

Reclaiming Outstanding Universal Value: Legacy of Shipai Campus at South China University of Technology

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Abstract

Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) refers to cultural or natural significance of exceptional importance to all humanity. However, in China, this concept has often been overlooked in the context of the campus, leading to the demolition or inappropriate treatment of historically significant sites. This study addresses this gap by investigating the OUV of Shipai campus of South China University of Technology (SpSCUT), a representative university campus, using a qualitative case study approach. Primary data were collected through archival research and in-depth interviews, while the findings were validated by focus group discussions and the Delphi technique. Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo, through which seven overarching value dimensions were identified: education and research, history and culture, sentiment, aesthetics, symbolism, ecology, and politics. Findings further suggest the campus demonstrates strong potential for UNESCO World Heritage nomination under Criteria (i), (iv), and (vi). As the first systematic investigation of a Chinese campus within the UNESCO framework, this study reveals the largely overlooked intangible and environmental values of SpSCUT. It provides key policy insights for improving campus heritage governance in China by aligning its value with international standards, while the proposed seven-dimensional framework further offers an analytical tool for identifying and evaluating campus heritage value.

Keywords: campus heritage landscape, outstanding universal value, South China University of Technology, Sun Yat-sen, National Sun Yat-sen University

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Introduction

Heritage scholarship has predominantly centered on monuments, historic towns, religious architecture, and natural landscapes, leaving university campuses at the margins of discourse. This neglect arises largely because their significance is expressed through intangible dimensions such as knowledge traditions, intellectual ideals, and institutional memory, rather than through tangible material entities. It is further reinforced by the tension that active educational institutions face between pressures for spatial development and the logics of heritage preservation. Moreover, universities serve as incubators of avant-garde thought, which is often perceived as potentially dangerous and thus met with governmental caution or restriction. However, universities are the central sites of knowledge production. Yet this persistent underrecognition has constrained scholarly inquiry and limited legal and policy recognition of campus and heritage conservation practice.

Particularly in China, late Qing and Republican-era university campuses embody not only material heritage values but also historical identity and intellectual continuity,

and they represent an authentic integration of orthodox Confucian thought with Western modern civilization. Nevertheless, the immense value of these heritage spaces has not been recognized, as public awareness of their cultural significance remains limited (National People's Congress, 2011, 2024; State Council, 2006, 2017). As a result, many historic campuses have been subjected to destructive alterations or even deliberate demolitions (Tang, 2012; Tian, 2019; Tsinghua Yearbook, 1937). The Shipai campus of South China University of Technology (SpSCUT) illustrates these tensions. As the most prominent successor to the former National Sun Yat-sen University (NSYSU), it carries associations with national elites such as Sun Yat-sen (alias Sun Zhongshan, hereafter "Sun") and generations of scholars and designers (Zhao & Zheng, 2008). Its central landmark is a granite monolith inscribed with the university motto in Sun's own calligraphy, symbolizing the campus's historical memory and cultural value (Figure 1).

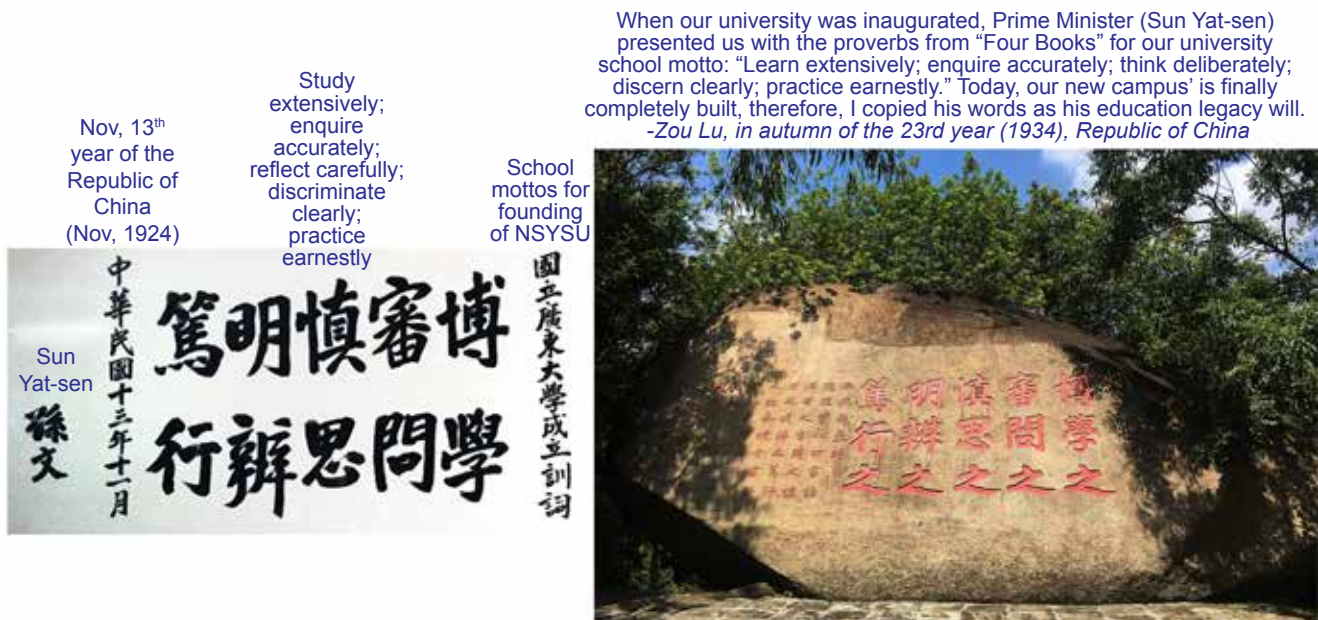


Figure 1: Sun's Handwritten School Motto Source: Left (Yi, 2005); Right – Photograph Taken and Translated by the Author

Although the campus holds profound heritage significance, its value has been progressively undermined by multiple forces. First, the nationwide restructuring of Chinese universities in the 1950s fragmented NSYSU and divided its original site among multiple entities, such as SpSCUT, South China Agricultural University (SCAU), the Guangdong Academy of Agricultural Sciences (GDAAS), Favorview Place (FP), and Wushan Garden Residence (WG) (Zheng, 2004). Three interrelated problems further exemplify the vulnerability of SpSCUT's heritage. First, shifts in institutional nomenclature from NSYSU to SCUT have obscured the campus's identity (Figure 2), generated semantic loss and weakened its genius loci (He et al., 2024; Liu, 2005; Norberg-Schulz, 1980; Taher Tolou Del et al., 2020). Second, insufficient heritage education and promotion have hindered public awareness of its symbolic and historical value. Third, conservation efforts have prioritized buildings while neglecting the broader environmental landscape during the process of campus development. As a result, As a result, many hills have been leveled, lakes filled, and vegetation removed, leading to a fragmented campus environment and the loss of ecological continuity (He et al., 2022).



Figure 2: Carved Characters of "Sun Yat-Sen University" on Roof Tiles in SpSCUT

Source: Left – SpSCUT History Museum (2015); Right – Photograph Taken and Translated by the Author

Collectively, these problems are widespread in China. Despite the centrality of UNESCO's OUV framework in global heritage recognition, systematic assessment of university campuses through the OUV lens has been limited and remains largely absent in the case of Chinese campuses. This lack of application has limited the visibility and recognition of campus heritage in China. Accordingly, this study aims to elucidate the values embedded in the SpSCUT campus through the lens of OUV framework of UNESCO. To achieve this aim, the study pursues two specific objectives:

To establish an analytical benchmark for the OUV of university campus heritage landscapes (UCHL) by examining the value components at UNESCO-listed university sites and other representative universities worldwide.

To identify the constituent elements that define the OUV of the SpSCUT campus based on the benchmark established in Objective 1.

Literature Review

Conceptualizing OUV

The concept of OUV was first introduced in the 1972 World Heritage Convention as the central criterion for inscription on the World Heritage List, though the convention itself did not provide a clear definition (UNESCO, 1972). The 1977 Operational Guidelines (OG) acknowledged OUV as a core standard, describing it simply as "of outstanding importance to humanity". In that edition, "universal" referred to properties highly representative of their respective cultures (UNESCO, 1977). In 2005, a more systematic definition was formulated, emphasizing that OUV denotes cultural and/or natural significance of exceptional importance and transcends national boundaries and is of common value to all humanity, both present and future (UNESCO, 2005). The 2008 OG further emphasized OUV as the essential condition for nomination, management, and monitoring (UNESCO, 2008). To operationalize this concept, UNESCO established ten criteria: those for natural heritage address biogeographical diversity, while those for cultural heritage highlight human creativity and cultural diversity.

While OUV offers a robust normative framework for heritage assessment, critical heritage studies caution against treating heritage as a fixed and universally agreed construct. Heritage is inherently contested, as multiple stakeholders attribute divergent or even conflicting meanings to the same site (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 1996; Silverman, 2011; Smith, 2015). Smith (2006) conceptualized this as an "authorized heritage discourse," whereby expert institutions privilege material authenticity and monumental forms, often overlooking everyday, emotional, and

community-based values. Complementary perspectives, including values-based approaches (Mason, 2002) and living heritage approaches (Poulios, 2014), argue that heritage must also be understood as a dynamic cultural process continuously reinterpreted through social practice.

In summary, OUV constitutes both a global benchmark for heritage evaluation and a negotiated space where universal principles interact with local identities and meaning.

OUV within University Contexts

OUV, initially restricted to monumental heritage and pristine natural sites, has subsequently broadened to include cultural landscapes (Labadi, 2013). As complex cultural landscapes, university campuses may demonstrate OUV when their attributes align with global heritage criteria, thereby linking local contexts with international discourse.

Since 1998, when the University of Alcalá de Henares (UAH) in Spain was inscribed as the first university on the World Heritage List (WHL), university-related heritage has been inscribed through two main pathways: directly, as in UAH; and indirectly, as part of a broader historic ensemble, as exemplified by the University of Macau within the Historic Centre of Macau.

Campus Heritage Landscape in China

The potential OUV of Chinese campus heritage landscapes rests not only on the cultural and innovative significance of their planning and design, but also on their close connection with national education and social development (Feng & Lv, 2016). Most of China's leading university campuses were founded during the late Qing and Republican periods, reflecting a synthesis of Western academic spatial models with Chinese cultural traditions (Wang et al., 2025). These campuses functioned not only as centers of scholarship but also as pivotal agents in China's transformation from a traditional feudal dynasty to a modern nation (Chen, 2008; Hayhoe, 1996).

Within this context, most existing studies focus on architecture and campus planning, emphasizing the conservation of historic buildings and overall campus layout. A secondary strand of research has addressed the cultural-historical dimension, exploring the developmental trajectory of university campuses and their cultural connotations (Cui, 2011; Deng, 2009; Liu, 2009; Liu, 2004; Ping & Wang, 2024; Zhao et al., 2023). A comparatively smaller body of scholarship adopts a landscape perspective, examining the natural and ecological values of campus heritage (He, 2013; Wei et al., 2012; Xiao, 1991). Only a few isolated case studies have focused on more specific aspects, such as heritage perception (Liu et al., 2023), or road systems (Yang, 2011). Nevertheless, Chinese campus heritage remains largely absent from UNESCO's OUV framework and underexplored in international heritage discourse, which limits its global visibility and comprehensive understanding.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was chosen because the heritage value of the SpSCUT campus was embedded in its historical context and cultural meanings, particularly its association with Sun Yat-sen. Such values could not be quantified and could only be interpreted through narratives, historical documents, and lived experiences. Qualitative research thus provided the most appropriate means to capture the contextual significance of SpSCUT and to address the research objectives. In line with this rationale, the study employed a qualitative case study design, drawing on literature review, archival research, and expert interviews, complemented by validation through focus group discussion (FGD) and Delphi surveys, and thematic analysis with NVivo coding.

Case Context and Expert Selection Rationale

Case Context. Although many universities in China and abroad had been named after Sun, the Shipai campus was the only one personally founded by him. Designated by Sun as “the highest university in China”, it once covered an extensive area of approximately 2,667 hectares (NSYSU, 1937; Zhao & Zheng, 2008). The campus represents the most characteristic embodiment of Sun’s educational philosophy and was the first modern university in China designed by Chinese architects. Collectively, it served as a unique exemplar of university heritage in China (NSYSU, 1934). The SpSCUT campus is located in the Shipai (now Wushan) area of Tianhe District, Guangzhou, adjacent to the historic Shipai Village, which is the largest and oldest urban village in the city. It is conveniently accessible by Guangzhou Metro Line 3 and several public bus routes, including lines 20, 41, and 78 (Figure 3).

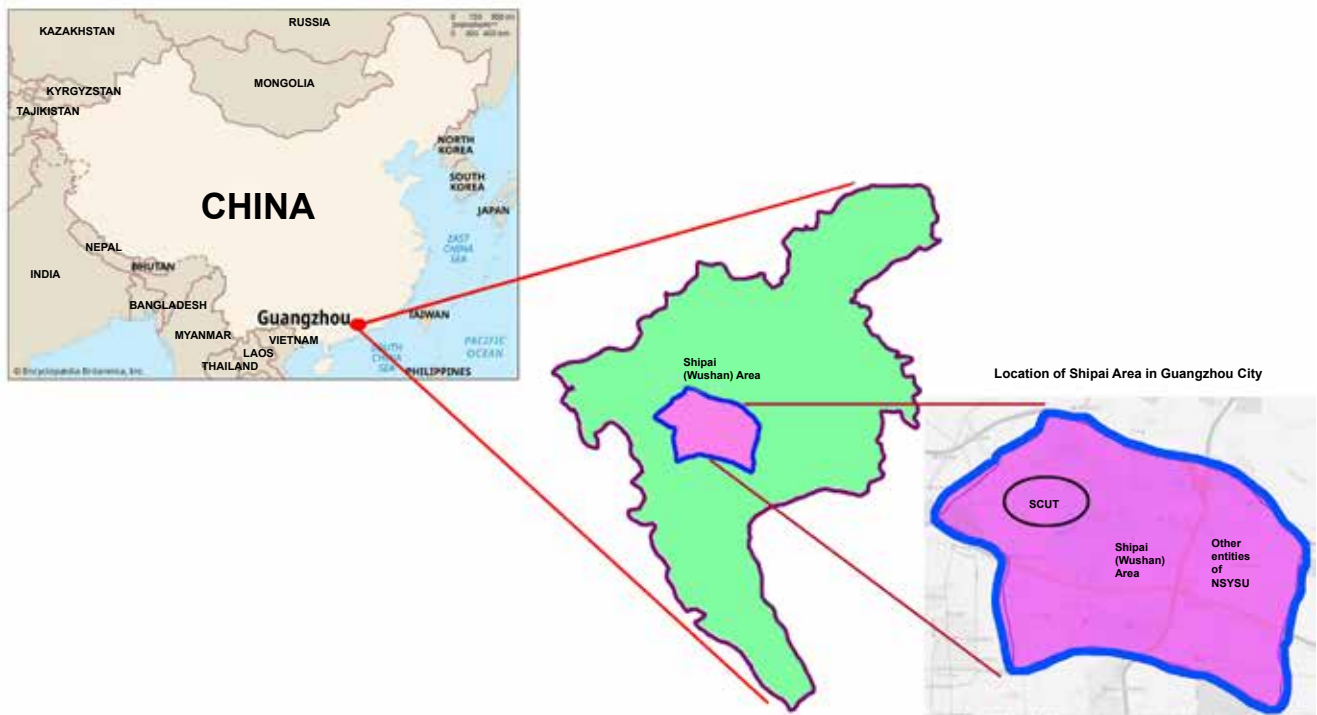


Figure 3: Geographical Location of SpSCUT Campus Source: Adapted by the Author Based on Google Maps

Expert Selection Rationale. In the in-depth interviews, FGD, and Delphi survey, experts were purposefully selected to ensure both academic and practical representativeness. The selection followed three key criteria. First, authority and professional credibility: all participants had over fifteen years of research or professional experience in heritage conservation, with backgrounds in landscape architecture, architecture, planning, history, or cultural studies, ensuring multidisciplinary perspectives and the reliability of findings. Second, research relevance and topical alignment: priority was given to experts experienced in UNESCO World Heritage evaluation or nomination, enabling the assessment of campus heritage OUV from both international and local perspectives. Third, diversity and representativeness: the panel combined Chinese and international experts from various institutions, fostering dialogue between theory and practice. This diversity enhanced cross-cultural comparability and strengthened the validity and explanatory power of the results.

Data Collection

In line with Objective 1, this study employed a comprehensive literature review and archival research. High-quality sources were identified from both English and Chinese publications by reputable scholars and publishers. Chinese materials were drawn from core academic journals indexed in CNKI and Wanfang Data, while English materials were limited to articles in the Web of Science Core Collection. In addition, archival records were systematically examined, including documents from Chinese universities and government entities, UNESCO, international university heritage organizations, and leading universities worldwide.

Objective 2 was addressed through a qualitative case study approach integrating archival research and in-depth interviews. The archival investigation examined the historical significance of the campus through systematic analysis of official records, historical photographs, campus plans, and related documents. The interviews involved experienced participants from SpSCUT, design institutes, and SCAU, selected for their expertise on campus heritage conservation and practice. A snowball sampling method was used to identify eligible participants, resulting in twenty invitations and eighteen completed interviews (Table 1).

Table 1: Profile of Interview Participants

Code	Field of Expertise	Years of Experience
P1	Chinese traditional building/ Feng Shui	>40
P2	environmental history / classical Chinese books	>35
P3	urban conservation / heritage landscape	>30
P4	campus planning and design / architectural design	>30
P5	post-occupancy evaluation (POE), architectural acoustics, soundscape	>50
P6	POE, campus study	>30
P7	industrial heritage / heritage law	>25
P8	architectural history and culture	>30
P9	campus study and urban planning	>25
P10	landscape/urban ecology	>40
P11	POE, campus planning	>35
P12	plants / landscape aesthetics	>35
P13	architectural heritage / landscape planning	>35
P14	urban conservation / planning	>35
P15	historic environment conservation and development	>30
P16	world heritage / tourism planning	>30
P17	architectural / landscape aesthetics	>20
P18	urban conservation / flood mitigation	>50
Titles	Professor (17, of whom 9 are Registered Architects/Planners); Registered Architect (1)	

The semi-structured interview questions were designed in alignment with the research objectives and further adapted to reflect each participant's specialization. A pilot study involving four participants was conducted to evaluate the appropriateness of the questions, after which moderate revisions were made to enhance more comprehensive responses. Among the eighteen interviewees, thirteen were affiliated with SpSCUT and five with SCAU. The sample questions used in the interviews are presented (Table 2).

Table 2: Example of Interview Questions

Code	Interview Questions
P1	As a senior consultant for the nomination of the Kaiping Diaolou and Villages, do you think it would be feasible to nominate SpSCUT as a UNESCO University World Heritage?
P5	As the first architecture PhD in China, could you provide your perspectives on the unique significance of the campus heritage of SpSCUT?
P9	I greatly admire your thesis on the architectural study of NSYSU campus. What are the unique characteristics of heritage landscape of the SpSCUT campuses?
P17	I deeply admire your expertise in the field of landscape and architectural aesthetics. What are the aesthetic values of the SpSCUT campus?
P18	As the inaugural PhD in the architectural history field in China. May I ask for your insights on the unique significance of the SpSCUT campus?

The 18 experts ranged in age from 44 to 79 years, comprising 15 females and 3 males. Each interview was approximately 45 minutes to 150 minutes, depending on whether they had responded to all questions based on their best recognition. Most interviews were performed in person at the experts' face-to-face workplaces, while two respondents were questioned by telephone, and one expert was interviewed using an online video. All interviews were audio- or video-recorded with consent and subsequently transcribed for analysis (Figure 4).



Figure 4: In-Depth Interview with Heritage Experts

Source: Taken by the Author

Data Analysis

Fundamental Steps

The gathered data included audio and video recordings, written texts, sketches, and photographs. Data analysis followed a systematic coding process aimed at identifying themes aligned with the research objectives. This research employed reflective thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The authors precisely transcribed the interview audio recordings into text, removing ambiguity and amplifying the core content. The approach consisted of four parts, each encompassing a comprehensive process for generating the findings (Figure 5).

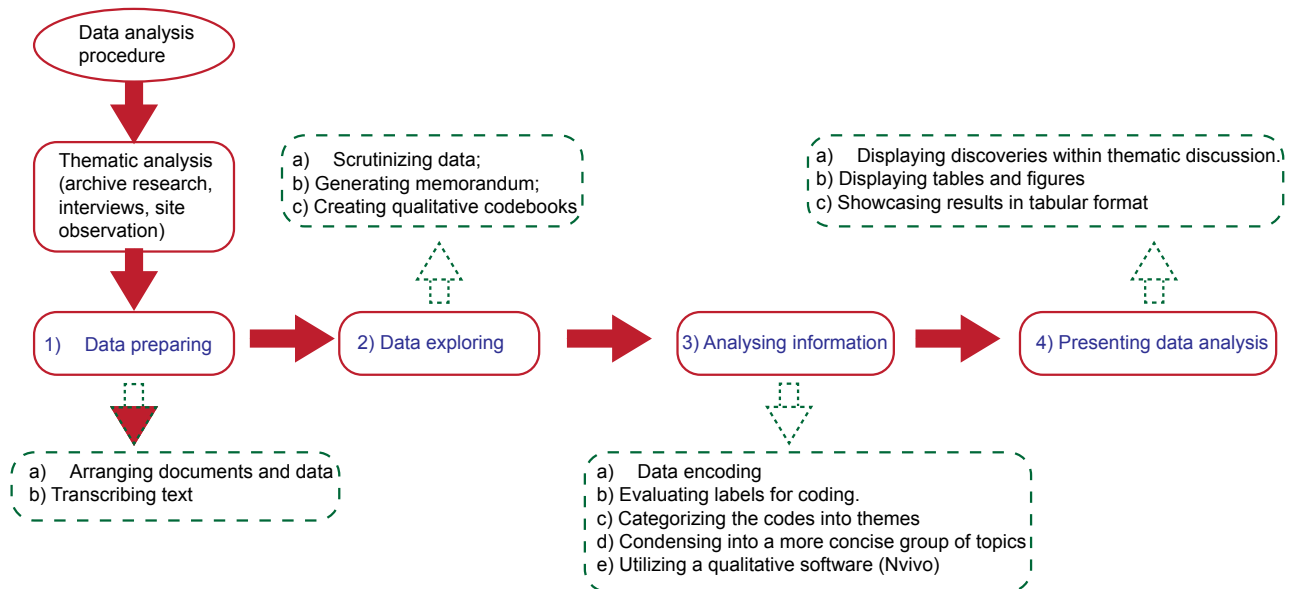


Figure 5: Specific Procedures of Data Analysis

Coding Procedure in NVivo

Open coding was conducted through a line-by-line examination of expert interview transcripts to identify phrases related to OUV. Initial codes—such as “ancient ritual order”, “Guozijian”, and “doctrine of the mean”—were created using NVivo’s node function to capture contents emphasized by experts. During axial coding, these initial codes were refined and consolidated into clusters; for example, “ancient ritual order”, “Guozijian”, and “doctrine of the mean” were grouped under the cluster “cultural significance”. Clusters such as “cultural significance” and “historical significance” were then integrated into the theme “cultural and historical”. This hierarchical coding structure was established in NVivo using a layered node system. Finally, selective coding synthesized all themes identified during the axial coding stage to construct the core category the OUV component of the heritage landscape at the SpSCUT campus. NVivo ensured systematic data management, maintained coding consistency, and supported the visualization of thematic relationships and analytical frameworks.

Data Validation

Process of FGD

Following Lincoln and Guba (1985), the research team enhanced credibility and transferability by including an FGD to verify and refine the emergent themes. Due to COVID-19 restrictions in China and Malaysia, the FGD was conducted in hybrid mode, enabling real-time, face-to-face interaction via videoconferencing (Table 3).

Table 3: Protocol of FGD

Items	Details
Date	Sep 9, 2022
Meeting Format	Mixed (physical and online)
Venues, institutions, and number of participants	1) Institute for Vernacular Architecture Studies (SpSCUT, 2 participants; UPM, 1)
	2) Institute for Historic Preservation and Development (SpSCUT, 1)
	3) Department of History (SCAU, 1);
	4) Department of Architecture History, (SpSCUT, 1)
	5) Faculty of Design and Architecture (UPM, 3)
Duration	2 hours and 30 minutes
Titles	Professor (7); Lecturer (1); PhD Candidate (1)

As presented in Table 3, a total of nine participants took part in the FGD. Five heritage experts were purposively selected based on their academic expertise in landscape heritage, architectural heritage, environmental history and ancient manuscripts, urban conservation, and architectural aesthetics. To ensure confidentiality, all participants were anonymized (Figure 6).



Figure 6: F.G.D. Meeting
Source: Taken by the Author

Process of the Delphi Technique

The Delphi technique was applied to reach expert consensus on the heritage components that define the OUV of the SpSCUT campus. Owing to the subjective nature of heritage value assessment, this method provided a structured means to synthesize expert opinions, reduce bias, and integrate perspectives from different geographical and disciplinary backgrounds. The Delphi process in this study comprised the following steps:

1) Selection of expert panel

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit international experts. Twenty-four invitations were sent, and twelve experts agreed to participate. The Delphi panel comprised twelve international experts with extensive experience in heritage conservation, including a UNESCO Chair, UNESCO specialist, ICOMOS expert, and senior academics from Asia, Europe, and North America (Table 4).

Table 4: Profile of Delphi Experts (International Participants)

Code	Title or Field of Expertise	Country / Region	Years of Experience
IP1	UNESCO chair, cultural heritage	Hong Kong	>45
IP2	UNESCO heritage specialist (Asia-Pacific)	Taiwan and France	>35
IP3	cultural heritage	Indonesia	>20
IP4	Malaysia ICOMOS representative	Malaysia	>40
IP5	urban studies and cultural geography	United States	>35
IP6	cultural landscape and literary heritage	Canada	>30
IP7	architectural heritage	Indonesia	>30
IP8	campus heritage	Iraq	>30
IP9	landscape heritage	Malaysia	>15
IP10	architectural heritage	Bangladesh	>15
IP11	landscape heritage	Malaysia	>15
IP12	architectural heritage	Malaysia	>15

2) Survey Design and Data Collection:

A questionnaire containing 24 heritage value statements for the SpSCUT campus was developed based on prior findings. Each statement represented a potential component of the campus's OUV and was rated by Delphi experts on a five-point Likert scale (from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree"), with space for open-ended comments. Supplementary materials, including photographs and video footage, were provided to enhance contextual understanding, and the researcher promptly addressed expert inquiries throughout the process.

Findings, Discussion, Data Validation

Benchmark of OUV of Campus Heritage Landscape

Following UNESCO's heritage classification framework, the author identified and synthesized the constituent elements of OUV from UNESCO-listed World Heritage universities and other exemplary historical institutions. These elements were systematically organized into two overarching categories. The first comprised tangible attributes, including geography, water bodies, flora, architecture, campus layout, etc. (Table 5).

Table 5: Tangible Elements of Benchmark Universities

Source: Compiled from UNESCO University World Heritage Documents (Oxford, 2012; UM, 2022; USYD, 2017; UTokyo, 1986, 2019) and Site Survey Materials.

University		UP	KC	UC	AH	AM	CC	VA	OX	UM	SD	TK
Attributes												
topography/ softscape	hill, valley	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•		
	river,lakes		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•
	plants: greening, cultivation, curation, habitat	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
traffic system	linear routes: road, pathway, corridor, bridge	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	nodes: plaza, parking area	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
building	educational: classroom, laboratories, workshops		•	•		•	•	•		•	•	•
	cultural: museum, library, gallery, palace		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	religious: church, mosque, monastery, pagoda		•		•		•	•	•	•		
	residential: villa, apartment, hotel, repository	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	service: restroom, dining hall, service hall	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	sports: stadium, sports field, court, gym, pool				•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	administrative: chamber, office, press	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	health: hospital, infirmary				•		•	•	•	•		•
furniture	table, bench, stool	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	
	utensil, pot, niche, flowerpot, stone basin, vase		•		•			•	•			
landscape structure	spatial: pavilion, loggia, archway, wall	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	decorative: sculpture, fountain, stone scenery	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	ritual: cemetery, altar, pulpit		•	•	•			•	•		•	
facility	water: well, supply, and sewer system	•		•	•			•	•	•	•	•
	mechanical: cooling tower, boiler room						•				•	
	service: signage, lighting	•				•	•	•	•	•	•	
collection	scientific: specimen, observatory, instrument	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	books: archive, manuscript, document	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
	visual & graphic; artifacts & artistic	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
ruins	castle, historic relics				•				•			
rare animal	rare species (e.g., iguana, blue boar)						•		•			

Abbreviations. UP = University of Padua (UNIPD); KC = Korean Neo-Confucian Academies; UC = University of Coimbra-Alta and Sofia; AH =University of Alcalá de Henares (UAH); AM = Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM); CC = Ciudad Universitaria de Caracas (CUC); VA = University of Virginia (UVA); OX = University of Oxford (Oxford); UM = University of Malaya; SD = University of Sydney (USYD); TK = University of Tokyo (UTokyo).

The second category concerns the intangible attributes of benchmark universities (Table 6):

Table 6: Intangible Elements of Benchmark Universities

Source and Abbreviations are Identical to Those Listed in Table 3.

University	Philosophy	Academic Traditions	Social Practices	Collective Memory	Aesthetic Legacy
UP	enlightenment science	botanical medicine	botanical teaching	scientific pioneers	renaissance symbolism
KC	neo-Confucianism	neo-Confucian academies	scholar rites	scholar-gentry memory	wooden academies
UC	humanist philosophy	royal traditions	graduation burning	monarchs and scholars	Pombaline classicism
AH	renaissance humanism	humanist learning	graduation robes	Cervantes's legacy	baroque style
AM	indigenous-colonial fusion	academic autonomy	national festivals	national heroes	colonial-modern hybrid
CC	Latin modernism	interdisciplin-ary ideals	student celebrations	symbolic figures	synthesis of arts
VA	Jeffersonians republicanism	academic freedom	graduation orations	Jefferson	neoclassical republicanism
OX	Christian humanism	collegiate system	matriculation, encaenia	statesmen and scholars	collegiate style
UM	postcolonial pluralism	nation-building mission	convocation, multi-faith rituals	independence leaders	colonial-modern mix
SD	enlightenment liberalism	colonial academic traditions	university ceremonies	reformist educators	colonial gothic
TK	East-West synthesis	Meiji modernization	graduation ceremonies	Meiji reformers	modernist Japanese

In summary, the two tables show that campus heritage comprises both tangible and intangible aspects that together form a complete system of value. The tangible dimension represents the material settings that support campus academic life, whereas the intangible dimension reflects the university's intellectual and cultural spirit. These interwoven aspects can be broadly categorized into seven key value dimensions: teaching and research (TR), historical and cultural (HC), symbolic (S), aesthetic (A), sentimental (ST), ecological (E), and political (P), which together form the conceptual foundation for identifying and interpreting the OUV of the SpSCUT campus.

Identified OUV of SpSCUT campus

OUV Themes and Constituted Elements

Building on the seven value dimensions identified from benchmark universities, the OUV of the SpSCUT campus was consolidated accordingly. Each theme corresponds to one value dimension and is structured into one to three clusters, with each cluster comprising multiple specific value items proposed by experts. The source (number of experts proposing value), frequency (total number of proposed value items), clusters, and sample of value items are presented as below (Table 7):

Table 7: Value Themes, Cluster and Sample Items

Theme Source/ Frequency	Cluster	Sample Value Items
TR 17/138	environmental planning	site selection, spatial configuration, utilization of water systems
	architectural education	architectural synthesis, architectural pedagogy, climate-responsive
	scholarship and talent	scientific spirit, environmental pedagogy, talent cultivation
HC 10/22	historical significance	legacy and inheritance, historical relic
	cultural significance	ancient ritual order, Guozijian, doctrine of the mean

Theme Source/ Frequency	Cluster	Sample Value Items
SB 11/29	Sun Yat-sen symbolism patriotism national ideals	campus layout, bell elements, university naming patriotic cultural function, Liu Yongfu national ambitions, the highest educational institution
A 5/11	formal and chromatic interpretive aesthetic literacy	formal beauty, chromatic beauty meaningful beauty aesthetic literacy of designer, design sensibility
ST 4/6	sense of belonging collective memory alumni bonds	emotional attachment, pride in university identity intergenerational story, campus legend alumni nostalgia, return visit, alumni networks
E 4/9	water and microclimate topography vegetation	lakes, swamps, southeast wind, local cooling effect mountains, hills, hillocks trees, grass, shrubs
P 1/1	political	cultural and ideological bridge for China and Taiwan

Furthermore, a radar chart was developed to illustrate the proportional distribution of seven dimensions as identified through in-depth expert interviews (Figure 7).

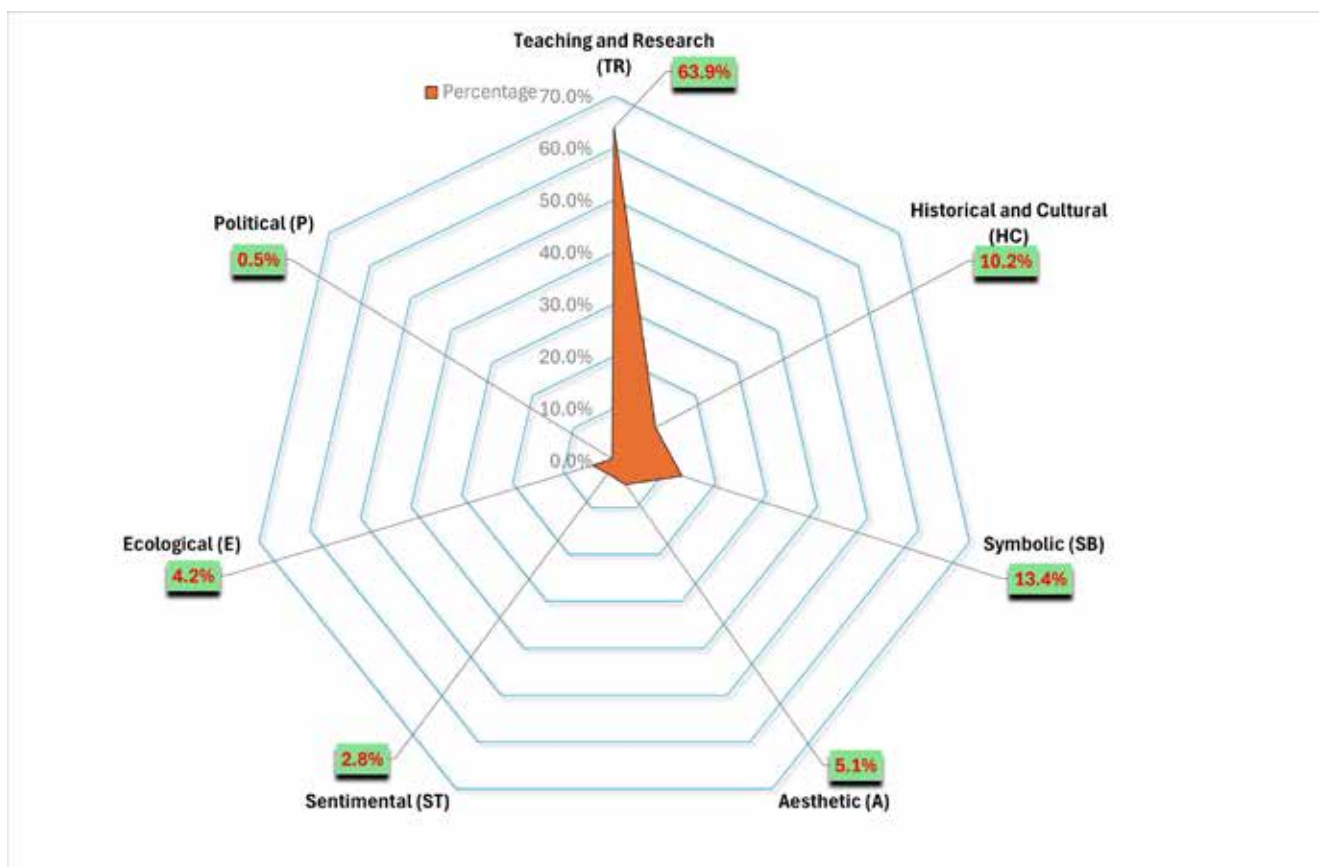


Figure 7: Percentage Distribution of OUV Components

The chart indicates that the teaching and research value forms the core of campus heritage perception, reflecting the campus's enduring academic and educational significance. Symbolic, historical and cultural values constitute the secondary layer, underscoring its dual role as a cultural emblem and historical landmark in the evolution of Chinese higher education. In contrast, aesthetic, ecological, and sentimental values appear less prominent, while the political dimension remains minimal.

Representative Quotations of OUV

Sample quotations from experts have been selected to illustrate their perspectives on the OUV of the heritage landscape at SpSCUT campus (Table 8).

Table 8: Representative Quotations Illustrating the Components of OUV

Theme	Cluster	Sample Quotations
TR	environmental planning	The site siting for NSYSU is in the Shipai area, which serves as a garrison site and a demarcation line between the Nanling Mountains and the alluvial plain in the Pearl River Delta (P4).
	architectural education	The design embodies numerous innovative concepts, demonstrating an outstanding integration of climate-adaptive technologies into new architectural solutions as early as the 1930s (P8).
	scholarship and talent	The tradition of rigorous scientific spirit and humanistic care of NSYSU is the spiritual core of a university, and any university should pursue it (P4).
HC	historical significance	The Yongfu Pavilion embodies a profound historical background, commemorating Liu Yongfu, a prominent military leader renowned for his pivotal role in repelling the French invasion (P4).
	cultural significance	The campus should be revitalized and positioned as a model university heritage zone, abundant in cultural depth, with its values and narratives communicated to a global audience (P2).
SB	Sun Yat-sen symbolism	Sun's testament, "The revolution is not yet successful; comrades must continue to strive", is reflected in the bell-shaped campus layout (P3).
	patriotism	The bell carries a symbol of vigilance. Then-president Zou Lu pointed out the entire campus layout resembled a bell, intentionally designed to serve as a reminder to the public of the nation's invasions (P3).
	National ideals	The campus parallels the historical role of the Imperial Academy (Guozijian), the highest educational institution in ancient China, which was situated in the capital and functioned as the central institute of learning (P8).
A	formal and chromatic	It embodies the essence of classical architecture through harmonious proportions of roof, body, and base, as well as refined roof curvature. These features confer enduring aesthetic value and a standard of excellence still unsurpassed today (P15).
	symbolic or interpretive	The campus reflects a symbolic philosophy of harmonizing with nature, integrating mountains, water, and gardens. This embodies deeper interpretive meaning (P15).
	aesthetic literacy	The designers of that generation possessed a deep understanding of classical architecture, largely attributable to their education within the French Beaux-Arts system (P15).
ST	sense of belonging	You can hardly imagine relocating the School of Architecture from the Red Building. It's impossible. Regardless of future circumstances, I am committed to safeguarding it—it represents my lifeblood (P4).
	collective memory	The building embodies values of history, culture, craftsmanship, and technology, which ultimately converge into the collective and shared memory it carries (P14).
	alumni bonds	The campus is imbued with a distinct historical atmosphere, which continues to resonate with students of SCUT and SCAU. It also serves as an emotional bridge connecting alumni to their formative experiences (P7).
E	water and microclimate	SCUT and SCAU share a distinctive waterbody system. It is uncommon to find such an extensive, continuous hydrological network on other university campuses (P6). The campus is shaped by a distinctive wind regime, with southeast winds from the Chashan area historically defining its microclimatic conditions (P1).
	topography	SCUT occupies a tropical setting enriched by a mountainous landscape, a feature absent from peer universities such as Tsinghua and those in Nanjing, which possess only modest elevations (P13).
	vegetation	Clustered groves, gentle plains, and secluded basins create a serene environment conducive to scholarship and human habitation (P12).
P	political	The campus serves a role in fostering a sense of unity between mainland China and Taiwan. Political considerations have played a significant role in the university (P2).

Discussion on OUV of SpSCUT Campus

Heritage Value Dimensions of the SpSCUT campus

The findings align with the views of Dober (2011), Felices-De la Fuente (2020), Cui (2011), and Liu (2018), who argued that university heritage embodies educational and research value by sustaining pedagogical purpose, fostering talent cultivation, and advancing architectural and academic development. They also correspond with Elefante's (2011), Zhao and Zheng (2008), and Zheng (2004), who emphasized

that such heritage landscapes possess enduring historical and cultural value as a critical testimony to China's pursuit of modernization in the early twentieth century. The symbolic value of the campus, embodied in its bell-shaped layout, reflects a direct association with Sun and his educational vision. This finding accords with previous studies (Huang, 1994; Li et al., 2024; Li & Yuan, 2006; Yan & Liu, 2006), which interpret the "bell" (钟) as both a metaphor for national vigilance and a homophone of Sun's name "Zhong" (中). In aesthetic terms, the campus, conceived by prominent twentieth-century Chinese architects, embodies a distinctly Chinese sensibility that harmonizes tradition and modernity, comparable to Mexico's UNAM, exemplifying enduring aesthetic ideals. The findings on sentimental value are consistent with Dober (2005), Ekman (2011), Landsmark (2011), who suggest that campuses cultivate attachment, belonging, and collective memory, thereby nurturing a shared sense of identity. The ecological value echoes Elefante's (2007) assertion that "the greenest building is the one already built," while the political dimension highlights the campus's role in fostering cross-strait understanding and serving as a platform for exchange.

Comparative Perspectives Within Global Heritage Debates

The discussion of the SpSCUT campus aligns with wider heritage debates on how educational spaces embody cultural identity, social transformation, and hybrid value systems. Institutionally, SpSCUT parallels globally significant university heritage sites while preserving distinct features. Like Oxford and UC, it represents the university's role in knowledge creation and social transformation. As the first modern campus independently designed by Chinese professionals, it marked the localization of higher education within China's cultural and political context. Comparable to UNAM and CUC, it reflects ideals of national modernization while integrating the principle of "education to save the nation" within a Sino-Western planning model, reinforcing its political and symbolic meaning. Both UVA and SpSCUT express national ideals through spatial form: Jefferson's plan for UVA reflects Enlightenment republican values, while Shipai's bell-shaped layout symbolizes vigilance and rejuvenation. Each reflects its founder's educational vision, transforming the university into a material expression of national identity. The KC illustrates the adaptation of Confucian traditions within the Korean context, while Shipai fuses Confucian ethics with Western academic frameworks. Compared with UNIPD's scientific continuity, Shipai demonstrates the multidisciplinary nature of modern higher education. The UAH exemplifies Renaissance integration between university and city, while SpSCUT, located in urbanizing Guangzhou, reveals a dynamic relationship among university, society, and state. Like UTokyo, it advanced national modernization but emphasized education for self-strengthening. In contrast to the colonial origins of USYD and UM, Shipai represents an autonomous realization of Chinese educational ideals grounded in Sun's philosophy of national rejuvenation.

Linking the Campus to UNESCO Criteria

The aforesaid seven heritage value dimensions of the SpSCUT campus correspond to the following three criteria of OUV:

(i): Represent a Masterpiece of Human Creative Genius

The Shipai campus was designed and constructed by representative architects of twentieth-century China during a period of political turbulence and severe material scarcity. Drawing inspiration from the imagery of China's great mountains and rivers, it symbolizes the endurance and permanence of the nation. Its bell-shaped master plan embodies national vigilance and rejuvenation, achieving harmony between functionality and symbolism, and exemplifying human creative genius

achieved under extremely challenging conditions (Themes TR, HC, SB).

(iv): Being an Outstanding Example of a Type of Building or Landscape

The design exemplifies the creative synthesis of traditional Chinese cultural ideals with Western construction methods. Inspired by the spirit of the Imperial Academy, China's highest educational institution, the campus follows the axial symmetry and ceremonial order of ancient palace architecture while embodying the Confucian ideal of self-cultivation, family regulation, state governance, and world harmony. Through the innovative use of materials and techniques suited to the Lingnan climate, the campus achieves both structural rationality and aesthetic refinement, reflecting a harmonious unity between cultural tradition and modern innovation. It thus stands as an outstanding twentieth-century example of building and landscape (Themes TR, HC, SB).

(vi): Being Directly or Tangibly Associated with Events, Ideas, or Beliefs of Outstanding Universal Significance (Historical and Cultural, Symbolic, Sentimental, and Political)

The Shipai Campus is directly associated with Sun's educational ideal of establishing a supreme institution to save the nation through learning, an idea of outstanding universal significance in China's modern transformation. Conceived in the 1930s, the campus materialized Sun's vision that higher education served as the foundation of national rejuvenation. Its bell-shaped plan echoed Sun's name (Zhong) and embodied the Confucian virtues of vigilance and self-cultivation. As the physical manifestation of the nation's highest institution of learning, it stood as a lasting testament to China's pursuit of independence, modernization, and moral renewal (Themes SB, ST, P).

In conclusion, these justifications collectively indicate that the Shipai Campus possesses significant potential OUV within the global heritage evaluation framework. This perspective has been supported by several interviewed heritage experts who recommended the site's nomination for inclusion on the World Heritage List (He et al., 2022).

Result for Data Validation

Results of FGD

The FGD results showed unanimous agreement among all five experts on the OUV themes identified in the previous stage, providing strong validation for the study's findings. Participants highlighted the educational and research value embodied in the campus's environmental planning and architectural design, the symbolic significance of the bell-shaped layout and its association with Sun Yat-sen, the sentimental attachment rooted in collective memory, and the ecological importance of its hillocks and water bodies. The discussion also generated new perspectives, as participants called for the holistic protection of both SpSCUT and SCAU campuses. They suggested replacing the existing solid boundary walls with transparent fences to enhance visual and spatial continuity between the two campuses.

Results of the Delphi Technique

The Delphi experts' responses were compiled and visualized to illustrate the level of consensus achieved. A heatmap was produced to display the raw count of expert ratings for each of the 24 statements regarding the OUV of SpSCUT campus (Figure 8).

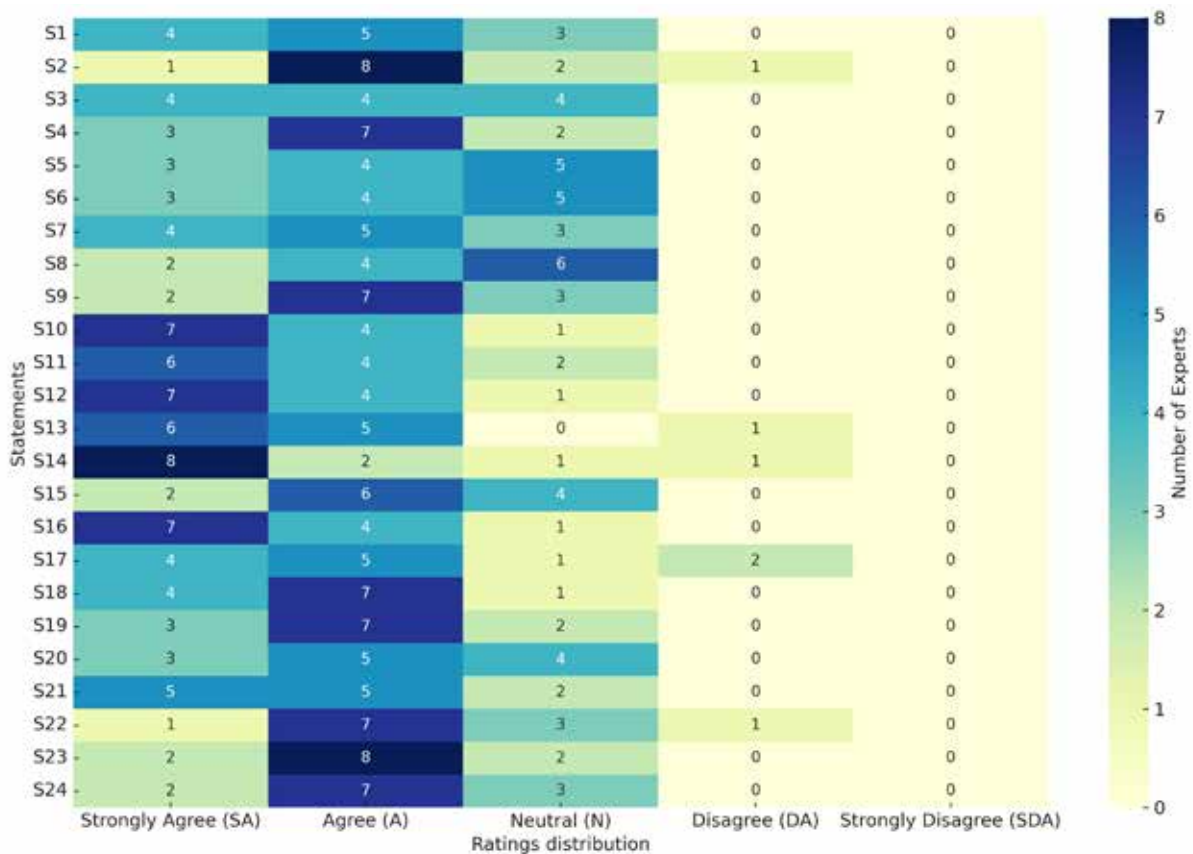


Figure 8: Experts' Rating Distribution (Raw Counts) for Each Question

This diagram represents the concentration of responses across the five-point Likert scale. The responses range from Strongly Agree (SA) to Strongly Disagree (SDA), reflecting expert consensus across dimensions. According to the results, the clustering of responses around the “SA” and “Agree (A)” categories demonstrated a notably high level of consensus among the experts across thematic dimensions. The “Disagree (D)” and “SDA” categories remained almost empty across all questions, suggesting that none of the proposed statements were considered inappropriate or irrelevant by the expert panel. This further reinforced the validity of the findings. The following results present the Expert Positive Rating (EPR) for each of the above 24 OUV-related statements (Figure 9).

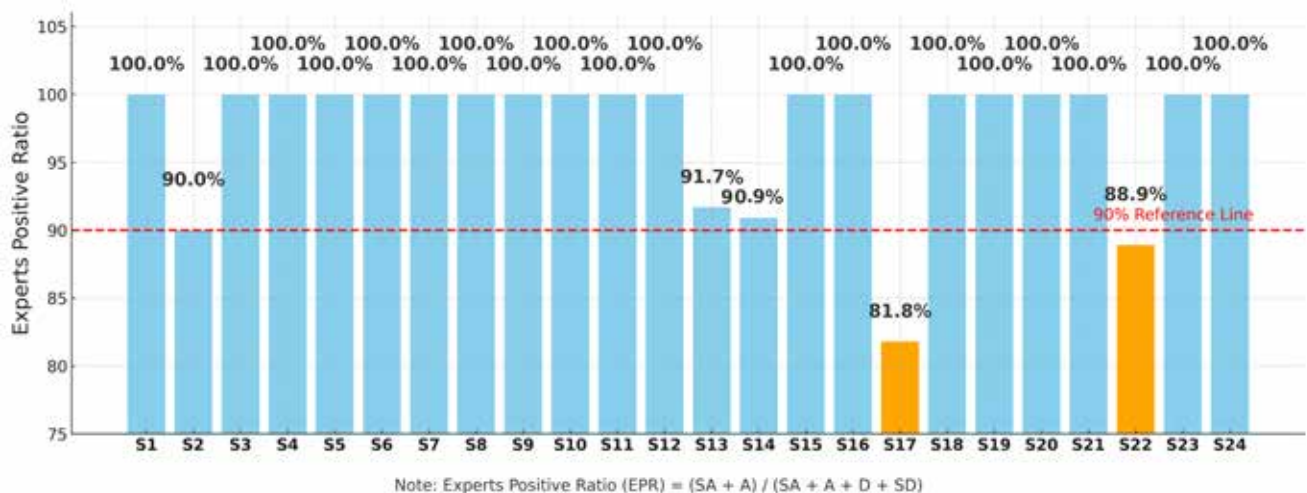


Figure 9: Expert Positive Ratings of the Delphi Experts

The bar chart visualizes the proportion of positive expert responses—specifically, those who selected “SA” or “A”, relative to the total number of evaluative responses. The Expert Positive Rate (EPR) was calculated as $EPR = (SA + A) / (SA + A + D + SD)$, excluding neutral (N) ratings to focus on responses reflecting a clear evaluative stance. Items achieving an EPR of 90% or higher are shown in blue, indicating strong expert consensus, while those below this threshold (S17 and S22) are highlighted in orange. The red dashed line indicates this consensus benchmark. The results reveal uniformly high expert agreement, with 22 of the 24 items exceeding the consensus threshold, confirming the validity of most proposed heritage elements as meaningful contributors to the campus’s OUV. Statement S17 concerns the statue of Sun Yat-sen, currently located at Sun Yat-sen University (formerly Lingnan University). To maintain historical authenticity and spatial continuity, this study recommends relocating the statue to its original site at the SpSCUT campus. Statement S22 addresses the university’s academic spirit and cultural traditions, highlighting that intangible attributes are integral to the campus’s overall heritage value and should be preserved alongside tangible elements. In summary, the Delphi panel’s perspectives showed strong alignment with the preceding research findings; the validation was thus effectively completed in the first round of the Delphi process, and a subsequent round involving international experts was deemed unnecessary.

Conclusion

Summary of Main Findings

The study revealed that the campus’s heritage value primarily lies in its association with Sun Yat-sen and other historical figures, its distinctive environment and spatial layout, the integration of Chinese and Western architectural traditions, and its profound sentimental significance. The findings underscore the need to protect these constituent elements to sustain the OUV of the campus heritage.

Theoretical Contributions

This research represents the first systematic investigation of the heritage of the SpSCUT campus, addressing a critical gap in campus legacy studies by revealing the overlooked value of environmental and intangible attributes beyond architecture. It is also the first study to apply UNESCO’s OUV framework to a campus in China, thereby situating SpSCUT within a globally recognized heritage discourse and demonstrating how the OUV framework can be adapted to interpret university heritage in non-Western contexts. By localizing and extending the OUV concept, the study enriches its theoretical applicability and advances understanding of campus heritage as a multidimensional construct. Furthermore, it establishes a theoretical foundation for the comprehensive conservation of the campus heritage in the future.

Practical Contribution

First, this study provides important policy implications for improving the governance of campus heritage in China. Institutionally, the proposed seven-dimensional analytical framework, grounded in the concept of OUV, offers an operational tool for cultural and educational authorities to systematically identify and categorize campus heritage assets. It addresses the current gaps in the *Cultural Relics Protection Law* and the *Intangible Cultural Heritage Law*, which largely overlook educational institutions. By aligning the heritage value of a Chinese campus with international heritage standards, the study promotes policy coordination and enhances the overall governance of campus heritage in China. Operationally, the framework assists the Ministry of Education and local universities in establishing evidence-based and tiered management mechanisms, integrating heritage conservation into

campus planning and funding systems, and embedding campus heritage education and public participation within university governance. Government agencies and campus authorities can also apply the framework to identify and prioritize heritage assets, delineate conservation zones, and develop context-specific strategies for management and restoration, thereby linking heritage protection with institutional governance and sustainable campus development.

Second, the seven-dimensional framework serves as an analytical tool for evaluating the heritage value of university campuses. Its application follows three progressive stages. The first stage involves examining the campus's academic traditions, cultural history, spatial layout, architectural style, landscape design, and collections to identify its core heritage values and map them onto the framework's dimensions. In the second stage, approximately fifteen domestic heritage experts assess the campus using the framework to determine its overall value composition. If these experts recognize the campus's potential OUV, the third stage invites about ten international specialists, preferably those with experience in UNESCO World Heritage nomination or evaluation, to verify its alignment with the OUV framework and critically assess its representativeness and potential for World Heritage inscription.

Research Limitations

First, this investigation began during the COVID-19 pandemic, when Chinese university campuses were under strict lockdown. These restrictions prevented on-site interviews and archival research. To mitigate these limitations, the author resided near the SpSCUT campus from April 2021 to April 2023; however, access to the adjacent SCAU campus remained restricted. Movement limitations and social distancing measures further constrained fieldwork depth and reduced opportunities for direct engagement with participants and primary materials.

Second, the administrative separation between SpSCUT and SCAU created institutional barriers to data collection. Since the division of the former NSYSU in the 1950s as part of China's national economic development strategy, the once-integrated campus layout has been fragmented. This separation complicated archival access and site observation, while administrative constraints discouraged participants from openly discussing potential remerger or cross-institutional collaboration.

Third, while this study provides an in-depth examination of the heritage landscape and OUV of the SpSCUT campus, the applicability of its findings should be contextualized. Variations in historical trajectories, regional characteristics, and institutional governance, particularly in campuses outside China, should be considered when extending this framework to other cases.

Finally, this research primarily relied on qualitative approaches, which may limit statistical generalizability. In terms of participant composition, an expert-oriented sampling strategy was adopted, given the general public's limited awareness of the historical background of SpSCUT. While the expert-driven approach ensured a high level of professional insight, it inevitably excluded broader stakeholder perspectives such as those of students and local communities, resulting in limited representation of public experiences and intergenerational perceptions.

Future Study Recommendations

First, future research should place greater emphasis on the perspectives of students and community members, whose attitudes and identity formation are vital to the sustainable transmission of campus values. To enhance engagement, participatory methods such as photovoice, co-creation mapping, and digital storytelling could be introduced to integrate the subjective and lived experiences

of the broader campus community into research. Such approaches would balance expert-driven analysis with grassroots insights and support more inclusive and sustainable heritage governance.

Second, future studies should incorporate quantitative data to complement qualitative findings and enhance methodological robustness. Quantitative analysis can verify patterns identified through qualitative inquiry and improve the generalizability of results, thereby providing a more balanced and evidence-based foundation for campus heritage research.

Third, the division between SpSCUT and SCAU has become an established reality, and their reintegration into a unified campus appears unlikely in the near future. However, the current institutional titles of both universities have largely lost their substantive meanings and no longer correctly reflect their disciplines. Both institutions have evolved into comprehensive universities encompassing a wide range of fields, including the humanities, sciences, engineering, law, economics, and medicine. Except for a few specialized areas such as agriculture, most academic disciplines are duplicated across both campuses. Looking ahead, as China progresses toward developed-nation status, the significance of cultural assets is anticipated to be acknowledged equivalently to that of material ones. Campus heritage will therefore assume increasing significance as a critical component of national cultural and educational development. In this context, the potential reunification of SpSCUT and SCAU may re-emerge as an important topic for scholarly inquiry. Subsequent research should investigate public attitudes regarding the viability of the proposed merger by involving a diverse array of stakeholders linked to the former NSYSU campus, including students and community members from SCUT, SCAU, GDAAS, FP, WG, and relevant governmental education authorities.

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