

Campus Visual Landscapes, Cultural Identity, and Students' Learning Experience: Evidence from Chinese Universities

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Abstract:

University campuses are widely regarded as learning environments which affect students in the sense other than in the classroom instruction. Of many elements of campus environments, visual landscape reflects the regional culture, the identity of the institution and the values of the education so that it also affects how the students perceive the and what they learn. Previous studies, on the other hand, have looked at the campus landscape in terms of architecture, or the aesthetic, or the environment while not much was paid to the role of the regional cultural expression of how we can develop students' learning by their culture identity that can be used for the students to learn. Also, the cultural identity was taken as the measured result instead of an interpretive process. This study investigates how the regional cultural expression embedded in the visual landscape of the campus is involved in students' learning experiences via the construction of cultural identity. It is designed as a qualitative multiple-case study. Three universities in Shandong Province, China, are involved in the case study. Data were gathered by using semi-structured interview, participant observation and document analysis. Thematic analysis was used to find out the recurring pattern across the three cases.

Keywords:

Learning Experience, Qualitative Multiple-case Study, Campus Visual Landscape, Regional Cultural Expression, Cultural Identity

1. Introduction

Visual landscapes among various components of campus environments have attracted growing scholarly attention. Campus visual landscapes include architectural styles, public squares, gardens, monuments, museums, sculptures, cultural installations, and other physical components of a campus that communicate with whom the institution is and what culture values it holds. These landscapes not only contribute to the aesthetic quality of life in the campus, but also provide opportunities for informal learning, social interaction, emotion, and cultural participation. [22] Research in environmental psychology pointed out that well designed learning

environments improve the attention of the students, reduce the psychological stress, and encourage the collaborative learning.[9]

Campus landscapes have been studied in the previous studies from the viewpoints of ,e.g., the environmental quality of the campus, the ecology of sustainability, the architectural design of the campus, or the landscape aesthetics. These studies show the positive relations between the campus environment and the student well-being, but comparably few of them have looked how the expression of the regional culture affects the students in their learning experiences by the processes of identity formation. In the existing studies, the cultural identity is also often imagined as a psychological variable that can be measured, rather than as a process which is developed by the continuous interaction with the campus environments.

To fill this gap, in the present study, we use a qualitative multiple-case study to investigate how the regional cultural expression embedded in visual landscapes of the campus contribute to students' learning experiences in the way of developing cultural identity. Instead of looking at the statistical relationship among the variables, the study is to look at what the students experienced, interpreted and daily lived in the campus space. Semi-structured interviews, participant observation and document analysis were conducted in three universities in Shandong Province, China, to develop an understanding on how the cultural identity is developed through the participation and the spatial way.

The study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do students perceive regional cultural expression in campus visual landscapes?

RQ2: How is cultural identity constructed through students' everyday interaction with campus visual landscapes?

RQ3: How does cultural identity contribute to students' learning experiences within higher education environments?

This study emphasizes the educational function of the campus visual landscape, redefines cultural identity as an interpretive process, and provides guidance for culturally-responsive campus planning, thereby promoting the development of theory and practice.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Campus Visual Landscapes in Higher Education

By campus visual landscapes, we mean the physical and cultural that the students experience through the architecture, green space, public art, historical buildings, cultural monuments, museums, and outdoor learning places of the campus. In current higher education, the campus visual landscapes are now seen as not only the aesthetic components of the campus design, but also. They are as educational supports of the students' academic, social and emotion development. [23]

Kaplan and Kaplan suggested that natural and well designed environments improve attention, [9] reduce mental fatigue and create conditions that support learning. Strange and Banning argued that campus environments represent an important part of the hidden curriculum because physical spaces communicate institutional values and influence students' behaviour. [22] Previous studies have also demonstrated that

campus environments influence students' learning experiences by providing opportunities for collaboration, informal learning, and psychological restoration.

2.2. Regional Cultural Expression and Cultural Identity

Regional culture is the historical traditions, values, customs and collective memories that define a certain geographical area of the country. The regional cultural expression in the universities is present through the architecture of the campus, the landscape design, in the cultural exhibitions in the public sculptures, in the museums and traditional gardens, in the cultural activities. They express the local identity and they preserve the regional culture and the educational tradition.

As for Cultural Landscape Theory, the landscapes are social meanings which are interpreted by people continuously and do not exist as objects only. [5] In the same way, Lowenthal claims that the landscape is keeping the historical memory of connecting the people with culture by the everyday experience. [13] From these views, we may say that a campus landscape has an educational value because students could become senses of the local culture in the learning field which they are used to.

Another important way of thinking about this relationship is the concept of cultural identity. Phinney defined cultural identity as a sense of belonging of particular cultural community of an individual. [16] Current research tends to view cultural identity as a process that comes to the individual by means of social participation, interaction and lived experience and not as a personal characteristic.

Place Identity Theory also discusses how people slowly inculcate meaning places in their self. [17] Relph and Tuan argued that feeling for place is developed by continuous interaction with meaningful place. [18][24] Thus, we can say that students' cultural identity may be formed by repeated interaction with campus visual landscapes and not by passively looking at cultural symbols.

2.3. Learning Experience in Campus Environments

Learning experience is not anymore seen only as the achievement of the academic in the form of the classrooms. The contemporary higher education knows that learning is also meaningful in an informal interaction, in the activities of collaboration, in the culture and in the daily experience in the campus. [11]

Kolb in the Experiential Learning Theory says that the learning develops concretely in experience, in reflective in observation, in the concept, in the experimental in the action. [10] Campus visual landscapes are good cases of these because the students are learning the cultural environment in the time when they do their educational and social activities. The museums, cultural exhibitions, heritage and outdoor learning values, are the students that can construct of the knowledge by immersed in the surroundings.

In addition, physical settings for the learning are also stressed in the environmental psychology. It was found that attractive out of door environment encourages creativity, decreases stress and promotes the communication of the student. [9] If the environmental quality is combined with meaningful culture, it takes more importance.

2.4. Research Gap and Conceptual Framework

From the literature reviewed above, it can be seen that campus visual landscapes, regional cultural expression, cultural identity and learning experience have all been given much attention from scholars. However, there are still many important gaps.

First, in the previous studies, almost all are focused on the points of the physical or aesthetic of the campus environments, and almost no one pay attention to the educational aspect of being a culture learning place of the campus environments.

Second, although the issue of cultural identity has been very popularly discussed in psychological or sociological research, it is rarely involved in the studies of campus landscape. At present, little, if any, research explains how the students gradually form the cultural identity by the every day interaction with the campus visual landscape.

Third, many studies are also taken as quantitative approach that looks at the statistical relationship among the environmental variables with the learning outcome. The studies like these are useful in giving an empirical evidence, but they do not consider the lived experiences of the students and the interpretive process of how the educational meaning is made.

In order to overcome these drawbacks, the present study is a qualitative multiple-case study design. The cultural identity is not treated as a statistical mediator but is considered as an interpretive mediating process by which the regional cultural expression is meaningful in students' everyday learning process.

Based on the reviewed literature, the study proposes the conceptual framework illustrated below. As shown in Figure 1.

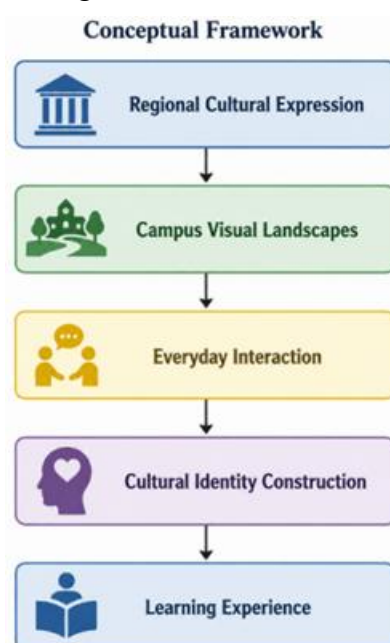


Figure 1. *Conceptual framework.*

The conceptual framework is the basis for the qualitative investigation which we are going to see in the next section.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

In this study, we used a qualitative multiple-case study design to investigate how the regional cultural expression embedded in the campus visual landscape affect the students' learning experience on the way of developing the cultural identity. We considered that the qualitative approach was appropriate for this study since the purpose of the research was to understand the participants' perceptions, lived

experiences and interpretations, instead of to look at the statistical relationship among the variables. [6]

The multiple-case study design allowed the comparisons among different institutional context without losing the particularities of each university. As Yin stated, multiple-case studies are appropriate for studying complicated social phenomenon in real-living contexts. [25] Campus visual landscape is closely connected with the institutional culture and students' daily life, therefore, the study can also explore the similarities and the differences among the selected universities and build up the knowledge of the research problem in a wider way.

Instead of thinking of the cultural identity as a kind of statistical mediating, in this study we considered the cultural identity as an interpretive mediating by which the students were slowly building up cultural sense, feeling and educational sense by the continuous contact with the campus visual landscape.

3.2. Research Sites and Participants

This study was done at three universities in Shandong Province, China. Shandong is chosen because it has a very rich regional culture. It is the place of Confucian culture and Qilu civilization. The universities in the province have incorporated the regional culture in the planning of the campus by architecture, museum, cultural square, public sculpture and the heritage activities.

The three participating institutions represented different types of higher education.

Shandong University (SDU) represented a comprehensive research university with a strong historical and cultural background.

Shandong Jianzhu University (SDJZU) was a shandle for a university for architecture, engineering, and design of the environment.

Zibo Vocational University (ZVU) was the representation of the vocational higher education with practical cultural activities and the taking part in the community.

To recruit the participants that had regular experience with the campus environment and the cultural activities, purposeful sampling was used. Twenty-four students participated in the study, which included undergraduate students, postgraduate students and international students from different academic disciplines. During the participant selection, diversity in gender, educational level, and cultural background was considered.

Participant recruitment went on until data saturation, which was the point in which during the later stages of data collection no substantially new themes appeared.

Table 1. Participant Profile.

Category	Number
Undergraduate students	12
Postgraduate students	6
International students	6
Female	13
Male	11
Total	24

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected by means of three complementary qualitative methods: semi-structured interviews, participant observation and document analysis. The use of three

different data sources added to the credibility of the results concerning the methodological triangulation.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Because we wanted the participants to be able to describe their own experiences, semi-structured interviews were the source of data. Each interview lasted about 30-45 minutes and we held them in a quiet place on campus. They were the main source of data because they gave the possibility of follow up questions.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim before being analysed. All interviews were done with participants' informed consent.

Participant Observation

The participant observation took place in big public places in the three campuses, such as cultural squares, museums, gardens, libraries, learning areas outside the buildings, exhibition of heritage.etc.

The observation was focused on students' patterns of movement, social interaction, participation in cultural activity and use of the public learning spaces. Field notes were made during the period of the observation that could complement the interview data.

Document Analysis

To give a context about the planning of the cultural in the campus, also the institutional documents were considered. The documents considered were the campus master plan, the strategic report of the university ,the official site, the promotional material of the campus, and the description of the cultural heritage activities.

Document analysis was used to explain how the universities had officially represented the regional culture and to support the interpretation of the interview and observational findings.

3.4. Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. We have chosen this approach as it is a procedure that allows to identify and interpret repeated patterns that are present in the qualitative data. The data was analyzed using the six-stage thematic analysis method, which includes familiarization, coding, classification, theme development, theme definition, and interpretation based on research questions and theoretical frameworks.

3.5. Trustworthiness & Ethical Considerations

In order to guarantee the quality of the qualitative research of the study, it was followed the trustworthiness framework of Lincoln and Guba, that is, the credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. [12]

Table 2. Strategies for Ensuring Trustworthiness.

Criterion	Strategy
Credibility	Triangulation; Member checking
Transferability	Thick description
Dependability	Audit trail
Confirmability	Reflexive memo writing

This research adheres to ethical principles, ensuring voluntary participation, obtaining informed consent, protecting the privacy of participants through anonymization, and securely storing all research data.

4. Results

4.1. Overview of the Findings

In this chapter, the results obtained from the thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis are presented. After the analytical procedures described in Chapter 3, three major themes were found in the data. The themes show how the regional cultural expression embedded in the visual landscapes of the campus contribute to the students learning experience through the cultivation of the cultural identity.

4.2. Theme One: Regional Cultural Expression as Symbolic Representation

All the participants from all the three universities stated that the visual landscapes of the campus reflected the regional culture via the architecture, the public sculptures, the museums, the traditional gardens, the cultural squares, and the historical monuments. These elements of the landscape helped students to understand the cultural characteristics of their universities, and these landscapes raised the awareness of the local history and traditions of the students.

Many participants regarded these spaces as important symbols of university identity. One undergraduate student commented:

“The campus museum and the traditional buildings make me remind that our university has a long history. And they make the campus different from other universities.” (P4)

Another participant stated:

“The sculptures and cultural squares show the characteristics of Shandong culture, especially Confucian culture.” (P11)

We produced the same kind of findings with the participant observation. As the students were doing their activities for the day in the campus, they often go through the cultural squares, historical buildings and the public exhibition areas. They were all quite visually appealing and they were also landmarks of the campus.

Yet, although the students were aware of these cultural symbols, they also said that they did not search the historical contents of these symbols often. Most of the participants saw the landscapes as beautiful sight but not active learning sources.

For example, one postgraduate student explained:

“I know these buildings have cultural meaning, but I usually just walk past them because there is little opportunity to learn more about them.” (P18)

Document analysis also indicated that all three universities put regional culture on the table in their strategies of campus planning in the universities. For instance, Confucian culture, local heritage and institutional history were always mentioned in the official planning documents as the principles of landscape design. However, in these planning documents, almost no contents were discussed regarding the student part or the education part for the construction of physical.

4.3. Theme Two: Cultural Identity as an Interpretive Mediating Process

The second theme shows that the cultural identity is being built slowly in the constant interplay of the students with the campus environments. The identity was not built the moment they have seen the cultural symbols, but was built by the participation in the campus activities, in the social interaction, in the constant repetition of the meaningful places.

Participants consistently described cultural activities as the turning point in their understanding of campus landscapes.

One international student explained:

“I only noticed the beautiful buildings at first, after joining cultural festival and activities of museum and I understood that that’s their historical meaning.” (P21)

Similarly, another participant stated:

“The landscape itself did not change, but my understanding changed after I participated in several heritage activities.” (P9)

These views were supported by participant observation. Those students for instance who went to cultural exhibitions, to a traditional festival, to a volunteer, or to activities in the museum, spent more time in the culture space and met more often with peers and with university staff.

Compared with the students who passed through these areas just, the participants of the cultural activities felt more sentiments for the campus and more interest in the culture of the region.

Other institutions documents showed that universities also increasingly organized heritage education programs, traditional cultural festivals, and student led cultural projects for instilling participation instead of a passive way of looking at the heritage.

These results show that cultural identity is an interpretive process that links the regional cultural expression with the students’ lived experience. Identity was not built with physical landscapes only but with the meanings that students built by participating and by reflecting.

4.4. Theme Three: Learning Experience through Everyday Spatial Practice

The third theme highlights the role of campus visual landscapes in supporting students’ everyday learning experiences.

Participants repeatedly stressed that learning was not only inside the classroom, but also in outside public places, where some academic discussion and cultural activities and informal communication take place.

One undergraduate participant remarked:

“Many of our project discussions happened in the cultural garden because it was quiet and comfortable.” (P6)

Another student commented:

“The museum became part of my learning because I often visited it after class with my classmates.” (P15)

From the observation data we saw that the outside seats, garden, library, museum, and other culture squares were used for solitary study, group discussion, and social

interaction. All of these phenomena encourage a kind of coworking and think for the students and also provide students the chance to meet the campus culture.

Participants also stated that the cultural landscape made them feel a stronger belonging. For example, several students said that after the participation in the cultural activities or the knowledge of the historical value of the buildings of the campus, they felt more related to the university.

One participant explained:

“When I understand the stories of these places, I will not only study this university, but I will feel that I am belonging to this university.” (P2)

The results indicate that campus visual landscapes in this way support learning by producing environments that encourage an environment of interaction, participation, and culture. Their pedagogical value is not only less on the physical design but also on the possibilities that students have to experience and interpret in a meaningful way these spaces.

4.5. Summary of Findings

The thematic analysis has highlighted three themes that are related to each other and that explain the link between the regional cultural expression, the visual landscape of the campus, the cultural identity and the students learning experience.

First, we note that campus visual landscapes are well represented of the regional culture by physical design and symbolic. But symbolic representation does not guarantee of the education engagement.

Second, we argue that cultural identity develops as an interpretive process, as a result of the continuous participation, social interaction and emotional attachment of the students to the spaces of the campus.

Third, learning experiences are extended if the visual landscapes of a campus are functional as participatory environments that stimulate reflection, interaction, and cultural inquiry other than the teaching in the formal classes.

Table 3. Summary of Themes.

Theme	Main Findings	Supporting Evidence
Regional Cultural Expression	Campus landscapes effectively represent regional culture but remain largely symbolic.	Interviews, observation, documents
Cultural Identity	Identity develops through participation, interaction, and cultural engagement.	Interviews, observation
Learning Experience	Outdoor cultural spaces support collaboration, reflection, and informal learning.	Interviews, observation, documents

5. Discussion

5.1. Interpreting the Educational Value of Campus Visual Landscapes

The findings of this study show that campus visual landscapes do have a role to play in students' learning, but that their learning value is not only in the physical design or in the quality of the aesthetics. It is clear that the participants always recognised the region cultural symbols present in the campus environments, but meaningful learning only took place when the landscapes were forcing interaction,

participation and interpretation of itself. This finding agrees with the previous findings of there we found that the learning environment is an active place of education and not only a passive physical place. [22]

From the view of the Cultural Landscape Theory, the landscapes are not simply the building and the monuments, but rather are cultural environment whose meaning are made by humans. [5] The present study in a way supports this view of the perspective since we found that the regional cultural expression is educationally significant only if the students living in the cultural spaces by the everyday campus life.

5.2. Cultural Identity as a Process of Meaning Construction

One of the main findings of this study is that the cultural identity should be seen as a process, not as a personal given. The participants reported that they were slowly forming the understanding of the campus culture as they participated in the cultural festivals, the visits to the museums, the heritage activity and the daily life in a meaning full campus places. This finding is in line with the argument of the Place Identity Theory, which states that the identity is constructed by people in the repeated experience of significant places. [17]

The results also support the work of Relph and Tuan which highlights that emotional attachment to place is developed from lived experience and not from being in the place or close to the place. Students in this study, did not develop a strong feeling of being cultured in the campus landscapes just by looking at it. [18][24] The identity was developed through the participation, reflection and by their terms, lived with the regional culture.

5.3. Campus Landscapes and Learning Beyond the Classroom

Another important finding concerns the role of campus visual landscapes in supporting learning also beyond the context of form of teaching. In all the answers, the participants mentioned as places where discussion, collaboration, independent learning, and cultural reflection occur, museums, cultural gardens, outdoor seating areas, public squares.

These results are also in line with the Experiential Learning Theory. [10] Knowledge is developed by experience and reflection. Campus landscapes make the students get the knowledge of the book together with the experience of the culture in real life, which is good for the academic learning as well as the self development.

Moreover, in the line with environmental psychology we have that attractive and restorative environments foster concentration, creativity, and emotion well-being. [9] In the present study we have also shown that cultural meaning further boosts the educational function of the environment of the campus. Learning is not only affected by the quality of the environment but also by students emotion and culture of the campus.

5.4. Practical Implications

The research results indicate that universities should regard campus landscapes as educational resources rather than merely aesthetic facilities. They should integrate regional culture into teaching through outdoor education, museums, cultural heritage activities, and interdisciplinary projects. At the same time, flexible public spaces and

diverse cultural programs should be developed to encourage student participation, strengthen cultural identity, and enhance the learning experience.

6. Conclusions

The results show that the campus visual landscapes have also an important educational role besides the physical and aesthetic roles. The regional cultural symbols convey the history of an institution and the local heritage, but that does not mean that they automatically produce meaningful learning. The students build the cultural identity by participating in cultural activities, by using the spaces of the campus, and by reflection on their activities. The learning is enhanced if the campus visual landscape stimulates the students to participate, interact, collaborate and culture, and not only to be some symbolism.

In addition, this study shows that in the case of campus visual landscapes, they are also the educational environments in which the regional culture, the identity and the learning are connected. By continuous interaction with the sense of places which are meaningful places, the students would have a better sense of belonging and get a better sense of regional culture. These enrich both academic and personal development of the students.

From the theoretical point of view, this study adds to the literature by using Cultural Landscape Theory, Place Identity Theory, and Experiential Learning Theory to account for how campus environments shape the learning by way of culture identity. Instead of treating cultural identity as a quantifiable variable, the study treats it as an interpretive process by which the students make educational sense out of their campus life.

The findings also have some implications for the universities. In addition to the symbolic construction of the landscape, the campus planner and the administration of the university should think of participative learning. They should give space to the students to interact with the culture of the region in the form of exhibitions, heritage, activities in the outdoors, and means of interaction with the community. Such things could make the students stronger in their cultural sense and also increase the value of the campus for the educational use.

Nevertheless, there are some limitations to be mentioned here. We only studied three universities in one province and the results might not cover other institutional or culture contexts. In future studies, one could increase the geographies, or include other stakeholder groups like teachers, campus planners or use mixed-method and to compare the qualitative results with other empirical results.

In general, we can say that this study implies that the campus visual landscape should be looked at not only as a place, but as an educational ecosystem in which the regional culture, the cultural identity and the learning do the process of being developed through the participation and the interaction.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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