and embedded within the mountain terrain. The "water-close" and "mountain-close" types also form connections between city and boundary, city and focus, and city and direction. However, in the former, heritage sites are widely scattered across both mountains, while in the latter, they are primarily concentrated on the side closer to the urban core.

In the WSLS framework, the alignment between the two mountain ranges and the city forms a visual corridor. Ancient religious buildings were often constructed on elevated sites to facilitate the worship of nature. The ruling class leveraged these height differences to fuse natural belief systems with imperial authority, thereby reinforcing spatial expressions of faith. For cities, rivers served not only as sources of agricultural irrigation but also as spatial references for orientation and direction, shaping the trajectory of urban expansion. In the process of urban evolution, spatial organization followed the principle of "preserving the orthodox and opening the new" [21]. "Preserving the orthodox" refers to the continuity of the new city's spatial pattern with that of the old city. "Opening the new" implies that when the new urban area is located far from the old city, the original axial alignment may be disrupted, resulting in the emergence of new spatial connections on a broader scale [21]. As a traditional planning concept in agrarian China, "preserving the orthodox and opening the new" reflects the spatial logic employed by the ruling class in the siting and expansion of cities. It is regarded as "a foundational concept in local urban construction that has endured across generations" [21].

Table 1. Correlation of elements of WSLS.

Types	Mountain and Water Connecting Type	Water-Close Type	Mountain-Close Type
Representative city	Taiyuan	Yichang	Datong
Focal architecture-city relationship	The focal architecture is at the river's mountain entrance, closely tied to the ancient city.	The focal architecture is at the mountain-water junction across from the ancient city.	The focal architecture is on the mountainside next to the ancient city.
Mountain-city relationship	The ancient city lies in a basin between two mountains; the mountains' rich historical heritage often creates visual connections.	The ancient city is nestled between mountains and water, with historical heritage in both eastern and western foothills.	The ancient city is nestled between mountains and water, with rich historical heritage on the mountainside near the historic city.
Water-city relationship	The ancient city is on one or both sides of the river.	The ancient city is on one side of the river.	The ancient city is on one side of the river.
Landscape layout diagram			
City diagram			

4.2. Protection Principles for WSLS

The key to protecting the WSLS is to understand the correlation between landscape structure elements. The WSLS primarily focuses on the spatial perception range of urban residents towards shallow mountainous areas and related elements, including focal buildings, mountains, rivers, and the city itself. As shown in Figure 3 different types of WSLS ("mountain and river connecting type", "water-close type", and "mountain-close type") form correlation networks by connecting the central point of the ancient city with the historical heritage points on the mountains, rivers, and focal buildings. The line segments connecting these points symbolize visual and spiritual connections. This network in geographical space can reflect the relationship between urban construction activities and mountains and rivers through linear correlation, and it can also reflect the overall evolution process of urban history and the historical and cultural space system through the sector space formed by any line segment (extension line). This is the foundation for constructing and protecting the WSLS space.

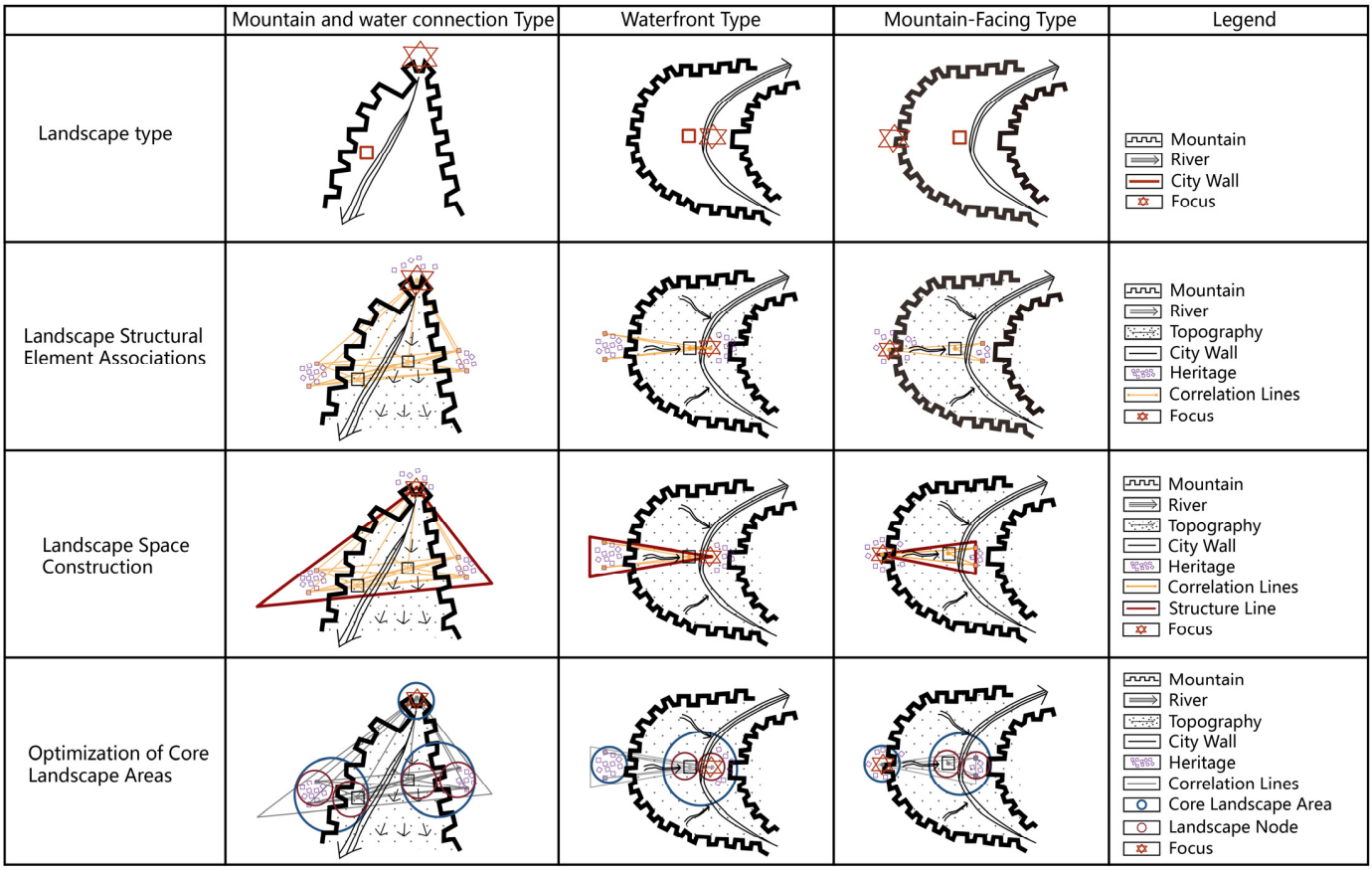


Figure 3. Construction method of WSLS.

Furthermore, the protection principle is also embodied in the construction of landscape structure space (the landscapes structural space is a culturally significant region formed by the interaction and spatial organization of the four key elements of the WSLS). It embodies the integration of nature, humanities, and faith and the optimization of core landscape areas. By associating landscape structure elements, a network of WSLS elements (comprising four spatial elements—focus, boundary, direction, and domain—aims to reflect the spatial and spiritual connections between urban construction activities and natural elements) is formed, and the line segments (extension lines) associated with elements are pairwise to form a sector space. The urban historical heritage within the sector is integrated, combined with the distribution characteristics and association network of historical heritage to jointly construct the WSLS space. As shown in Figure 3, different types of WSLS form a triangular landscape structure space with the focus as the apex, facing the ancient city or the mountain. Adjacent nodes of focus, mountain, river, and city can form core landscape areas; for example, the "mountain and river connecting type" city forms two ancient city landscape areas combining the east and west mountains and the landscape area surrounding the focal buildings. Therefore, protecting the WSLS requires systematically analyzing and maintaining the connections between these elements and optimizing core landscape areas to inherit the landscape creation wisdom of the agrarian civilization.

5. Case Study: Construction of WSLS in Taiyuan City

5.1. Application of the "Wind and Earth" Framework in Taiyuan

The spatial and cultural identity of Taiyuan is deeply rooted in the dialogue between "wind" and "earth". The city's historical core is shaped by the Fen River, which serves as a central hydrological axis, and the three surrounding mountains, which act as natu-

ral protective barriers [22]. This configuration aligns with traditional Chinese geomantic principles, where mountains provide stability (earth), and water channels direct energy flow (wind).

Belief systems in Taiyuan have long been influenced by this landscape interaction. The placement of Jinci Temple, the Twin Towers, and other sacred sites demonstrates a historical consciousness of topographical advantages and spiritual alignment with natural elements. For example, Jinci Temple, located at the foot of Xuanweng Mountain near a spring, embodies the Daoist and Buddhist reverence for water as a life-giving force and the belief in mountains as divine realms [22]. Similarly, the historical planning of Taiyuan Fu Prefecture followed traditional wind-water principles, ensuring harmony between urban expansion and the city's natural landscape.

By applying the "wind and earth" framework to Taiyuan, this study highlights how cultural values, religious beliefs, and historical spatial planning have been deeply intertwined with the city's natural setting. Recognizing this interplay is crucial for heritage conservation, ensuring that Taiyuan's historical identity is preserved while accommodating modern urban development.

5.2. Elements of WSLS in Taiyuan City

5.2.1. Focus—Juewei Mountain Pass

As the exit of the Fen River, the Juewei Mountain Pass area in Taiyuan City is also the place where Taiyuan's mountains and rivers meet. The historical and cultural heritages here are such as the Ancestral Hall of Doctor Dou[5], Jingyin Temple[6], Duofu Temple[7], and other national cultural relics protection units [22]. The Ancestral Hall of Doctor Dou is a religious building in memory of the Spring and Autumn period of the Jin State Doctor Dou. It is also a place for local ministers and people to pray for rain. In addition, among the "Taiyuan Eight Scenery[8]", "Red Leaves of the Juewei Mountain", "Cold Stone Spring", and "Sacred Cypress of the Earth" are all famous landscapes in this area. Because there are many heritages with religious significance in this area, which have a strong visual effect and respect significance, the whole area is regarded as the "focus" in the WSLS.

5.2.2. Boundary and Direction—East and West Mountains and Fen River

The West Mountain area is an area where historical and cultural heritage, such as religious buildings, is widely distributed. The existing national cultural relics protection units include Jinci Temple, Tianlong Mountain Grottoes, and Long Mountain Grottoes, and provincial and municipal cultural protection units such as Tongzi Temple burning lighthouse and Meng Mountain Giant Buddha, which reflect the historical status of Jinyang City and the prosperity of Buddhist culture in the Eastern Wei and Northern Qi Dynasties. From the perspective of the WSLS, the buildings on the West Mountain are high, back to the mountain, and face the water, which is the direction the ancient city people look up, indicating that people's activities at that time have been closely related to the West Mountain.

East Mountain Wangjiafeng North Qi Cultural Group (571 A.D.), as a representative of the culture of the Southern and Northern Dynasties, has gradually received planning attention. As an important part of Jinyang culture, its unique mural tomb group shows the prosperity of the Northern Qi. In WSLS, its location has important spatial node significance. Hanshan Mountain (罕山), the highest peak of the East Mountain, was historically referred to as "Viewing Mountain" (看山). From the ancient city of Jinyang, this mountain was clearly visible, and its visual prominence may have contributed to the symbolic or ritual significance of the site. The Northern Qi tomb group is located along this line of

sight, within the shallow mountain zone of East Mountain, suggesting that both visual and psychological connections played a role in the selection of the burial site.

The Fen River divides the Taiyuan basin into two parts and serves as a central geographical axis. Within the WSLS framework, it functions as a directional element that influences the spatial orientation of the city. The two historical urban cores—Jinyang and Taiyuan Fu—were developed on opposite sides of the river. The tributaries of the Fen River traverse the city and, together with the main stream, form Taiyuan's natural ecological corridor. This hydrological network has had a significant impact on the layout of roads, the siting of heritage sites, and the overall urban morphology.

5.2.3. Domain—The Central Basin of Shanxi

Taiyuan is located in the central basin of Shanxi. The city is surrounded by mountains on its north, east, and west sides, with the terrain sloping from high in the north to low in the south, forming a dustpan shape. The Fen River flows from north to south through the city. More than ten rivers, formed by the confluence of east and west mountain gullies, connect to the Fen River, creating an urban water system with a fishbone distribution. Thus, Taiyuan City presents a typical WSLS pattern of "three mountains in the back, a plain spread in the front, the Fen River flowing as one water, and dendritic water veins melting into the city".

The ancient people carried out urban construction in the "domain", and Taiyuan had four prosperous periods of urban construction in history. The first prosperous period can be traced back to 497 BC—Jinyang City in the Spring and Autumn Period (Figure 4). The second is from the Southern and Northern Dynasties to the Sui and Tang Dynasties. Jinyang City in the Two Jin and Southern and Northern Dynasties maintained its central axis on the basis of the Spring and Autumn Jinyang City. During this period, the city was connected with the East Mountain of Taiyuan and the Northern Qi cultural group of East Mountain. Wangjiafeng was located in the shallow mountain area on the line of sight between Jinyang City and East Mountain [22–24]. In the Sui and Tang dynasties, the new city was built on the east side of Jinyang City, which was located at the bend [25] of the Fen River, which established the terroir landscape between the cities and the mountains and rivers. In the third prosperous period of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, Taiyuan Fu old town (prefecture town) was far away from Jinyang Ancient City, and the northwest of Taiyuan was higher than the southeast. Therefore, Twin Towers Temple was built in the southeast of the old town to make up for the lack of cultural development in the terrain [26]. Jinyang Ancient City established a connection with the Peak of East Mountain (its name is "Viewing Mountain") through this landmark building's connection. The fourth prosperous period is the early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China. Taiyuan was planned to be built into a heavy industry base mainly focusing on metallurgy, electrical and mechanical engineering, coal, and the chemical industry during the First Five-Year Plan period [27]. The North Mountain Industrial zone along the Juewei Mountain Pass was one of the important industrial zones, with corresponding living areas (Figure 5).

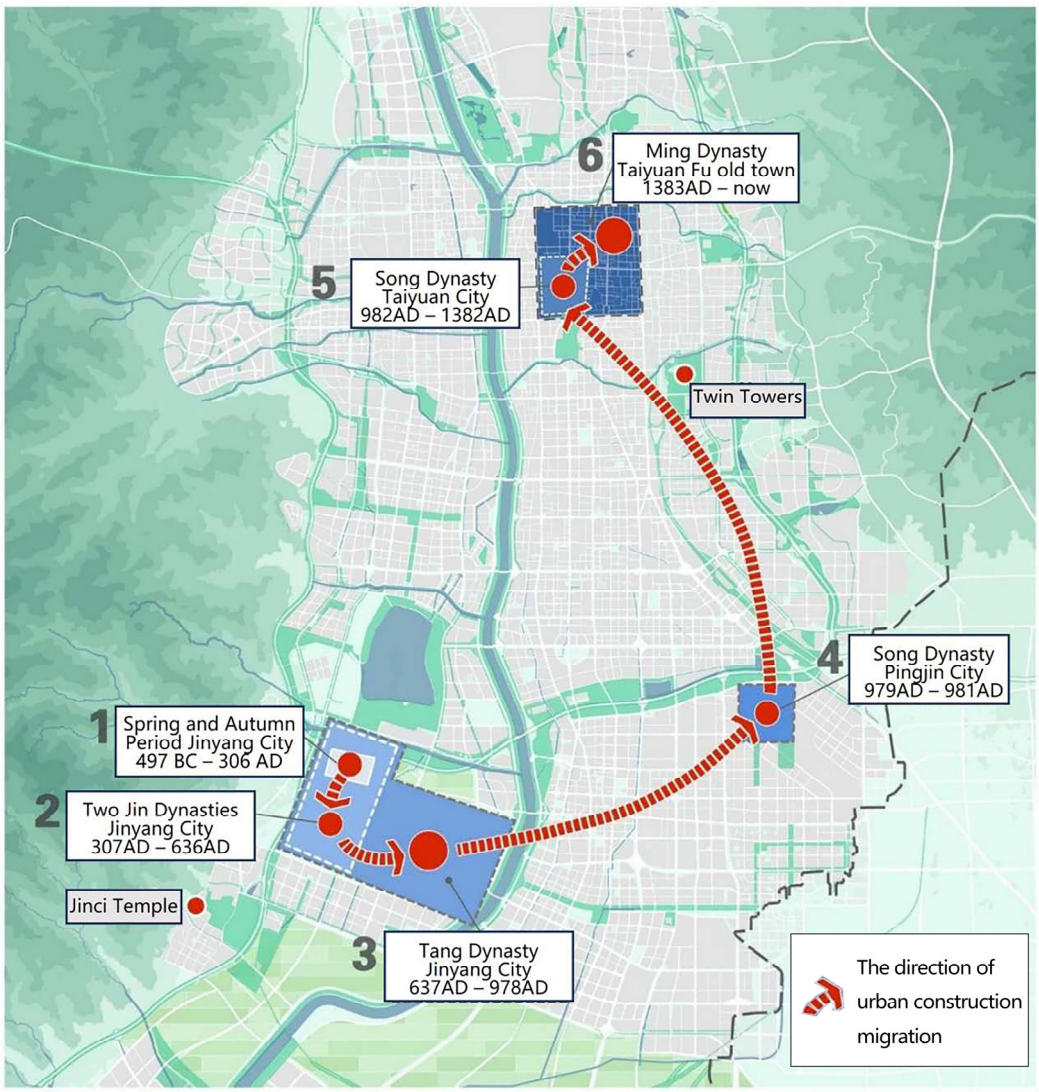


Figure 4. Historical evolution map of Taiyuan city's urban developments.

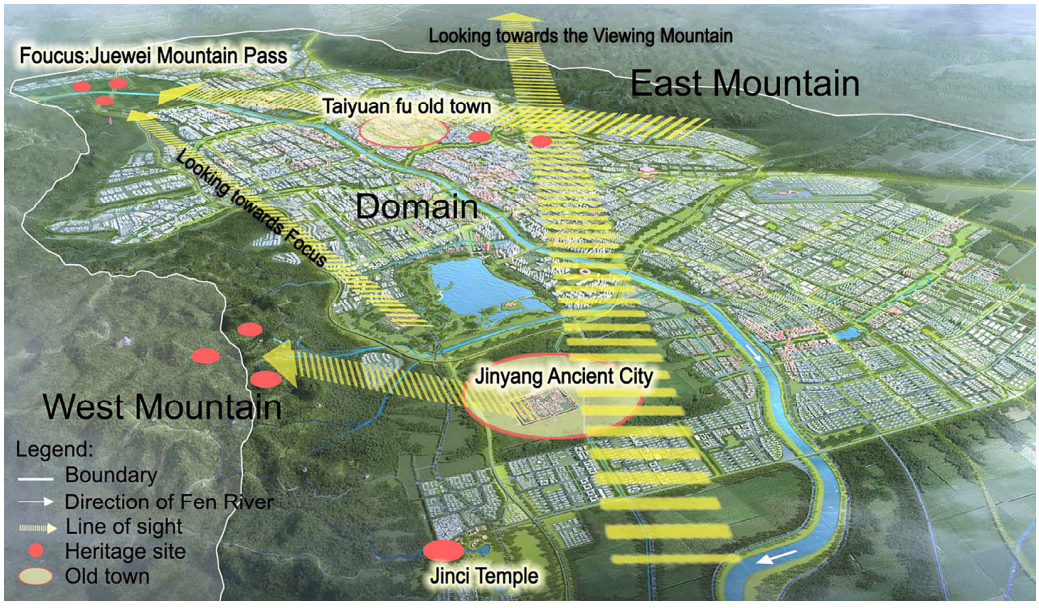


Figure 5. Taiyuan landscape spatial elements.

5.3. Taiyuan Urban Landscape Construction Strategy

5.3.1. Correlation of Taiyuan Landscape Structure Elements

In combination with the four prosperous periods in Taiyuan's history, the historical and cultural heritages in different periods have corresponding correlations with the elements of the WSLS. The three important historical nodes of the above four periods in Taiyuan (Juewei Mountain Pass, Taiyuan Fu old town, Twin Towers Temple, and Jinyang Ancient City) are connected in series to form a "triangle" with Wangjiafeng as the apex, connecting Jinyang Ancient City, Jinci Temple, Twin Towers Temple, Taiyuan Fu old town, and Juewei mountain pass. More than three-quarters of the historical elements of Taiyuan City are located in the triangle (Figure 6). This correlation reflects the emphasis on the connection between landscape structural elements in historical evolution and spatial dimensions as highlighted in the WSLS protection principles. By analyzing the spatial relationships of these historical nodes, a better understanding of the interaction between Taiyuan's urban development and its mountain-water layout can be achieved.

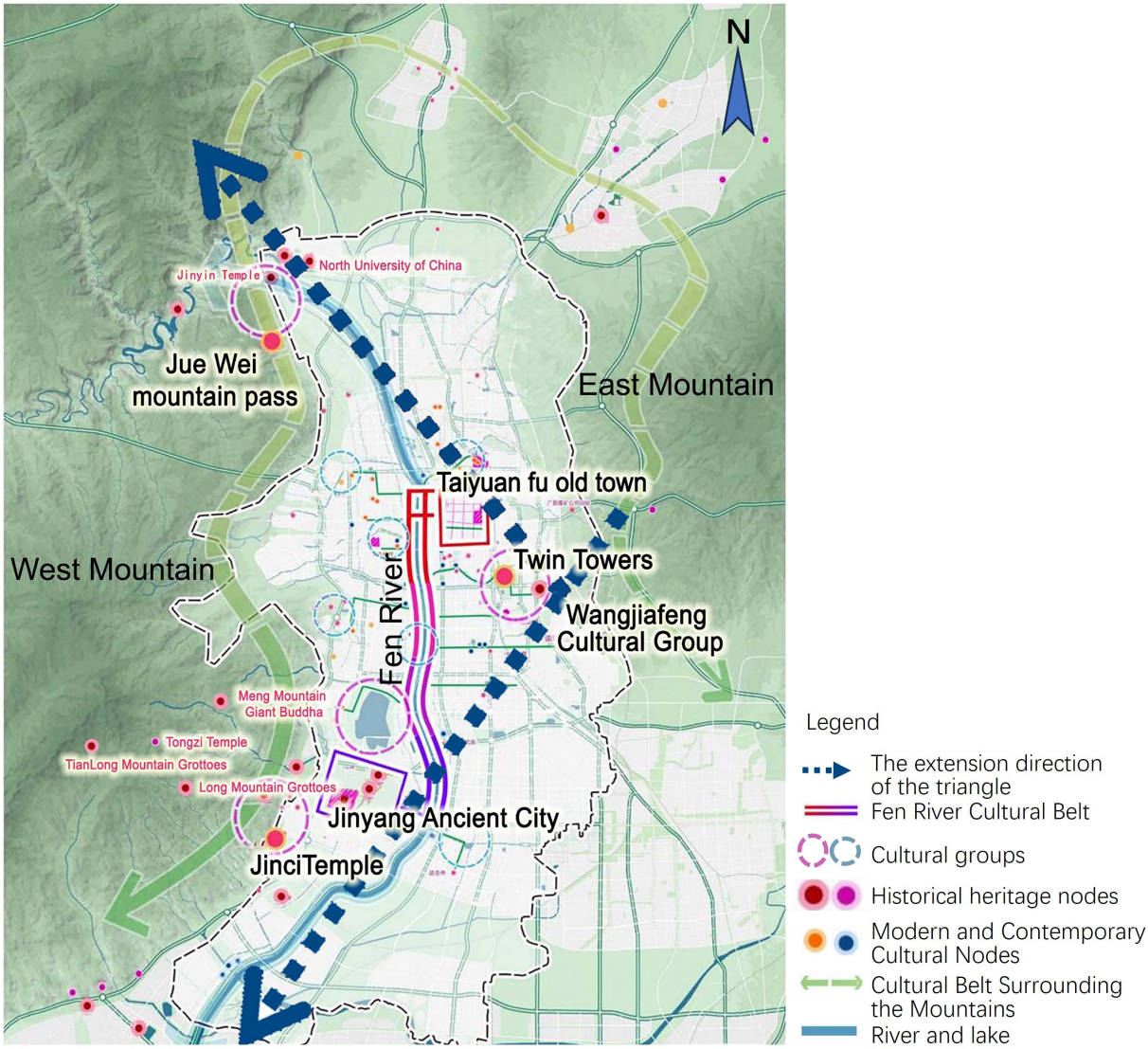


Figure 6. Taiyuan landscape culture space construction.

5.3.2. Conceptual Framework for Taiyuan's Cultural Landscape Space

To reinforce Taiyuan's characteristic urban morphology—enclosed by three mountain ranges with the Fen River running through the center—this study proposes a cultural spa-

tial framework inspired by the WSLS model. Anchored by the historical cores of Jinyang Ancient City and Taiyuan Fu Old Town, the framework takes the Fen River as a central axis and extends to surrounding heritage nodes. These include key cultural and landscape landmarks such as Juewei Mountain Scenic Area, the Twin Pagodas, Wangjiafeng Northern Qi Cultural Group, Jingci Temple, and the West Mountain area (Figure 6).

This strategy echoes the requirements in the WSLS protection principles regarding the construction of landscape structural spaces. By integrating historical heritage located within fan-shaped spaces and combining their distribution characteristics and associative networks, a more complete urban cultural landscape system can be formed. As revealed by WSLS research, cities have multiple connections with boundaries (mountains, rivers), focal points (key building complexes), directions (rivers), and domains (urban areas). The construction of Taiyuan's landscape cultural space aims to strengthen these connections and showcase the cultural significance of the dialogue between "wind" and "earth".

5.3.3. Optimization of Taiyuan Core Landscape Cultural Area

The WSLS protection principles emphasize forming a network by associating landscape structural elements and establishing core landscape areas with adjacent nodes. For Taiyuan's specific situation, the core landscape cultural area can be optimized from the following aspects.

(1) Enhance the perception of West Mountain and build a new cultural area in connection with Jinyang Ancient City.

The relationship between West Mountain, the historical and cultural heritage on West Mountain, Jinyang Ancient City, and Fen River should be viewed from the perspective of the connection between the terroir and the heritage protection, and the unique historical status of West Mountain represents the culture of the Southern and Northern Dynasties and the Sui and Tang Dynasties of China. According to the World cultural heritage standards and requirements, the Jinci Temple, Jinyang Ancient City, Mount Long, Tianlong, Meng, and Tai should be integrated. Promote a joint application for World Cultural Heritage status and integrate cultural and creative industries to support the development of the Jinyang National Cultural New District. At the same time, through the overall planning and greenway series to establish the connection between the ancient city of Jinyang and the West Mountain landscape planning strategy, reproduce the Jin Dynasty Yuan Haofan poem "West mountains on the water like a hanging screen, thirty miles of lush" spectacular scenery (Figure 7). This reflects the strengthening of the protection of the urban historical and cultural core area by maintaining the connection between the 'boundary' (West Mountain) and the 'domain' (Jinyang Ancient City).

(2) Improve the environment of East Mountain and highlight the unique Northern Qi culture.

This strategy proposes linking the ancient city of Jinyang with the shallow mountain zone of East Mountain via the Wangjiafeng Northern Qi Cultural Group. The area is currently underutilized, but it offers broad open views overlooking the city and facing West Mountain. A Northern Qi Mural Museum is under construction nearby, presenting an opportunity to activate the cultural potential of the region. Given the degraded ecological conditions of the East Mountain foothills, the Wangjiafeng site can serve as a catalyst for environmental enhancement and cultural revitalization. It is recommended to establish a humanistic science and education base centered around this node, extending visual and functional connections northwestward to the Twin Pagoda Temple Scenic Area and southeastward to nearby university campuses. This emphasizes the protection and utilization of important cultural relics within the "boundary" (East Mountain) and attempts to establish new spatial connections.

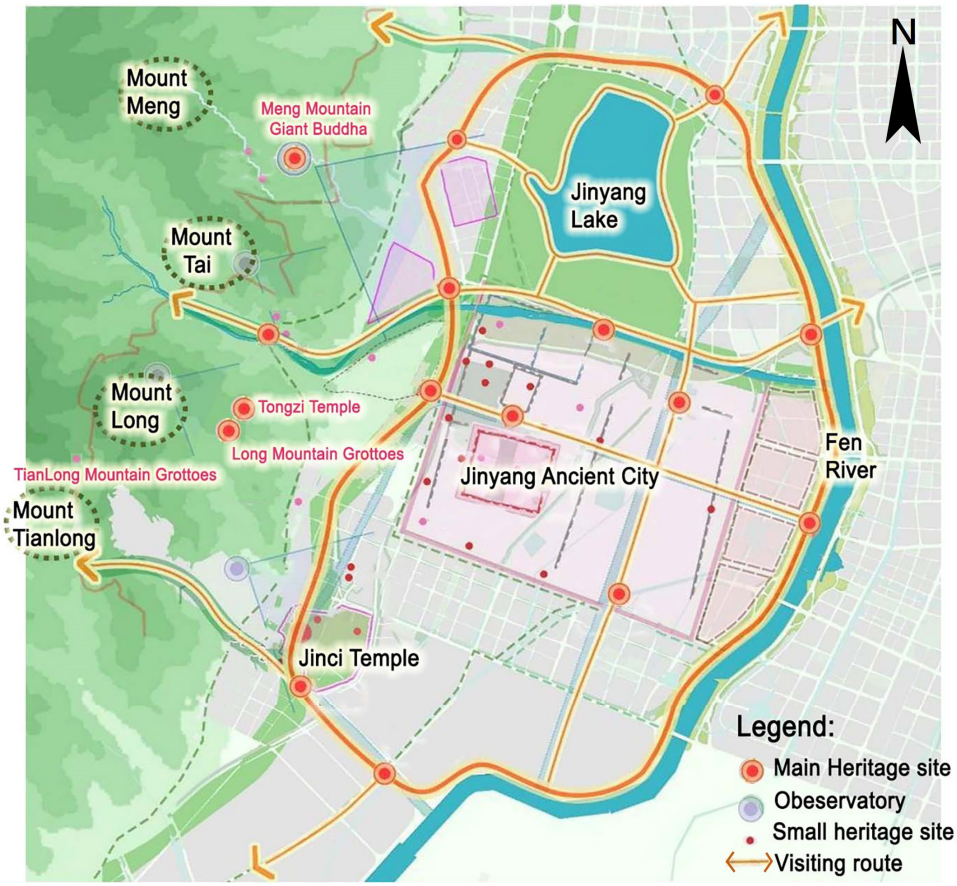


Figure 7. Jinyang ancient city—Jinci Temple—West Mountain integration.

(3) Integrate mountain pass resources to build an ecologically healthy country park.

This proposal focuses on integrating the cultural and tourism assets around the Juewei Mountain Pass into a unified country park system. Although the area is rich in cultural heritage and natural scenery, it is currently fragmented, with heritage protection units enclosed by isolated boundary walls. The revitalization of the surrounding rural areas presents an opportunity to spatially and functionally connect key sites such as Juewei Mountain, the Fen River Scenic Belt, Erlong Mountain, Dou Doctor Temple, Jingyin Temple, Duofu Temple, Lao Dragon Head, and the North University of China. As the area south of the Fen River Mountain Pass is designated as an urban flood detention zone, large-scale construction is restricted. Instead, the development of country parks is encouraged to provide high-quality ecological and cultural recreational space for public use. This strategy reflects the comprehensive protection and utilization of the "focal point" (Juewei Mountain Pass) and its surrounding natural and cultural resources.

(4) Connect with the tributaries of the Fen River to build a landscape pattern connecting the mountains to the water.

The riverside roads on both sides of the Fen River currently function as urban expressways, which obstruct people's visual and physical access to the river. It is recommended that, with the construction of the metro system and the transformation of the existing ring expressway into a grade-separated urban thoroughfare, the current expressway system be restructured. Specifically, the roads along the east and west banks of the Fen River should be downgraded to urban arterial roads. This adjustment should be accompanied by the development of continuous greenways, the reorganization of surrounding land use, and the integration of cultural exhibition and public service functions. The goal is to re-establish the Fen River as "an ecological corridor for the shared prosperity of water and city, a cul-

tural landscape of inheritance and innovation, and a dynamic interface of diversity and integration". Such interventions aim to evoke the historical imagery of the Han Emperor's visit to the Fen River, as captured in the poetic line, "The boat sails across the middle stream of the Fen River, stirring waves beneath it".

At the same time, as a seasonal river system, the tributaries of the Fen River—connected to the East and West Mountains—remain dry for most of the year and are currently used primarily for flood control. These waterways have not yet been fully utilized as landscape and recreational resources. Notably, many of these tributaries are located within the "triangular" spatial structure formed by mountain and river systems. It is proposed that the Fen River serve as the primary blue-green axis, extending gradually along its tributaries—primarily toward the West Mountains and partially toward the East Mountains—to establish a continuous ecological base. This system would form an ecological corridor linking mountain and water elements. To support this, rivers and adjacent roadways should be realigned, and the transitional land between roads and riverbanks should be transformed into accessible and high-quality leisure landscapes for public use (Figure 8) [28,29].

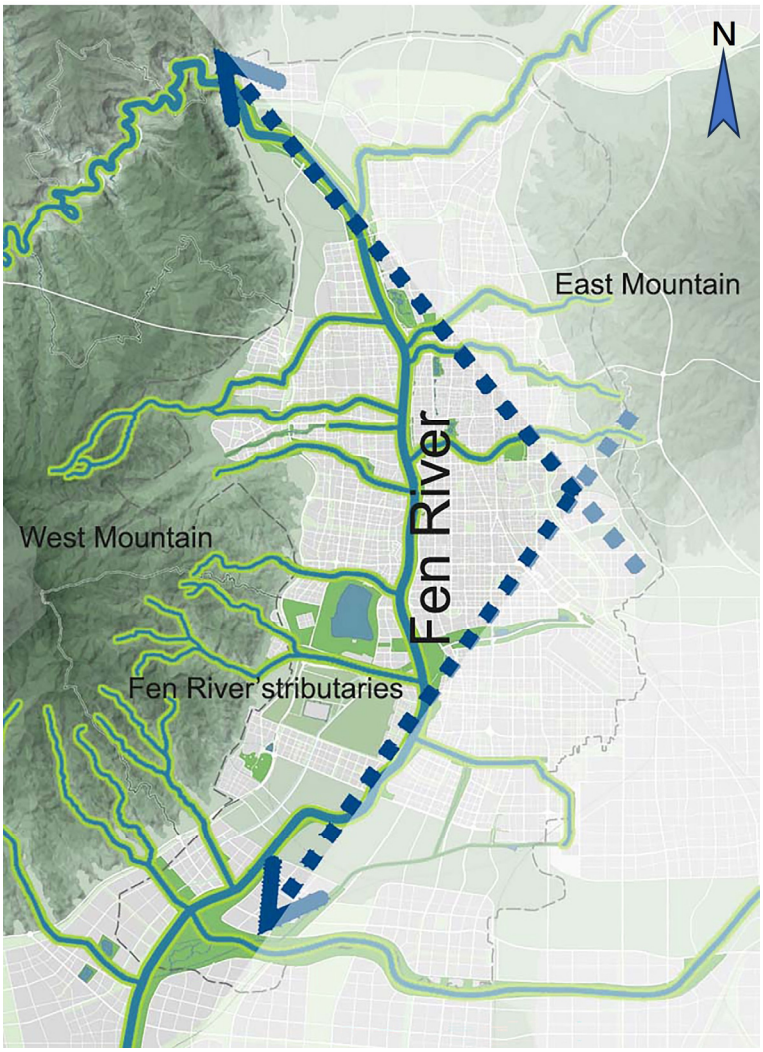


Figure 8. The Fen River and its tributaries face the West Mountain to form a blue and green landscape base connected by mountains and rivers.

These strategies emphasize the important role of the "direction" (Fen River and its tributaries) in the urban landscape layout and how the water system connects the "boundary" (East and West Mountains) with the "domain" (city).

6. Discussion

This study explores the applicability of the WSLS model—originally developed in the Japanese cultural and geographical context—in the analysis and protection of Chinese urban heritage. Through a detailed case study of Taiyuan, we examined how historical spatial configurations align with the four key WSLS elements and how this framework can be used to inform integrated conservation strategies.

A shift from fragmented to holistic heritage conservation: Unlike traditional Chinese urban planning approaches that often emphasize the isolated preservation of individual heritage sites, the WSLS model provides a holistic spatial logic that connects natural geography, historical monuments, and cultural narratives. This shift from fragmented protection to structural interpretation marks a significant advancement in heritage conservation methodology.

Revealing latent spatial patterns and cultural continuities: The findings from Taiyuan suggest that the WSLS framework can serve as an effective analytical tool to identify latent spatial structures that are no longer immediately visible in the modern urban fabric. The alignment between river systems, mountain ridges, and focal heritage sites—such as temples, tombs, and ancient city cores—reveals a persistent cultural landscape logic that has endured across different historical periods.

Visual interpretation as a methodological bridge: This study highlights the potential for using visual-spatial analysis, including line-of-sight relationships and directional flow of water, to reconstruct historical perception of space. By visually interpreting these relationships through field observation and diagrammatic representation, it becomes possible to bridge subjective cultural meanings with objective spatial structures.

Implications for contemporary planning and heritage strategy: At a practical level, applying the WSLS model to heritage conservation efforts in cities such as Taiyuan provides a systematic basis for identifying core landscape areas, prioritizing visual and symbolic connections, and formulating policies that reflect both environmental and cultural continuity. This has implications not only for urban design and planning but also for community engagement in heritage recognition and value transmission.

Limitations and future research: The spatial analysis in this study relies primarily on qualitative mapping and visual interpretation rather than quantitative geospatial modeling. While tools such as Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop allow flexible diagrammatic exploration, future research could benefit from incorporating GIS-based simulations, visibility analyses, or participatory mapping to enhance precision and interactivity.

Contextual applicability of WSLS across diverse urban landscapes: The WSLS model itself, while effective in agrarian and mountainous contexts, may require adaptation when applied to cities with different topographies, such as coastal plains or desert environments. The typological expansion of WSLS beyond mountain-water-based structures should be carefully approached with contextual sensitivity.

7. Conclusions

This study examines the applicability of the Water-distributing Shrine landscape structure (WSLS), a concept rooted in Japanese landscape theory, within the context of Chinese urban heritage. Using Taiyuan as a case study, it explores how the WSLS framework—consisting of focus, boundary, direction, and domain—can reveal underlying spatial logic embedded in historical landscapes.

Unlike conventional approaches that treat heritage sites as isolated objects, this study emphasizes the interpretation of cultural landscapes as coherent spatial structures shaped by natural geography, historical development, and cultural symbolism. The research proposes a visual-analytical methodology based on historical document analysis, field obser-

vation, and diagrammatic interpretation. This approach offers an alternative to purely quantitative spatial analysis, allowing for the reconstruction of perceptual and symbolic relationships between mountains, rivers, and heritage sites.

Through the case of Taiyuan, the study demonstrates that the WSLS model provides not only a theoretical lens but also a practical framework for identifying, interpreting, and organizing cultural landscape resources. Key spatial elements—such as the visual corridor from Jinyang Ancient City to Hanshan, the symbolic axis between mountain passes and focal buildings, and the division of the basin by the Fen River—collectively support a reinterpretation of urban morphology through cultural geography.

Furthermore, the WSLS-based approach—emphasizing the interaction between natural terrain, cultural landmarks, and symbolic axes—offers a transferable analytical framework for other Chinese cities with similar geographical and historical conditions. In regions where mountains, rivers, and cultural heritage sites coexist, this integrated method can help reveal latent spatial structures, guide heritage corridor planning, and support the preservation of landscape continuity. By reinterpreting urban history through the lens of cultural landscape structure, this study provides a replicable strategy for identifying and organizing cultural resources at the territorial scale.

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Data Availability Statement: The data used in this study were obtained from my workplace, Taiyuan Urban and Rural Planning Design and Research Institute. Due to intellectual property rights, the data are not publicly available. Readers interested in accessing these data should contact the corresponding author by e-mail: zhangruijiee@outlook.com. The data were used under the terms of the agreement for the sole purpose of this research.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

Notes

1 In his book The Construction of Landscapes, Tadahiko Higuchi proposes seven types of landscape structures for human settlements, which are: Mikumari (Water-distributing) Shrine Type, Akitsshima-yamato Type, Hachiyo-Renge Type, Zofu-Tokusui Type, Komoriku Type, Kamunabiyama Type, and Kunimiyama (Country-viewing Mountain) Type.

2 Shrines represent buildings used for religious ceremonies, prayers, or offering activities, including temples, ancestral halls, etc.

3 Water-distributing Shrine is dedicated to the god of water.

4 It is dedicated to two gods, the Oyama God, who is considered to be the god of land and agriculture, and the Kunichang Ritsu, who is considered to c one of the ancestors of the Japanese nation, representing the spirit of heaven and earth, the security and prosperity of the country.

5 During the Spring and Autumn period, the Jin doctor Dou (unknown—494 BC). the fiefdom in today's Taiyuan. He was commemorated by his descendants for having opened a canal for water conservancy in LangMeng district (present-day Huangzhai, Yangqu).

6 Jingyin Temple, located 25 km northwest of Taiyuan City, Shanxi Province, was originally built in the Northern Qi Dynasty and rebuilt in 1205.

[7] Duofu Temple was built in the second year of Zhenyuan of the Tang Dynasty (786). It was destroyed in the war at the end of the Song Dynasty and rebuilt many times after that.

[8] "Taiyuan eight scenery" also known as "Ancient Jingyang eight scenery", respectively refers to "Lieshi cold spring, Fen River late crossing, twin towers, Sunwater smoke, Red leaves of Juewei Mountain, Earth hall God Cypress, Tianmen snow, Meng Mountain Moon" eight scenery.

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