



# Conserving the English Landscape of Taiping Lake Garden: Gaining public awareness

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## Abstract

Taiping Lake Garden (TLG) is one of the remaining British legacies located in Taiping, Perak. TLG is facing the transformation of English landscape environment, and diminishing the public appreciation on its historical value. This study aims to investigate the transformation of TLG's historical value in the current environment, and to propose suggestions in promoting public awareness towards conserving the historical value in historic garden. This study has assessed the public awareness through a combination of survey and case study. The outcome of this study could offer the landscape architecture industry to moving towards conservation of historic garden in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** *English landscape; Taiping Lake Garden; public awareness; historical park conservation*

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21834/ajbes.v3i10.77>

## 1.0 Introduction

Taiping Lake Garden (TLG) is one of the remaining British legacies that located in Taiping, Perak. TLG was created as the recreational centre for British officers and the increasing number of expatriates in Taiping during the colonial era. The design concept and the surroundings of TLG reminded the British residents of the Lake District of England, which is used by British poets and writers who inspired from landscape and natural environment of Highland Of Scotland (Taiping Municipal Council, 2012). Current view on the landscape today is different from views in the past. People viewed the park and its landscape as a sublime experience, like walking through a landscape painting and nature picturesque. Unlike colonial architectural building in Malaysia, consciousness with regards to landscape environment conservation especially park or garden is still a new phenomenon. Towards creating historic value and quality living environments, the sustainability of the historic public park as invaluable heritage need to be protected for present and future generations.

For the past two decades, the historical public parks have been under threats from several aspects. These include public understanding on the actual purpose based on its historical value and landscape environment. There are common contentions among scholars that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, people have changed, their leisure needs have changed and parks are designed for the leisure needs (Conway and Lambert, 1993). Public parks are emerging as one of the most important spaces in town. They are multipurpose public spaces that offer social, economic, and environmental benefits. To what extent could those transformations, and in the same time parks which have the significance related in historical value are also have to disappear? Without a specific conservation approach, the historical value in landscape environment of TLG might be forgotten by future generations. With respect to this, there is need to help in establishing general guidelines for conservation in historic garden in order to sustain the public park as heritage conservation. This study aims to investigate the transformation and significance of English landscape garden during British era and its relevance in present Public Park, towards reminiscing its historic value and quality of today's living environment. The scope of the study is limited on the transformation of historic Public Park in TLG from British period (1884 – 1937) to the present.

## 2.0 Literature Review

### Overview of historical garden

Historical garden is built with "architectural or horticultural" considerations and it is "of interest to the public" because of its historical or artistic importance (The Florence Charter, Article 1, ICOMOS, 1981). According to O' Donnell (2004), historic garden is much more than merely an old garden. It is unique places as a living composition of plants and physical features and public can see the past throughout their own identity, culture and landscape character on that era (Conan, 1999). As a living constructs of mankind and nature, historic garden is an ever changing, dynamic places that can be destroyed or renewed (Micouline, 1993; Melnick, 1997). Thus, it is an evolutionary evidence of the 'ecological', 'biotic' and 'aquatic system' of

a specific place that has been and continues to be influenced by human culture, natural events and climatic conditions.

### ***The style of English landscape garden***

English Landscape Garden is defined as an informal, asymmetrical, 'natural' type of landscape. According to Hobhouse (2002), the style of English landscape garden is apparently with grassy meadows, serpentine lakes, gently contoured hills and artfully arranged clumps of trees, seem the very model of Englishness. The typical English landscape would consists of undulating grass that leads somewhere down to an irregularly shaped piece of water over which a bridge arches, of trees grouped casually, with cattle or deer about the slopes and of houses and other buildings glimpsed in the middle or far distance (Hunt, 1993). Figure 1 shows the typical style of English landscape garden.

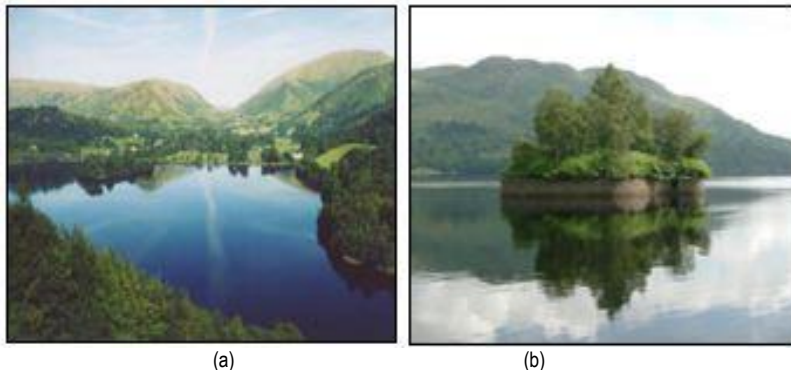


Figure 1: The typical style of English landscape; (a) background of the hills in Lake District of England and (b) fascination of reflecting water in Loch Katrine, Scotland

There are three evolving phases of development in 18<sup>th</sup> century landscape garden. The innovator of the first from the 1720s to 1740s, were Charles Bridgeman and William Kent (Hobhouse, 2002). Physical landscape features such as statues, temples, pavilions and other garden buildings were an essential feature, especially in Kent's design. The second phase was dominated by Lancelot 'Capability' Brown and his followers, their main masterpieces produced between 1750 and the 1780s where grass, trees, sky and reflecting water were its main elements. The ideas that Bridgeman and Kent introduced in the early stages was greatly influenced in the third phase, the Picturesque Movement. The "picturesque", however, criticized Brown's and Repton's compliance and called for a genuine romantic wildness symbolized by asymmetry, distant moor or mountains, moving water and crumbling ruins. The park's naturalistic water features are an integral part of the picturesque English landscape.

### ***The need for historical public park***

Parks are more than sceneries, they are social space in the cultural landscape, planted, managed, and continually reacted the nature that have been engineered (Benton, 2008). According to Alfonso (2003), parks are more than just a place to stay and relax in. It has an array of cultural, recreational and entertainment amenities and most of all improve the health of the public.

Understanding a garden's history is a primary vital ingredient in determining the correct manner and approach in which a park or garden should be conserved (McCullen, 2008). History in this context is meant not only in the strict chronological order of its landscape, infrastructural and land use but also in its available art historical data which are its cultural, social national and international events as well (McCullen, 2008).

In Malaysia, TLG is the best example represented the historic garden from British's legacy that should be conserved. The character of English landscape style in TLG is a main reason why it should be unspoiled. This explains the important of appreciating the significance of English landscape garden during British era towards reminiscing British's legacy and quality of today's living environment.

### ***Historical landscape conservation***

People nowadays tend to use park as escapism from stress, for the purpose of relaxing and recreational activities. Therefore they tend to depreciate the heritage value (Nur Zalina *et. al.*, 2013; Lee *et. al.*, 2013). This has become a challenge towards the attempt of preserving the historical values in old park. Apart from the changing lifestyles, insufficient legislation and enforcement from relevant authorities also be a challenge toward the efforts of historical landscape conservation (Badaruddin *et. al.*, 2008). This is due to lack of concern of some authorities to recognize and protect the cultural landscapes (Shabnam, 2009). The reason is because the difficulties in defining and identifying the values inherent in landscapes, yet it is hard to adopt the best conservation practices.

A landscape that is in need of conservation can be treated in a number of ways, depending on the condition of the site, and the intent of the conservation. The approach includes preservation, conservation, rehabilitation, restoration, and reconstruction. The establishment of Conservation Management Plan (CMP) will assists relevant authorities to determine what features, historical value or artefacts are most important to the overall design of the site.

## **3.0 Methodology**

### **Study area**

The location of this study is at Taiping Lake Garden, Taiping, located in northern Perak, Malaysia. This area covers 96.44 hectares and within the vicinity of Bukit Larut. The design concept and the surroundings of TLG reminded the British's residents of the Lake District of England, which is used by British poets and writers who inspired from landscape and natural environment of Highland Of Scotland (Taiping Municipal Council,

2012). Figure 2 shows the location of TLG and its master plan.

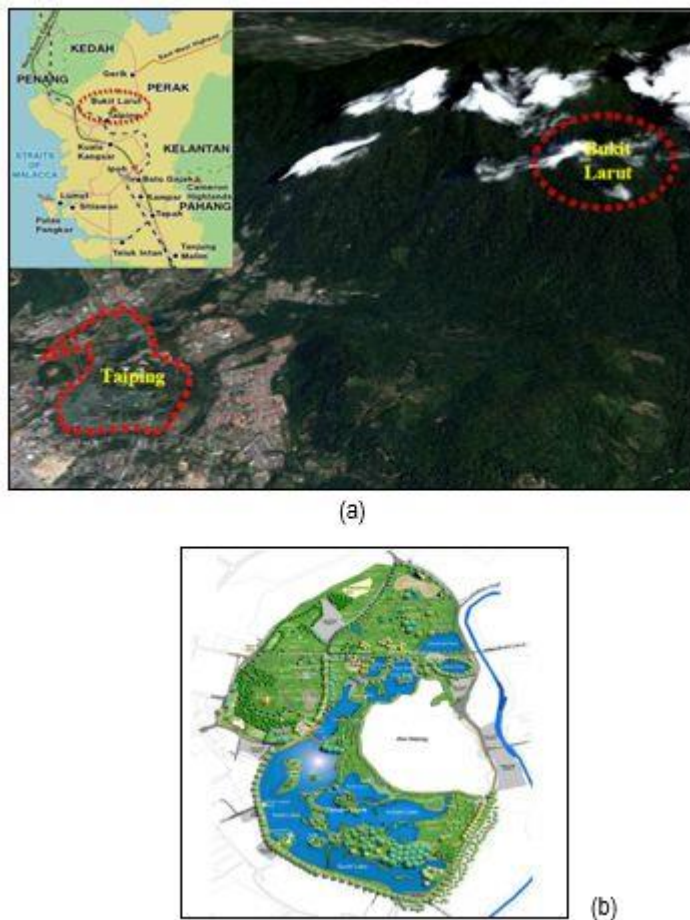


Figure 2: Study area (a) location of TLG and (b) Master plan of TLG

### **Data collection**

This research involved two stages of data collection. The first stage was through the gathered primary and secondary data. This is purposely conducted to search the issues and problem related to the topic studied, and to investigate the transformation of TLG. Literature survey and review of existing information serves as secondary data. It refers to historical data structures of variables that have been previously collected and assembled for some research problem. Literature review consists of examination of selected empirical research relevant to

the particular concern of the study. This is to establish the background information about TLG and its historical value.

The second stage of data collection was obtained using questionnaires. Related questions about the historic landscape environment were grouped together within the questionnaire and distributed to the respondents in park (visitors). Section A (Question 1-5) surveys the information of demographic profile of the respondent who visits TLG. This includes gender, age and education level. Section B (Question 6-11) surveys on the specific uses and general frequency of occurrence uses of parks. Section C (Question 12-17) is surveying the responsiveness of respondent about the historic landscape environment and general knowledge of historical background in TLG. This is to determine the public awareness on the existence of British's legacy and historical landscape element in TLG.

### ***Procedure of the questionnaire survey***

For the purpose of this research, 101 respondents were selected of the public in the city of Taiping. To get a reliable result, the surveyed sampling is assumed to be 10% of the population (Mitra and Lankford, 1999). Referred to Malaysian Department of Statistic 2010, Taiping's population was 245,015. Therefore, the calculated sampling error for 101 respondents is 3.5%, and was an appropriate estimate for this survey.

The survey was conducted over a three days period (September 29 and 30, and November 18, 2012). The respondents were surveyed at the park on mornings and late afternoons. The distribution of the sample is stratified according to three sections; section A (user distribution in park), section B (the usability and regularity in visiting park), and section C (the public awareness on historical landscape element in TLG).

## **4.0 Results and Discussions**

This study has identified the significance of English landscape style and how the culture, tradition and life style between British's and today's people are influencing the changing uses in TLG. The summary of findings is as follows:

### **Transformation of TLG**

TLG is facing the transformation of English landscape environment and diminishing the public appreciation on its historical value. During British period, the colonial officers built park to cater to the recreation and leisure needs of their families, citizens and local affluent people such as royal family members. In other words, the main functionalism did not seek to develop public parks, but rather as their private sanctuary.

The transformation of park's uses during British's colonial period and today's public park slowly decrease the public perceptions in appreciating the historical value in TLG. As a result, the combination of traditional and modern landscape element, emphasis on leisure needs and public lifestyle had blurring the uniquely English landscape identity in TLG. The materials and style that has been used are not suitable with English landscape characteristics. This is due to the changing functionalism of TLG during colonial era and today's people needs. This

study agrees with Enache and Craciun (2013) which indicates that the landscape must become the historical and cultural continuity by fitting the characteristics of the place so that it will conjoint the spatial continuity between the ancient and the recent, cultural and contemporary. Figure 3 shows the existing English landscape elements in TLG, and Figure 4 shows the inappropriate instant makeover of modern landscape facilities that spoiled the English landscape garden's style.



Figure 3: Figure (a) to (c) indicates the heritage of English landscape style that portray British colonial reminiscence



Figure 4: Figure (a) to (c) shows the inappropriate modern landscape elements that spoiled the English landscape style in the study area

### ***English landscapes: Significance of TLG as part of public park***

The diversity of natural environment intertwined with English landscape style in TLG has changed the usability of the park from historic garden to public park. The result confirms that people visited TLG for common public recreation and leisure even though the park has its own unique character and historical value. 55.4% of survey respondents indicate that they go to the park simply to get some fresh air and outdoor recreation (Figure 4).

The transformation of TLG as a public park that used to fulfill leisure needs and demands for modern style on physical landscape element slowly decrease the historical value. The findings indicate that people come to TLG for exercise and leisure activities, but the special character of historic park were unnoticed. This can be seen in the graph (Figure 5) where historical appreciation is the least percentage for the reason people visiting the park. This finding agrees with the previous research by Nur Zalina et. al (2013) where it is found that people enjoy the distinctive character of TLG by its picturesque natural scenery of hills, sky and clouds, lawns, trees and lakes which resembles the Englishness of landscape garden.

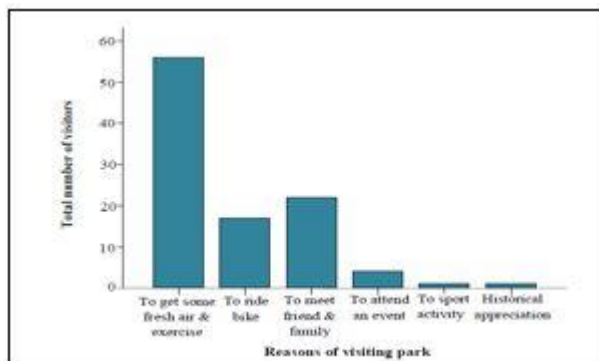


Figure 5: The reasons of visiting TLG by visitors

### Public awareness

General knowledge of TLG as oldest park

The public awareness indicates that 55.4% do not know that TLG is the oldest park in Malaysia while 44.6% visitors are well recognise. This finding suggests, peoples still used the park as they viewed that TLG is one of the common public park in Malaysia. Thus, it lessens the appreciation of the history and awareness to preserve the lake identity as it is.

### Historical landscape elements in TLG

The data indicates 66 of the visitors unable to identify any of the historical landscape elements in TLG while 35 of them able to point at least one of the historical landscape element (Table 1). This finding indicates that most of the visitors are not aware on the element that enhances the identity and historic key point in the park.

Table1: The awareness of visitors on historical landscape element in TLG

Visitor's awareness	Number of visitors	Percentage %
Yes	35	21.8
No	66	78.2
Total	101	100.0

## 5.0 Conclusion

The findings established that transformation of landscape elements should be done with thorough studies and suitable to be adapted in to existing identity. Transformation that took place at TLG has been seen as implication effect to certain group that supposed to be responsible for defining efforts toward conservation. The study suggests that landscape design guidelines should be deliberated to protect the historic physical landscape character



and replacing a missing historic feature that compatible with the landscape environment. In addition, landscape design approach could offer the landscape architecture industry to explore the historical value through English garden style and moving towards conservation principle for historic garden in Malaysia. The awareness can be gained through organizing of talks, workshops, exhibitions and seminars by authorities and non-government organization in order to encourage them to feel proud on inheritance of their historic garden.

The use of Conservation Management Plan will enable the understanding of the landscape history, and inventorying historical value of whole historic park. This will depend on the involvement of all relevant professionals' inputs. For future research, it is important to understand how the significance, character, style, culture, and social history play a vital role in conserving the historical garden. It is also important to outline the conservation management plan that considers sustainability and usability of the existence historical value within today's public park.

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