

Characteristics for cultural landscape identification according to Malaysian heritage

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ABSTRACT

Cultural landscapes reflect the dynamic interplay between human societies and the natural environment, embodying both tangible and intangible heritage values. While globally acknowledged, cultural landscapes remain absent from the scope of Malaysia's National Heritage Act 2005, limiting their recognition and legal protection. This study addresses this gap by objectively investigating the characteristics that define cultural landscapes and evaluating their relevance within the Malaysian heritage context. Adopting a two-phase qualitative methodology, the study first conducted a comparative review of heritage frameworks from five selected countries, where cultural landscapes are formally recognised. This review identified six core characteristics: site, human activities, time or age cultural features, natural resources, and wildlife. These characteristics informed the second phase of the study, involving semi-structured interviews with five heritage and landscape experts in Malaysia. Thematic analysis of expert insights confirmed seven characteristics are relevance to the Malaysian context, with sense of place emerging as additional characteristic, encompassing local experience, memory, and community attachment. By proposing a framework for identifying cultural landscapes in Malaysia, this research advocates for the integration of cultural landscapes into the national heritage register as a means of safeguarding historically significant environments shaped by human-nature interaction and offers a foundation for more inclusive and sustainable approaches to heritage conservation in Malaysia. While this study demonstrates a comprehensive list to identify cultural landscape characteristics, it is limited by guiding documents to interpret the characteristics in existing legal frameworks in Malaysia for comparison with other countries.

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Nevertheless, present research would be beneficial in providing interpretations of cultural landscape characteristics and context in Malaysia.

1. INTRODUCTION

Approximately three decades ago, scholarly and professional discourse began to embrace the notion that even seemingly ordinary or vernacular landscapes could hold heritage value. These landscapes, which reflect human interaction and presence, are collectively conceptualised as "cultural landscapes". According to UNESCO (2017), cultural landscapes are cultural heritage assets that illustrate the dynamic relationship between human societies and the natural environment. This reciprocal relationship enables societal evolution and the development of settlements over time. UNESCO, the international organisation responsible for formally recognising cultural landscapes as part of world heritage, emphasises that this recognition is crucial for promoting sustainable interactions between people and their environments. Moreover, this recognition aims to protect not only extant physical evidence but also living cultural traditions that may otherwise be lost (Fowler, 2003). The inscription of cultural landscapes on the World Heritage List elevates their perceived value beyond localised significance. Morokuma (2016) added the interpretation of cultural landscape adopts an even more comprehensive approach encompassing landscapes that have evolved through the continuous interaction between human lifestyles and occupational practices. Vlami et al. (2017) further assert that landscapes with a high degree of cultural character warrant a holistic conservation strategy. So, it also means supporting the protection of cultural properties that hold human memories, and the environment or landscape is the part that changes most due to current influences, which are often adjusted and re-adjusted.

In Malaysia, although the National Heritage Act 2005 provides the legal framework for listing cultural and natural assets as national heritage, it has yet to formally include cultural landscapes within its scope. Despite the global trend toward recognising cultural landscapes, Malaysia's historically Valuable landscapes are vulnerable to the pressures of Channel urban expansion, agricultural encroachment, and tourism. As noted in prior studies, such vulnerabilities threaten both the identity and authenticity of human-nature spaces (Yu, Verburg, Liu & Eitelberg, 2016; Ahmad, 2013; Abdullah, 2011; Antrop, 2005; Farina, 2000). The exclusion of cultural landscapes from Malaysia's National Heritage Act 2005 significantly limits the recognition and legal safeguarding of human-modified landscapes with historical value. This legal gap increases the vulnerability of such landscapes to modern development pressures, largely due to a lack of recognition of the interdependent relationship between humans and their environments. Consequently, this study is motivated by a need to identify and assess cultural landscapes within the context of Malaysia's heritage legislation.

Moreover, Stephenson (2008) highlighted concerns regarding methodologies used to identify and evaluate cultural landscapes, suggesting that available approaches may inadequately capture their cultural significance. Because cultural landscapes are very complex, properly assessing them requires more than just looking at historical records; it needs on-site studies and teamwork from different fields to capture their unique features. In addressing this concern, the existing local research appears insufficient, particularly in terms of standardised methodologies for cultural landscape assessment. The downplay of cultural landscapes within Malaysian heritage law makes often relying on international or state-level guidelines without anchoring analyses in the National Heritage Act 2005. Although several Malaysian studies have advocated for the recognition of cultural landscapes as heritage assets (Ahmad, 2013; Ismail et al., 2015; Jani & Hussain, 2014; Ismail & Ariffin, 2015; Abdullah, 2011), the lack of a unified evaluative framework remains a major gap that this study seeks to address. Thus, this study is objective in delving into the characteristics that define a cultural landscape and evaluating their relevance within the Malaysian heritage context.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Cultural landscape

It is important to distinguish that cultural landscapes are not mixed heritage sites, although both involve natural and cultural elements. Larsen and Wijesuriya (2015) clarify that mixed sites must exhibit both cultural and natural attributes within the same geographical area, even if the two are not directly related. In contrast, cultural landscapes specifically focus on the tangible and intangible manifestations of a profound interaction between human culture and the natural environment. Taylor (2009) emphasises that cultural landscapes represent the values and achievements of past societies, embodying their ways of life through physical settings. While landscapes are often understood as contemporary phenomena, cultural heritage reflects historical elements inherited by the present (Sodano, 2018). Consequently, the notion of cultural landscape captures the evolution of historical life patterns, merging tangible, intangible, cultural, and natural dimensions of heritage (Antrop, 2005; Taylor & Altenburg, 2006). The recognition of cultural landscapes plays a pivotal role in heritage conservation, as it elevates everyday environments to the global heritage discourse (Taylor, 2017). It also reinforces the view that heritage places are embedded within broader ecosystems and social structures, rather than existing in isolation. UNESCO asserts that any space interpreted as a landscape inherently possesses cultural value, even if it does not meet the criteria for OUV (Green, 2010). However, OUV remains a prerequisite for inscription on the World Heritage List, often limiting recognition of cultural landscape at national or local cultural landscape (Green, 2010; Yüncü, 2015). Therefore, this study undertakes a comparative review of how different countries integrate cultural landscapes into their national heritage frameworks as elaborated in the following section.

2.2 Cultural landscape in selected countries

Five countries were selected into the review which are Australia, China, Japan, Taiwan and United States of America (US). Reviews on the selected countries describe that cultural landscape is not formally recognised as National Heritage List (NHL) in Australia; however, according to the legal and guideline structure, cultural landscape in this country plays a significant role as a ground to assess heritage attributes, as well as on the places that contain NHL. In Japan, China and Taiwan, cultural landscape is one of national

heritage scopes, while in the US, cultural landscape is recognised as one of cultural resources for the National Register.

The definition and scope of cultural landscape in five countries selected is comparable and inferred for the similarities in term of attributes or characteristics that make a potential site possess cultural landscape value(s). According to NatureScot (2023) and Swanwick & Land Use Consultants (2002), characteristic is referring to the pattern of items found on the landscape and makes one landscape different from other. In assessing the landscape, 'key characteristic' is to describe the combinations of obvious and consistent pattern of elements that contribute to distinctive character of one landscape from another (Heritage, n.d; National Park Service, n.d-b; Swanwick & Land Use Consultants, 2002). National Park Service (2017) refers characteristic of a landscape as the result from individual or collective tangible and intangible features that aid to understand the cultural value of a landscape.

Australia

Cultural Landscape Definition: "Cultural landscapes are all around us and are the result of the interaction of humans with their environment over many years"

Document(s): Australia ICOMOS

Position of Cultural Landscape in National Legal Framework: Designated as the ground for criterion and one of the places for National Heritage List criterion.

Japan

Cultural Landscape Definition: "Landscape that has been created by people's lives or occupations in their community as well as by the climate (geographical features) prevailing in such community, and which are indispensable to the understanding of the mode of life or occupation of Japan."

Document(s): Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties 1950 (LPCP)

Position of Cultural Landscape in National Legal Framework: Designated as one of the national cultural properties

United States of America (USA)

Cultural Landscape Definition: "A geographic area, including both cultural and natural resources and the wildlife or domestic animals therein, associated with a historic event, activity, or person or exhibiting other cultural or aesthetic values."

Document(s): National Historic Preservation Act 1966

Position of Cultural Landscape in National Legal Framework: Designated as one of Cultural Resources for National Register

Taiwan

Cultural Landscape Definition: “Locations or environments formed through longtime interactions between human beings and natural environments, which are of value from the point of view of history, aesthetics, ethnology, or anthropology.”

Document(s): Cultural Heritage Preservation Act 1982 (Amended 2016)

Position of Cultural Landscape in National Legal Framework: Designated as one of the national cultural heritages

China

Cultural Landscape Definition: “Site that created through human interactions (both physical and creative) with the natural environment and have significance. The natural environment affects the expression of culture while culture endows the natural landscape with aesthetic and other values.”

Document(s): Principles for the Conservation of Heritage Sites in China 2015 (Issued by ICOMOS China)

Position of Cultural Landscape in National Legal Framework: Designated as one of the Heritage Sites

Table 1: The characteristics identified through definition by legal frameworks at national level

Characteristic	Aus	Japan	US	Taiwan	China
Sites or Area	•	•	•	•	•
Human activities	•	•	•	•	•
Timeline/ Age	•		•	•	
Cultural Resources			•		•
Natural Resources		•	•		•
Wildlife/ domestic animal			•		

Source: Authors

The similarities in characteristics derived from cultural landscape definitions across five countries are supported by Taylor (2014), who identifies four significant elements that shape cultural landscapes: the landscape pattern, natural elements, cultural traditions, and individual human features. Adding to the list, Table 1 also presents a timeline or age, and wildlife as other characteristics of the cultural landscape. The concept of cultural landscape in its identification is summarised Fig. 1.

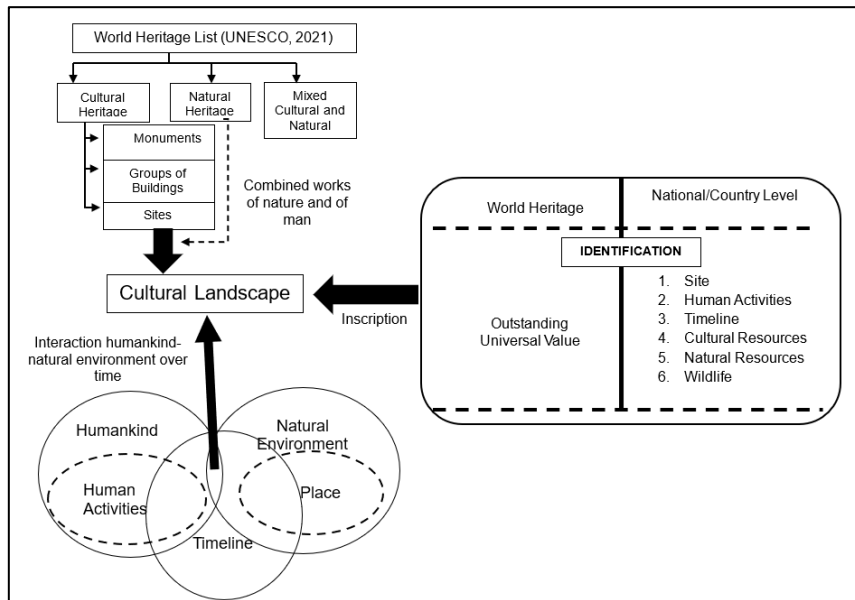


Fig.1. Conceptual framework of cultural landscape in relation to its identification at national level
Source: Authors

Fig. 1 shows that the cultural landscape concept has been recognised in the World Heritage List as a part of cultural heritage properties (UNESCO, 2021) and is built from three fundamental dimensions: human, place and timeline. As cultural landscape at world level applies Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) to identify and inscribe cultural landscape, the framework also presents the characteristics to identify cultural landscape at national level context.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study was conducted through two phases of processes. Phase 1 employed a comprehensive literature review on the concept of cultural landscape at international level and Phase 2 is semi-structured interview with experts. An in-depth review on relevant official documents published by the international government and private agencies, as well as journals have been used to develop understanding on interpretation of definition and characteristics to identify cultural landscape at national level by five selected countries.

In details, five (5) countries were selected to compare the similarities and differences as shown in Fig. 2. The process of selection was begun with the review on sixty-one (61) UNESCO's States parties where cultural landscape in those countries are recognised at world level. For the purpose to understand and interpret cultural landscape's definition at national level, the national heritage legal frameworks of those UNESCO States' parties were identified through the protection and management requirements on every World Cultural Landscape. Based on the thorough screening, five (5) countries of the UNESCO States' parties have been selected because their national heritage frameworks do include 'cultural landscape' term in their heritage law and guidelines and have adequate reference materials that interpret their legal

framework. These countries are Australia, Japan, United States of America, Taiwan, and China. A further screening was conducted on other countries and has found that Taiwan is the only country found with no World Heritage Cultural Landscape but has legally recognise cultural landscape at national level through their gazettal federal act.

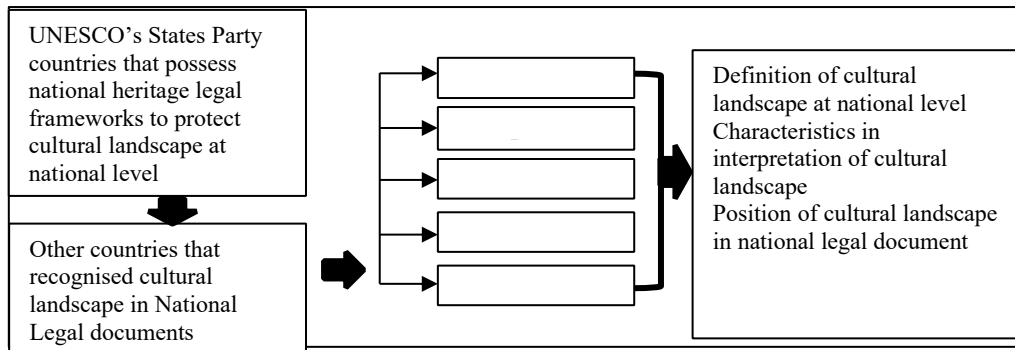


Fig. 2. Summary for the selection of selected countries for comparison

Source: Authors

Phase 2 was experts' interview, conducted with the practitioners in both heritage and landscape field in Malaysia. This phase was conducted purposely to obtain their opinion and interpretation on characteristics of cultural landscape according to Malaysian heritage context.

Based on the research gap mentioned, it is found that cultural landscape concept is absent in Malaysia National Heritage Act 2005 (Act 645). This means that there is a lack of cultural landscape experts in this country according to the Act 645. Thus, for this research, it is crucial to determine key persons through sampling criterion which is the experts in both heritage and landscape assessment recommended by lead organisation in Malaysia i.e., National Heritage Department and National Landscape Department, Malaysia. In addition, the criteria used for sampling are key persons who are involved with conservation of both cultural heritage and landscape in Malaysia for more than 10 years, and key persons who used to involve in assessing and nominating national heritage sites for within 20 decades of enactment of National Heritage Act 2005.

Besides that, this study was also considering officials from the National Heritage Department, Malaysia who used to involve or still involves in assessing and nominating national heritage sites as experts. This criterion of respondents is considered necessary because of their experience and knowledge for sites' nomination according to the provision and requirement of the National Heritage Act 2005 (Act 645).

A total of five experts were reachable and agreed to contribute to this phase. Cultural landscape characteristics developed in the conceptual framework for cultural landscape identification at national level was used as the instrument to develop questions in Phase 2, objectively to identify the characteristics and interpretation to identify cultural landscape for Malaysian heritage context. Each interview conducted took between 1 hour to 1.30 hour for every expert.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Data coding and analysis process of the interview employed ATLAS.ti software Version 23 to arrange huge, extracted data from transcription accordingly to related coding. The employment of software only to manage mass of data obtained (Azmi, 2015; Silverman, 2006). Deductive coding was employed, utilizing cultural landscape characteristics identified in literature review as preliminary codes to identify thematic interpretations—referred to as elements of character (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Chua, 2012; Vaismoradi,

Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). Through this process, twenty-three themes emerged, each representing an interpretation of the six preliminary codes, i.e., cultural landscape characteristics.

At the final stage of coding, a word cloud analysis was conducted using the software, confirming the frequent use of key terms by experts in reference to the newly identified characteristic: Sense of Place. Figure 3 and Table 2 below summarize the result from semi-structured interview where 'Interpretation' is the emergent theme for every cultural landscape characteristic. The interpretations in Fig. 3 are according to the opinions shared by the experts based on Malaysian heritage context to identify cultural landscape in potential site, while descriptions in Table 2 are the discussion of emergent themes according to the literature.

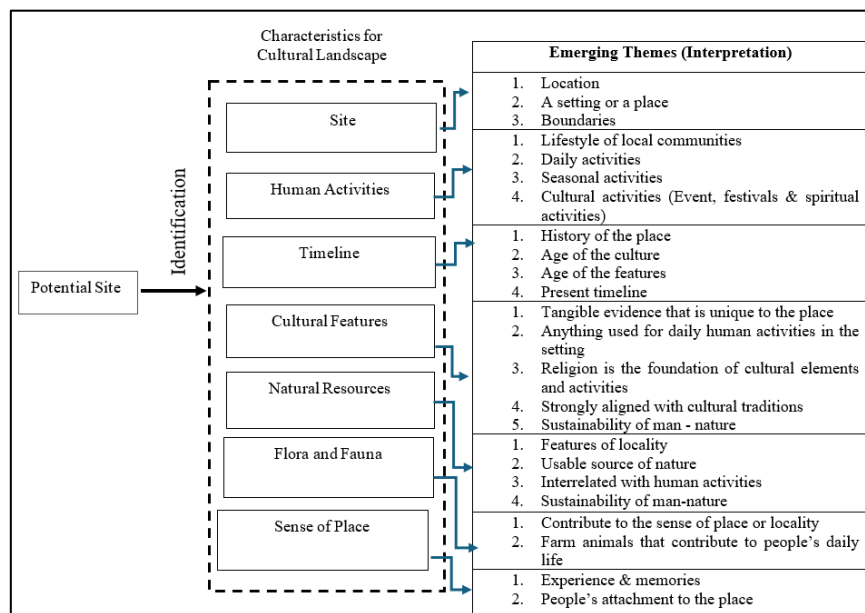


Fig. 3. The characteristics to identify cultural landscape

Source: Authors

Table 2. Discussion for every characteristic for cultural landscape identification at national level according to Malaysian heritage context

Descriptions
Site: as a setting encompassing all cultural landscape characteristics, where each element within the setting is shaped by human activities, thereby necessitating the inclusion of both tangible and intangible aspects within its defined boundary. The site must be able to represent the character or spatial pattern of the landscape itself. References: Government of Japan (2004), Ministry of Culture, Republic of China (2019), Taylor (2009), Vlami et al. (2017).
Human activities: better understood as the everyday lifestyles of local communities—activities that need not be unique, endangered, or limited to special occasions. Human activities should be interpreted through the lens of everyday practices that reflect local culture, as these practices convey the locality-specific values embedded within the place. Also need to emphasise the significance of the location where human activities occur in contributing to cultural landscape value in specific site of the country. References: Bin and Xuan (2011), Zhang et al. (2021), Nakagoshi (2011)

Timeline: Cultural landscapes are the result of evolutionary processes over time, with each phase revealing distinct values embedded in the landscape. It reflect historical evolution, with the landscape itself serving as tangible evidence of that progression. Regardless of the age of the site, it is essential to define when particular cultural practices began and understand the rationale behind their emergence. References: Taylor (2011& 2014), Taylor & Altenburg (2006), and Sodano (2018)

Cultural Features: Any element facilitating daily human activities and ongoing human-landscape interaction should be regarded as a cultural feature within the landscape. These features are essential for conveying the narratives of local communities, events, and places—regardless of whether they originate in a historical or contemporary context. Including modern infrastructure, such as houses, transport systems, and routes, as components of cultural landscapes when they reflect the lived experiences of local communities. References: Bin and Xuan (2011), Chiang et al. (2013), Mouri (2016), and the National Park Service (2017), Bishop (2019), Edani (2012), Government of Japan (2004), Inaba (2012), Taylor and Altenburg (2006) and Taylor (2017).

Natural resources: Play a crucial role in cultural landscapes, either as the physical setting in which communities reside or as essential resources that support human livelihood and survival. References: Sauer (1925), Fukamachi (2017), Government of Japan (2004), ICOMOS China (2015), National Park Service (2018a), Wang (2015), Wang and Fu (2011) and ICOMOS China (2015).

Flora and Fauna: Within the Malaysian context, flora and fauna—particularly domestic animals—should be considered when identifying cultural landscapes. These elements contribute to the sense of place and locality, and are integral to the daily activities and livelihoods of local communities. Thus, the inclusion of flora and fauna, especially those involved in everyday rural life, serves as an important indicator of cultural landscape in Malaysia. References: National Park Service (2017), Watt et al. (2004), Young (1997), Fukamachi (2017), Hidaka et al., (2008).

Sense of place: Within cultural landscapes is fundamentally linked to human experience over time. This sense can be most clearly observed in the lived experiences of local communities—particularly among individuals who were born in and have continuously inhabited the landscape. References: Mouri (2016), Taylor and Altenburg (2006), Taylor (2009), Jackson (1994), Othman, Nishimura, and Kubota (2013), Sodano (2018), (Giuliani & Feldman (1993), Hernández et al. (2007), Hidalgo & Bernardo, (2001), Ramkissoon, Weiler, & Smith (2012), Shuhana & Norsidah (2008) and Giuliani and Feldman (1993).

Source: Authors

5. CONCLUSION

This study reveals that cultural landscape is not currently included within the scope of heritage as defined under Malaysia's National Heritage Act (NHA) 2005. However, findings from semi-structured interviews with experts highlight both the relevance and necessity of formally recognizing cultural landscapes as part of the nation's heritage framework. Such recognition is viewed as a vital protection mechanism, ensuring alignment with broader heritage interpretations, values, and legal context.

Importantly, the research identifies seven key characteristics of cultural landscapes that are particularly suited to the Malaysian heritage context, thus achieved the research objective. These include site, human activities, timeline, cultural features, natural resources, flora and fauna, and sense of place. Derived from expert interviews analysis, sense of place is understood to encompass the lived experiences, memories, and emotional attachments of local communities to their environment.

This study addresses a significant gap in existing literature by emphasising the need for formal recognition and protection of cultural landscapes as heritage assets of local importance—an area that has previously received limited attention. The identification of the core characteristics of cultural landscape was developed through comparative analysis of definitions from countries that formally recognize cultural landscapes as possessing outstanding heritage value.

Consequently, the present research proposes a framework that interprets characteristics for cultural landscape identification in Malaysia, advocating for their inclusion within the country's heritage legal framework that establishes a basis for future efforts aimed at protecting and preserving cultural landscapes as living expressions of human-environment interaction.

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7. CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

8. AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors jointly contributed to the research design, questionnaire development, data analysis, and manuscript preparation. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

9. DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI IN THE WRITING PROCESS

AI tools (e.g, ChatGPT, Grammarly) were used for drafting, assistance, paraphrasing and grammar checking. All content was critically reviewed and edited by researcher.

10. DATA AVAILABILITY/SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

The datasets used and/or analysed during this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

11. ETHICS STATEMENT

The authors declare that this research did not involve human or animal subjects.

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