

From “Engraving Books as an Act of Accumulating Virtue” to Digital Preservation: The Cultural Reproduction of Classical Books in Contemporary Suzhou

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Abstract: Suzhou, as an important birthplace of woodblock printing in China, has occupied a central position in the national book-production system since the Tang and Song dynasties. The notion of “engraving books as an act of accumulating virtue” not only shaped Wu's cultural lineage but also became an essential component of the city's cultural memory. Entering the modern era, large-scale industrial publishing disrupted the traditional ecosystem of classical books, and Suzhou's ancient-book activities experienced a temporary decline. Yet, against the backdrop of digitalization and cultural heritage protection as national priorities, classical books have regained social vitality in contemporary Suzhou. Based on literature review, questionnaire analysis, and case studies, this research examines the continuous trajectory of Suzhou's classical books—from traditional engraving, to modern restoration, to digital dissemination. The article first reviews the historical development of Suzhou's engraving culture, highlighting its deep connections to the local economy, literati communities, and the city's cultural temperament. Second, the analysis of 153 questionnaires reveals structural disparities in the attitudes, knowledge, and participation of contemporary Suzhou residents. Third, taking Suzhou Library's classical-book preservation practices as a case, it discusses the institutional construction of libraries in the digital era. This study argues that the significance of classical books in contemporary Suzhou lies not only in textual preservation but also in their ongoing role in public culture, urban identity, and cultural reproduction. Classical books have moved from the era of “engraving” and “collecting” into the era of “use” and “participation,” becoming an essential medium of cultural identity in contemporary Suzhou.

Keywords: History of Suzhou Engraving; Classical-Book Conservation; Suzhou Library; Digital Cultural Resources; Local Cultural Identity

1. Introduction of the Problem

In the history of Chinese woodblock printing, Suzhou has always held an important position. Since the Tang and Song dynasties, Suzhou—prosperous economically, wealthy in literary atmosphere, and home to many bookshops—has become a major national center of book engraving. The idea that “engraving books accumulates virtue, and collecting books surpasses collecting gold” not only reflects Suzhou people's cultural values but also constitutes an integral part of the city's historical memory. The flourishing book industry of Jinchang in the Ming-Qing period, the emergence of modern collectors such as Gu Yuan and Pan Zuyin, and the national influence of the Xie family's Saoye Shanfang in the late Qing and early Republican eras all illustrate the profound connections between Suzhou's engraving activities and the city's social structure, aesthetic tastes, and cultural ideals. However, with the rise of modern mechanical printing and the publishing industry, the traditional engraving system gradually declined, and the visibility of classical books in urban daily life continued to diminish. Contemporary public attitudes toward classical books are generally friendly and curious, yet actual opportunities for contact and active participation remain limited. Meanwhile, since the early twenty-first century, the national “Chinese Ancient Books Preservation Project” has been launched, and fields such as digitalization, conservation studies, and library document management have become important forces promoting the reuse of classical books. Against this backdrop, Suzhou Library's institutional development, talent cultivation, and digital achievements have once again brought classical

books into the public eye, prompting a new examination of their cultural value in contemporary Suzhou.

In this historical context, the meaning of classical books no longer belongs solely to scholars or collectors, but has become an integral part of public culture, local identity, and urban memory. This article attempts to understand this process from both temporal and social perspectives. On the one hand, tracing Suzhou's engraving history from the Tang-Song to modern times reveals the interactions among engraving culture, local economic structures, literati activities, and the city's cultural temperament. On the other hand, based on data from 153 questionnaires, it presents the realities of contemporary Suzhou residents' cognition, attitudes, and participation regarding classical books. It analyzes the "distance" between classical books and ordinary citizens. Finally, using Suzhou Library's classical-book preservation practices as a case study, it explores the institutional model of digital preservation in contemporary contexts. It examines how classical books acquire new life amid changing historical conditions.

This study focuses not only on how classical books are preserved, but also on why they remain significant in contemporary Suzhou: How do they enter public culture? How do they participate in the construction of local identity? And how do they continue to be used, interpreted, and reproduced as cultural resources in the digital age? Through a combination of historical narrative, survey data, and case analysis, this article aims to reveal the transformation of classical books in contemporary Suzhou from "documents" to "culture," thus discussing their sustained vitality in the modern city.

2. Existing Research Foundation

Research on Suzhou's engraving history, classical-book preservation, and local cultural identity already has a certain foundation in academia, although it remains relatively fragmented. Among these topics, studies on Suzhou's engraving history are the most developed, focusing mainly on bibliography, printing history, and the institutional structure of bookshops. Jiang Chengbo's *Wumen Fanshu Congtan* and *Jiangsu Huozhi Yinshu* systematically sort out Suzhou's engraving and book-industry ecology from the Ming-Qing

period onward, reconstructing the basic landscape of the Jinchang book-culture circle and providing solid historical materials for understanding Suzhou's engraving tradition [1,2]. Shen Dongli's research further presents the operating models, technical features, and positions of Suzhou bookshops within the Jiangnan publishing network during the Qing dynasty. In local cultural studies, related works often treat engraving and book collecting as essential components of Wu culture, emphasizing their long-term influence on Suzhou's urban culture [3]. However, such studies generally focus on issues such as bookshop institutions, carving techniques, and the value of editions, while paying relatively little attention to the deeper connections between engraving activities and the city's cultural temperament, local social structure, and literati practices. Although the engraving history of Suzhou is thoroughly described, most questions remain at the level of "how books were engraved," "which books were engraved," and "which bookshops were famous." In contrast, more socially and culturally oriented questions—such as "why Suzhou became a center of engraving" and "how engraving culture shaped Suzhou's cultural identity"—are comparatively underdeveloped. This suggests that the cultural-social historical dimension of Suzhou's engraving history still requires further development.

Research on the preservation of classical books has increased significantly in recent years. With the implementation of the national "Chinese Ancient Books Preservation Project," academic attention to the restoration of classical books, textual collation, and library management systems has deepened. Existing studies often focus on topics such as paper deacidification technologies, binding restoration, digitization standards, and preservation environments, forming a relatively comprehensive technical system. Digitalization has become an important new direction, with much work centering on database construction, image quality, metadata standards, and optical character recognition, emphasizing the positive role of digitalization in alleviating the contradiction between "preservation" and "use." In this context, the practices of Suzhou Library in the digitalization of local documents and the construction of a Republican-era newspaper database are often viewed as representative examples of local

public cultural institutions' digital progress. However, overall, research on classical-book preservation remains confined to technical and institutional discussions, lacking attention to the social impact of classical books, public reception, and their role in urban cultural development.

Theoretical research on cultural identity and urban memory provides an important framework for understanding the contemporary value of classical books. Scholars such as Tu'an and Edward Relph argue that "sense of place" and spatial identity are not naturally formed but are constructed through historical narratives, symbolic systems, and collective memory [4,5]. Stuart Hall's concept of cultural identity further suggests that identity is not a fixed structure but is constantly produced in processes of reinterpretation and reproduction [6]. These theories offer a framework for thinking about the contemporary function of classical books: classical books are not merely textual resources but also cultural symbols whose meanings depend on modern reinterpretation and reuse. However, in Chinese-language scholarship, research on local identity tends to focus on tangible heritage such as historical sites, old districts, and traditional arts, while rarely treating classical books as research objects—especially lacking discussions that connect them to urban cultural identity.

Overall, existing research forms three interrelated but insufficiently integrated domains: studies on engraving history provide the historical foundation for understanding Suzhou's classical-book tradition; research on classical-book preservation reveals contemporary institutional and technical transformations; and theories of cultural identity highlight how historical resources are reconstructed in modern society. What is missing is an analytical framework that integrates "historical tradition," "contemporary practice," and "cultural meaning" into a single perspective. This absence creates gaps between engraving history and local cultural studies, and also leaves the contemporary cultural value of classical-book preservation insufficiently explored from a sociocultural standpoint. This article addresses this research gap by establishing connections between historical narratives and present-day experiences and by reexamining the cultural significance of classical books in contemporary Suzhou.

3. The History of Book Engraving in Suzhou

Suzhou's engraving activities can be traced back to the Tang dynasty. During this period, printing was still in its early, spontaneous, folk-based stage. Still, the northern part of Suzhou had already begun producing woodblock-printed calendars, indicating the existence of certain technical conditions and social demand. Printing further developed in the late Tang and Five Dynasties, partly related to the circulation of Buddhist scriptures and closely connected with the gradual economic growth of the Jiangnan region [7]. The "valuing literature" policies of the Song dynasty, the refinement of the civil service examination system, and the maturation of movable-type printing provided the institutional and technological foundation for the expansion of engraving activities in Suzhou. With the rise of educational institutions, the growth of the scholar-official class, and the increasing demand for local document compilation, Suzhou gradually developed from a regional printing site into an important node in the national engraving network [8].

During the Song and Yuan periods, Suzhou's engraving had two main characteristics. On the one hand, the printed content consisted mainly of Confucian classics and educational texts, indicating a strong didactic function. On the other hand, bookshops displayed a certain degree of scale, though they had not yet attained the commercial and cultural vibrancy seen in the Ming and Qing dynasties. Yuan-dynasty official engraving was large-scale but promoted mainly by the imperial capital; Suzhou's local engraving activities declined during this period, with surviving editions largely limited to those produced by educational institutions [9]. Overall, the engraving history of Suzhou during the Tang-Song-Yuan period remained in its formative stage. However, its cultural and economic foundations already laid the groundwork for its later flourishing [10].

The Ming and Qing dynasties marked the peak of Suzhou's engraving history, and the city ranked among the nation's most prosperous engraving centers. From the mid-Ming onward, Suzhou became one of the most economically advanced regions in Jiangnan. Commercial prosperity, thriving handicraft industries, and a large population of literati collectively facilitated the expansion of the bookshop industry. Bookshops clustered in the Jinchang district, where close interactions between shop owners

and literati formed a lively circle that blended commerce and culture. Bookshops often relied on the reputation and manuscripts supplied by literati, while literati depended on bookshops for the dissemination of their works. This created a typical pattern of “literati-merchant integration.” One of the most distinctive characteristics of Suzhou engraving in this period was its prominence in poetry collections and local documentary works. The trend of compiling Tang poetry flourished especially in the Qing dynasty, with numerous annotated, commented, and collected editions emerging from Suzhou, forming a mode of engraving that served both aesthetic and scholarly purposes. Local gazetteers also developed robustly—from prefectural and county histories to monographs on gardens, landscapes, temples, and local sites. Small gazetteers coexisted with major ones, reflecting the Suzhou literati's strong local consciousness. These gazetteers not only documented Suzhou's geography, customs, and notable figures, but also helped construct the city's image as a “land of culture and education” [11].

Another significant aspect of Ming-Qing Suzhou engraving lies in the innovation of carving techniques and visual styles. In the Yongzheng era, Deng Hongwen designed a new Song-style typeface, setting a new aesthetic trend in typography for Suzhou bookshops. Its slender, elegant lines echoed, yet subtly diverged from, the visual traditions of Southern Song book culture, demonstrating both antiquarian taste and local stylistic innovation. At the same time, interactions between Taohuawu woodblock New Year pictures and book illustrations enabled the formation of a distinctive visual system in Suzhou, further reinforcing engraving as a form of cultural creation rather than mere technical reproduction [12].

In the late Qing and early Republican periods, traditional engraving faced structural challenges as industrial printing technologies were rapidly introduced. Suzhou's most representative bookshop, the Xie family's Saoye Shanfang, underwent large-scale adjustments during this time, relocating its main operations to Shanghai and integrating into the commercial structure of the national publishing center. After adopting lithography, lead-type printing, and other new technologies, Saoye Shanfang published more than 700 titles during the Republican era, becoming a successful example of how a

traditional bookshop adapted to the modern publishing industry [3].

However, traditional bookshops struggled to compete with modernized publishing houses such as the Commercial Press and Zhonghua Book Company. Family-based business structures, the high cost of manual engraving, and limitations on publication topics eventually led to their decline. Saoye Shanfang officially closed in 1954, symbolizing the end of the traditional Suzhou family bookshop system. Nevertheless, its transitional role in modern publishing history cannot be overlooked: it preserved the academic value of traditional editions while demonstrating Suzhou's cultural resilience and adaptability in the new publishing environment [3].

Even after the decline of the engraving industry, Suzhou's book-collecting tradition continued to exert considerable influence. Whether in Gu Yuan's Yihailou, Pan Zuyin's Pangxizhai, or Pan Jingzheng's Zhiganglou Congkan, these private libraries served as important intellectual nodes in Suzhou's cultural history. Suzhou's literati valued textual collation, authentication, and documentation, making private libraries the centers of scholarly activity rather than mere storage spaces. These practices shaped the local literati ethos of meticulous scholarship and textual reverence, turning book collecting into an integral component of the city's cultural identity [13].

From a long-term perspective, the significance of Suzhou's engraving history extends far beyond the technical history of printing. It serves as an important entry point for understanding the city's cultural character. It reveals Suzhou society's enduring reverence for texts, knowledge, and cultural production, and it has quietly shaped the construction of the city's cultural identity. Contemporary efforts in the preservation, restoration, and digitization of classical books in Suzhou are rooted in this deep historical foundation, allowing them not only to exist as cultural artifacts but also to continue participating in the reproduction of local culture as dynamic cultural resources.

4. The Distance between Contemporary Suzhou Residents and Classical Books: Analysis of Questionnaire Survey

Against the backdrop of Suzhou's thousand-year engraving tradition, classical books should, in principle, possess a certain degree of cultural

visibility and emotional foundation within contemporary Suzhou society. However, how traditional influences operate under modern social conditions cannot be inferred directly from historical trajectories alone. To understand the public's current knowledge, perceptions, and engagement with classical books in Suzhou-and their relationship with the city's engraving heritage-this study designed and administered a questionnaire survey targeting Suzhou residents. The questionnaire addressed the public's basic understanding of classical books, modes of contact, willingness to participate, and degree of knowledge regarding Suzhou's engraving history. It aimed to depict, at an experiential level, the visibility and reception of classical books within contemporary urban culture. The questionnaire adopted a structured design, combining multiple-choice and a small number of open-ended items to obtain horizontally comparable data. To ensure diversity among respondents, the questionnaire used convenience sampling supplemented with stratification and was distributed through both online and offline channels, yielding 153 valid responses. Overall, the data show that classical books hold a clearly positive cultural image among the public (more than 90% of respondents selected terms with positive cultural connotations), yet actual contact, usage, and participation remain limited-forming the core characteristic of contemporary classical-book communication: a dual structure of "positive attitude but low engagement."

The questionnaire consisted mainly of three categories of variables. The first category included basic demographic variables such as age, gender, whether the respondent was a Suzhou native, and length of residence in Suzhou, used to analyze cognitive differences between groups. The second category addressed variables related to contact with classical books, including respondents' understanding of the concept of "classical books," frequency of contact, channels of access, and whether they collected classical books, to evaluate the actual reach of classical books in everyday life. The third category covered attitude variables, including assessments of the cultural value of classical books, satisfaction with existing promotional and preservation activities, willingness to participate in related events, and degree of knowledge about Suzhou's engraving history, used to assess cultural attitudes and behavioral inclinations. After data collection,

missing values were imputed; continuous variables were presented using means and standard deviations, and categorical variables were presented using frequencies and percentages, ensuring the stability and interpretability of the results. Basic information indicates that respondents were relatively balanced in terms of gender, age, and length of residence, including a significant proportion of migrants. This aligns with Suzhou's status as a migrant-receiving city and enhances the survey's representativeness.

In the item "first impression of classical books," 41.18% selected "personal learning needs," 18.95% selected "cultural-symbolic meaning," 13.07% viewed classical books as "boring or difficult," and 4.58% considered them a "niche hobby." These proportions indicate that more than 60% of respondents associate classical books with positive or neutral concepts, suggesting that classical books are typically perceived as culturally valuable or aesthetically meaningful. Such positive attitudes provide an emotional foundation for classical-book promotion, but also indicate that public understanding is often constructed through symbolic imagination rather than from actual experience.

In terms of actual contact, the distance between the public and classical books becomes significantly larger. Although 66.67% reported having "encountered information" about classical books, this exposure mainly occurred through museums (30.39%), school education (20.59%), and online platforms (12.75%), indicating primarily passive contact. Meanwhile, 33.33% had never encountered anything related to classical books. Notably, 19.61% listed "used bookstores" as a channel of contact, indicating that classical books retain some visibility in certain cultural spaces. It is also noteworthy that some respondents misunderstood "classical books" as "ancient literary works," demonstrating that the material and bibliographical meaning of classical books is not well understood. This reflects the limited accessibility of classical book knowledge within the public education system, as well as the high professional threshold that restricts systematic understanding.

In terms of private collections, the distance becomes even more evident. Only 16.99% reported having classical books at home, while 83.01% did not. Among collectors, 46.15%

owned Qing-dynasty books, 30.77% Yuan-dynasty books, and 23.08% Song-dynasty books. Yet since the number of collectors was only 26, the actual penetration of classical books into ordinary households is extremely low. Due to the physical fragility and preservation cost of classical books, they no longer form part of everyday literary life as they once did, becoming instead cultural resources held mainly by professional institutions. This constitutes a significant “physical distance” between the public and classical books.

Regarding willingness to participate, the data show a distinct gap between “willingness” and “actual involvement.” While 87.32% of respondents expressed willingness to participate in classical-book preservation, exhibitions, or lectures, only 7.19% had actually participated. This indicates that classical-book activities have not effectively penetrated everyday life and may lack accessibility. Some respondents wrote in open-ended answers that “activities feel distant from daily life,” “content is too academic,” or “I don’t know how to participate,” indicating that the symbolic appeal of classical books has not translated into practical avenues for engagement. In the item “Do you understand Suzhou’s engraving history?”, only 12.42% answered yes, while 87.58% answered no. However, in the item “Do you believe that understanding engraving history can strengthen identity with Wu culture?”, 92.16% answered yes. This sharp contrast forms a representative paradox in contemporary classical-book culture: the public strongly recognizes the cultural value of classical books yet lacks corresponding knowledge. This structural pattern—“strong value recognition but weak knowledge foundation”—is one of the most important findings of this study. Overall, contemporary Suzhou residents exhibit a “dual-layer distance structure” toward classical books. On the emotional and value level, the public holds highly positive attitudes (over 90% positive recognition) and believes classical books have cultural-identity value. Yet, at the level of actual contact and participation, opportunities are scarce (66% have encountered only “information” rather than physical books), participation is extremely low (only 7% have engaged in related activities), and knowledge remains limited (only 12% know Suzhou’s engraving history). Classical-book dissemination in contemporary Suzhou thus presents an imbalance characterized by “high cultural

recognition but low cultural reach.” This arises not only from objective limitations, such as the specialized nature and technical threshold of classical books, but also from the inadequacy of current public-cultural systems in designing activities and communication strategies to promote them.

Public evaluations of existing classical-book-promotion methods show a similar trend. In “number of lectures,” 66.01% selected “average”; in “activity formats,” 64.71% selected “average”; in “activity quality,” 59.48% selected “average”; and in “public participation,” 56.86% selected “average.” The dominance of the “average” option—much higher than “satisfied” or “unsatisfied”—indicates that classical-book activities currently exist but lack prominence. In “ways to improve,” 32.68% suggested “adopting activity formats more appealing to youth,” 26.8% suggested “more outreach in primary and secondary schools,” and 13.73% indicated “greater media exposure,” showing that the public is aware that classical books require new modes of communication.

Returning to the engraving tradition itself, this “distance” is not merely a cultural rupture but the result of new cultural logics emerging within modern urban structures. In traditional society, engraving, collecting, and reading were integrated cultural practices. In contemporary society, these have become separated into different institutions, professions, and markets—more specialized and more compartmentalized. Public imagination of classical books is mainly symbolic, while their actual dissemination relies on reconstruction by professional institutions. Therefore, to reintroduce classical books into everyday life, they must be “translated” through multiple channels such as education, urban cultural activities, and digital media. In this sense, the distance between classical books and contemporary Suzhou residents is bridgeable—but such bridging does not occur naturally; it requires new cultural mechanisms.

5. Suzhou Library’s Practices in Classical-Book Preservation

As an important historical site of engraving culture, Suzhou’s preservation and use of classical-book resources in contemporary times rely primarily on the Suzhou Library, a public cultural institution. As a municipal library, it bears multiple responsibilities, including protecting local classical books, organizing

documentary resources, promoting digital construction, and conducting public education. After classical books shifted from private libraries and bookshop systems to the modern public system, the mechanism sustaining their cultural meaning also transformed. Therefore, Suzhou Library's practices largely determine how classical books are seen, understood, and used in contemporary society.

The classical-book collection of Suzhou Library is characterized by its focus on local documents and ranks among the most substantial collections in Jiangsu Province. It includes Ming-Qing woodblock editions, Republican-era printed materials, and numerous local gazetteers, genealogies, epigraphical works, series collections, and manuscript copies associated with Wu culture. The value of these materials lies not only in their textual editions but also in the cultural memory and logic of the city that they embody. In traditional society, bookshops and literati served as the primary agents of knowledge organization and cultural dissemination. In the contemporary era, these functions have been reabsorbed by the library. Thus, classical-book collation and preservation are not merely technical tasks but also represent a reconstruction of cultural authority: the library becomes a new node for the production of meaning regarding classical books [14].

In practice, Suzhou Library has developed a relatively mature restoration system. The library has an in-house classical-book restoration studio, equipped with professional restorers who can perform unmounting, paper matching, hole patching, reinforcement, and binding. These procedures, at the technical level, continue the principles of traditional manual restoration, emphasizing "minimal intervention," "material compatibility," and "reversibility," consistent with classical conservation philosophy. Suzhou Library has long collaborated with Suzhou Arts and Crafts Vocational and Technical College and local handicraft resources to form a model integrating "restoration, training, and transmission," making classical-book restoration not only a document-preservation activity but also part of the intangible cultural heritage system. However, restoration resources remain limited and costly; many classical books remain unrestored, making the establishment of restoration priorities a necessary institutional task.

Besides restoration, the collation and

cataloguing of classical books are foundational tasks within the Suzhou Library. Librarians must systematically classify these scattered documents, verify editions, construct cataloguing records, and organize title slips, thereby reintegrating the dispersed resources into a coherent knowledge system. Although this appears to be a technical process, its influence on knowledge production is significant: the classification, cataloguing standards, and metadata structure assigned to classical books shape how researchers "see" these materials in the future. For example, grouping local gazetteers, epigraphical records, genealogies, and other materials into a single "local document system" reflects a contemporary institutional reshaping of Wu culture's structure. The way classical books are arranged is itself a form of cultural narrative, with the library acting as an active agent [14].

In the digitalization, Suzhou Library is among the earliest institutions in Jiangsu to digitize classical books. In recent years, the library has collaborated with Shanghai Library and the National Library of China to build digital resource databases. Through high-resolution scanning, OCR, and metadata creation, a large number of local documents have been made publicly available online. Digitalization significantly increases access to classical books, allowing users to access images without handling fragile physical copies; it also enables them to enter broader social contexts beyond geographic boundaries. However, digitalization also introduces new issues: quality control of digital images, consistency of metadata, copyright concerns, and user-interface usability all require long-term investment. Moreover, while users can easily access digitized images, they often do not fully understand the material characteristics and edition-specific details of classical books—meaning that digitalization reduces spatial distance but not necessarily knowledge distance [15].

Public-education programs constitute the key link in the cultural reproduction of classical-book meaning. In recent years, Suzhou Library has regularly held "classical-book restoration workshops," "classical-book guided lectures," and "local-document exhibitions" to bring classical books into public life. However, survey data show that public participation remains low: 92.81% of respondents had never joined any classical-book-related event, and more than 66%

rated the number, format, and participation levels of activities as merely “average.” This indicates a clear gap between the design of activities and public needs. Activities rely heavily on traditional lecture and exhibition formats, lacking interactivity and appeal, causing classical-book communication to adopt a “professional institution-centered” model rather than a “public-centered” model [16].

When interpreting the cultural meaning of Suzhou Library’s classical-book practices, it is important to recognize that classical books today no longer play the same role as in traditional society. In the past, classical books were closely tied to daily life in Suzhou; today, their cultural function is more closely aligned with “cultural resources,” “educational resources,” or “urban branding.” The library’s activity designs emphasize cultural value and knowledge dissemination but rarely reflect the lived experience of classical books, thereby weakening opportunities for emotional resonance. In other words, contemporary classical-book communication requires not only the presentation of knowledge but also the creation of connections between classical books and everyday life. This remains a relatively weak link in current institutional practices [17]. From an institutional perspective, Suzhou Library carries the central responsibility of transforming classical-book culture from “texts” into “public cultural resources.” Yet this process must balance institutional requirements, professional expertise, and public reception. On the one hand, classical book preservation demands specialized skills and high costs; on the other hand, public cultural needs are diverse and rooted in daily life. The library’s current approach heavily prioritizes the former while insufficiently addressing the latter, resulting in a structure in which classical books are “preserved within institutions but absent from everyday life” [17].

Thus, Suzhou Library’s classical-book preservation practices present a nested structure: restoration and preservation constitute the material foundation; collation and digitalization constitute the knowledge foundation; and public education constitutes the foundation for cultural reproduction. The balance among these three domains determines whether classical books can truly enter contemporary cultural life. Survey data reveal that while public attitudes toward classical books are positive, the available

pathways for participation are limited. The library has abundant resources, but its activities have not effectively reached the public. This suggests that for classical books to become part of contemporary Suzhou’s cultural identity, reliance on institutional mechanisms alone is insufficient; new modes of cultural communication—such as school partnerships, media collaborations, digital storytelling, and multimodal presentations—are necessary.

Overall, Suzhou Library’s classical-book preservation practices represent both the modern continuation of traditional culture and the reconstruction of classical-book meaning in the contemporary era. Through restoration, collation, digitization, and educational programs, the library reintroduces classical books—originally part of a professional textual system—into the public cultural sphere, laying the institutional foundation for their contemporary cultural significance. However, how to further narrow the practical distance between the public and classical books, transforming them from “professional objects” into “public culture,” remains a key issue requiring future attention.

6. From Cultural Resources to Cultural Identity: The Contemporary Reproduction of the Meaning of Classical Books

The meanings of Suzhou’s classical books have been continually reinterpreted and given new functions throughout history. In traditional society, engraving activities and private library systems imbued classical books with multiple layers of significance—including knowledge transmission, family culture, literati cultivation, and local identity. After entering modern society, however, the institutional structures, usage contexts, and cultural logics surrounding classical books underwent fundamental transformation: they shifted from private cultural assets to public cultural resources, and from everyday tools of knowledge to centrally preserved cultural heritage. The contemporary meaning of classical books in Suzhou is thus not a natural continuation of traditional meanings, but rather a reconstruction shaped by new institutions, media forms, and cultural conditions. To understand the cultural role of classical books in contemporary Suzhou, one must analyze how they acquire meaning through institutional, mediatized, and participatory processes and how they further shape the formation of local cultural identity.

From a historical perspective, classical books in Suzhou long possessed both everyday relevance and productive significance. Bookshops, private libraries, and networks of local gentry formed the social foundation for the circulation of classical books, keeping them embedded within vibrant social practices. Engraving was not merely a craft but a local cultural mechanism: Suzhou continuously organized, represented, and reinforced its cultural image through engraving. Local gazetteers, collected texts, landscape records, and garden monographs constructed a historical narrative of “Wu culture,” turning Suzhou into a cultural community that wrote, presented, and preserved its own heritage. Thus, classical books functioned not only as carriers of culture but also as mechanisms for shaping cultural identity. However, this mechanism relied heavily on the gentry structure and traditional knowledge networks; once placed within modern institutional frameworks, its social foundation changed dramatically.

In contemporary Suzhou, the cultural vitality of classical books depends primarily on public cultural institutions for organization and interpretation. Through restoration, collation, cataloguing, and digitalization, Suzhou Library brings classical books from private systems into public institutional frameworks, granting them renewed legitimacy and a new order of knowledge. Yet institutional preservation also entails the withdrawal of classical books from everyday life: they are redefined as “professional objects,” “cultural heritage,” and “public resources.” This shift has positive effects—classical books can be preserved, classified, and digitized systematically, and can more easily enter public discourse. However, the everyday quality, emotional resonance, and accessibility of classical books have diminished. Institutional models emphasize “protection,” “standardization,” and “rules of use,” rather than the tactile, storied, or life-based dimensions of classical books, creating a structural distance between the public and these texts.

Public cognition reinforces this sense of distance. In the questionnaire survey, more than 92% of respondents believed classical books had cultural value, yet only 12% understood Suzhou’s engraving history. Over 87% expressed willingness to participate in classical-book-related activities, but only 7% had actually done so. This contradiction between high recognition and low engagement is central to understanding

the position of classical books in contemporary Suzhou. Classical books retain strong symbolic significance as cultural heritage, but they have largely exited everyday life and become objects requiring specialized knowledge to comprehend. Their position within public culture thus depends more on institutional and scholarly interpretation than on spontaneous cultural experience.

This structural tension is not unique to Suzhou but reflects a broader dilemma in modern cities regarding cultural heritage. Yet in Suzhou—where engraving traditions run deep—the sense of cultural distance becomes especially pronounced. The traditional idea of “engraving books as a virtuous act” framed engraving as a local ethical practice that contributed to collective good through cultural production. In contrast, contemporary classical-book preservation retains a cultural mission but primarily operates as an administrative project, technical system, or public service. This represents a shift from “folk cultural logic” to “institutional cultural logic,” and from participatory cultural practices to institution-led cultural programs. As a result, cultural identity has shifted from a practical to a symbolic identity.

Nevertheless, classical-book culture in contemporary Suzhou retains strong potential to re-enter public life. With the advancement of digital construction, classical books have acquired new communicative forms that transcend professional boundaries and reach a wider societal audience. Public suggestions, such as adopting more youth-oriented dissemination methods (32.68%) and strengthening school-based education (26.8%), highlight a crucial path forward: classical books must reconnect with audiences through new narrative forms, interactive modes, and media. Short videos, online exhibitions, virtual restoration experiences, and youth-centered curricular programs can help reduce the distance created by professionalization and transform classical books from “inaccessible cultural relics” into experiential, understandable, and discussable cultural content.

From a cultural studies perspective, the contemporary reproduction of the significance of classical books in Suzhou follows a dual logic. On the one hand, restoration, collation, and digitization confer classical books with institutional cultural authority and position them as important components of Suzhou culture, contributing to the construction of the city’s

cultural brand. On the other hand, through public participation, educational activities, and media dissemination, classical books may return to public life and become practical resources for cultural identity among Suzhou residents. The meaning of classical books, therefore, is not static but is continually negotiated and generated between institutional logic and everyday experience.

In this process, Suzhou Library is not the only actor. Schools, cultural media, local gazetteer offices, grassroots cultural groups, and creative practitioners can all contribute to the contemporary meaning-making of classical books. The dual roles of classical books-as “cultural resources” and as “mediators of cultural identity”-require cross-institutional collaboration and multi-modal presentation. For example, linking classical books to garden culture, Kunqu opera, regional literature, and local-gazetteer traditions can embed classical-book reproduction within a broader Wu-cultural context, forming new cultural narratives with coherence, experiential value, and contemporary relevance.

Overall, the cultural significance of classical books in contemporary Suzhou has not disappeared; rather, it is being reconstituted under new institutional structures and cultural conditions. Classical books are no longer merely historical remnants or objects of specialized study. Through preservation efforts by libraries, the public's willingness, digital dissemination, and ongoing cultural narration within the city, classical books are reintegrated into Suzhou's cultural ecosystem as contemporary cultural resources. Their significance in the present is thus not simply a continuation of tradition, but a meaning continually shaped by modern cultural mechanisms. From this perspective, the future of classical-book culture depends not only on restoration and preservation but also on whether classical books can reemerge as living cultural resources within everyday life. Classical books must be reembedded into the city's cultural narrative-through school education, media communication, cross-sector collaboration, and youth-oriented content creation-to find pathways into contemporary lived experiences. As a city with deep cultural traditions, Suzhou possesses the foundational conditions to transform classical books into mediators of cultural identity. However, richer cultural mechanisms are needed to support this process. Classical

books must not only be preserved but also understood; not only researched but also experienced; not only belong to institutions but also to the public.

The meaning of classical books is never fixed; it is continually generated through processes of re-reading, re-using, and reinterpreting. From the ethical tradition of “engraving books as an act of accumulating virtue” to the modern project of “digital preservation,” the core of Suzhou's classical-book culture has not changed-classical books remain a vital way for the city to understand itself, write itself, and reproduce its cultural identity. The task of contemporary classical-book preservation is precisely to ensure that this cultural mechanism continues to operate under new conditions, allowing classical books to remain active within modern urban life and to serve as an essential component of Suzhou's cultural memory and cultural identity.

7. Conclusion

As a major center of engraving, Suzhou's classical-book culture spans over a thousand years, forming a cultural ecology jointly sustained by bookshops, literati networks, and local society. In traditional society, engraving was both a technique and an ethical practice; it was a productive activity and also a means of writing local memory. The notion of “engraving books as an act of accumulating virtue” embedded classical-book production deeply within the city's cultural structure, treating the cultivation of literature and reverence for education as integral parts of Suzhou's cultural identity. However, after entering the modern institutional system, the methods of producing and circulating classical books underwent fundamental changes, shifting from private libraries and bookshop systems toward preservation and utilization dominated by public institutions. As a result, the cultural status of classical books also transformed-from everyday, life-based resources to professionalized, institutionalized cultural heritage.

The questionnaire survey shows that contemporary Suzhou residents' perception of classical books presents a striking dual structure. On one hand, classical books still enjoy a high degree of value recognition: over 90% of respondents believe classical books help in understanding Wu culture, and nearly 90% are willing to participate in classical-book activities. This indicates that classical books remain widely

acknowledged in their symbolic cultural significance. On the other hand, at the levels of knowledge and practice, the public has very limited direct contact and participation: only 12% of respondents understand Suzhou's engraving history, and only 7% have participated in related activities. Classical-book information primarily appears through museums and school education—primarily through “professional channels.” This structural gap between strong value recognition and weak practical engagement reveals the transformation of classical books in contemporary Suzhou from a form of lived experience to an institutional resource, while also exposing deficiencies in the modern public-cultural system's communication pathways, activity design, and media strategies.

As the primary institution responsible for the preservation of contemporary classical books, Suzhou Library plays a key role in restoration, collation, digitization, and public education, enabling the continuation of classical-book culture in the modern context. However, this continuation unfolds mainly through institutionalized means. Its professionalism and standardization, while essential for preservation, also create higher knowledge thresholds for the public. Digitalization expands accessibility, allowing classical books to transcend physical boundaries and enter public view. Still, digital images may weaken their materiality and reading experience, making it difficult for users to fully appreciate their “authenticity,” “historical depth,” and “local character.” Although the library's activities offer opportunities for public contact, their limited formats and lack of interactivity make it difficult for classical books to genuinely integrate into everyday urban life.

Synthesizing historical tradition, institutional practices, and public cognition, the contemporary cultural reproduction of classical books in Suzhou follows a clear logic: classical books no longer rely on traditional engraving structures and literati networks for dissemination. In modern society, they obtain meaning through institutionalized protection, digital technology, and cultural policy. Classical books are no longer natural cultural resources; instead, they must be interpreted, reorganized, represented, and disseminated before they can be understood, accepted, and recognized as cultural symbols. Their contemporary value is therefore not merely a continuation of tradition but a meaning

continuously shaped through modern cultural mechanisms. From this perspective, the future of classical-book culture depends not only on preservation and restoration but also on whether classical books can return from “institutional resources” to “living resources.” They must be reintegrated into the city's cultural narrative through school education, media communication, cross-sector collaboration, and youth-oriented content production in order to enter contemporary experiential worlds. Suzhou, with its deep cultural heritage, possesses the necessary foundation to transform classical books into mediators of cultural identity, but this process requires richer cultural mechanisms to promote it, ensuring that classical books are not only preserved but also understood; not only studied but also experienced; not only belonging to institutions but also to the public.

The meaning of classical books has never been fixed; it is continually generated through processes of re-reading, re-using, and reinterpretation. From the ethical tradition of “engraving books as an act of accumulating virtue” to the modern project of “digital preservation,” the core of Suzhou's classical-book culture has remained unchanged—classical books have always been a vital means for the city to understand itself, to write itself, and to reproduce its own culture. The task of contemporary classical book preservation is to keep this cultural mechanism functioning under new conditions, allowing classical books to remain alive in the modern city and to become an essential component of Suzhou's cultural memory and identity.

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