

TAIPING LAKE GARDENS

Resilience Over Histories

Written by Yasmin Helmi

In 1880, Taiping Lake Gardens was brimming with anticipation. It was the first public park ever established in Malaysia. Local commoners saw this as one of the profound times in their lives especially when socially segregated scenes were a common sight. Green backdrops and green carpets laid as far as the eyes can see – those were sights dedicated only to the British, Royals, capitans and the local affluents.

The announcement of Taiping Lake Gardens' opening to the public was somewhat a distinct news to locals, perceived to challenge the long-standing social hierarchy-based system. It was an occurrence synonymous to 'a breath of fresh air', signifying a sense of freedom, even by a small degree. Throughout the decades, even before the official establishment of Taiping Lake Gardens, the place observed a series of long historical events and timeline. It went back from the day when Taiping Lake Gardens was not even valued for its greeneries but rather an exploitation for its tin ores.

Back in 1861, prior to the formal establishment of Taiping Lake Gardens, the area was under the dominated impression of Bukit Larut as centre of fight and rioting. The place later brought the name 'Larut War', where a Chinese Capitan named Chung Keng Kwee went head-to-head with the leader of Ghee Hin Kongsi to secure his absolute power over Bukit Larut for the fortune that Bukit Larut held. Years later, the Pangkor Treaty officially marked the end of these wars and the beginning of a new era of peace, development and prosperity for the region, standing true to its name 'Taiping', of which made up of two Chinese character 'Tai' (great) and 'Ping' (peace).

In 1884, long after Chung Keng Kwee's victory and claim over Bukit Larut, a large area belonging to the Chung family comprised of swamps and abandoned mining pools was drained, levelled, planted and fenced. It was then seen as the official beginning to the history of Taiping Lake Gardens when Chung Keng Kwee donated the 60-acre of land to the Perak government and subsequently, marked its official opening to the public by the then Perak British Resident Frank Swettenham.

Transitioning from its dark era, Taiping Lake Gardens was considered to be the most beautiful gardens in Federated Malay State back then. And now, it lives the history as the first established public park in Malaysia. Proudly, it is now within the third most livable city in the world named in 2019, where Taiping, Perak, was measured for its global leadership in urban sustainability.

Bordered with thick green foliage, the land was an asset that was ready to be developed to its potentials. The landscape planning and design went under the direction of Charles Compton Reade, the same town planner Kuala Lumpur garden town. The design carried an English garden theme but nothing close to what was in their British's home country, according to George L. Peet. In his words:

"I know of no more lovely sight in this country than the Taiping gardens when the rays of the early morning sun are shining obliquely through their clumps of bamboo, palms and isolated trees scattered on islands among the expanse of water. One receives in that glorious half hour an experience of light in foliage that is quite unobtainable in England".



Decades later in recounting the natural beauty of Taiping Lake Gardens, it is odd to believe it was a former mining ground. The ground that had been dug out 70 metres deep is now waterbodies of calm surface mirroring an almost perfect reflection from above. What we are seeing today is an appreciation of heritage and cultural value that Taiping Lake Gardens possesses. Putting Taiping Lake Gardens alongside other parks under the same category, this park stood out to be the one that holds distinctive heritage integrity despite modern contemporary demands.

Historically, trees have their own space in gardens and parks. The perception of trees as luxury was recognized in the 16th century, within the frame of beautiful landscape paintings. The adaptability between trees and men was nothing conflicting rather a harmonious relationship. However, from the industrialization era to the present time, the closer trees get to people, the more problems there seem to be.

Physical link between past and present owns little or no historical value without its prioritization in its continuous planning and management. It was not the case for Taiping Lake Gardens. 'Raintree Walk' exhibits a clear understanding on the importance of natural heritage elements within an urban social context.

Standing from the edge of the slope overlooking the lake, eyes stood upon a picturesque vantage with mini islands seen from afar, framed by foliage and branches of trees. Every sight paid homage to the softscape, planted in 1884 by the British officials. The planting in 1884 benefits the atmosphere today when the tree branches spread out to the water, curving over the pedestrian path, creating a vista of what looks like a tree tunnel. Decades after the first germination, the tree vista is now a landmark to Perak, called 'Raintree Walk'. It was named after the common name of the tree species, Raintree (*Samanea saman*), which were planted along the street. These trees are one of the very elements that made Taiping Lake Gardens appreciated the way it is today.



Chung Thye Phin's tin mines in Taiping



LEFT Thick foliage seen from above makes Taiping Lake Garden a safe haven for birds (image credit: Majlis Perbandaran Taiping FB page)
RIGHT Felling of 140-year old tree adds heritage value to Taiping Lake Gardens (image credit: Majlis Perbandaran Taiping FB page)



The thick foliage from above makes Taiping Lake Gardens perceived as a safe haven for migratory birds between October to April. The large surface of waterbody isolates the mini islands from any human interaction, deeming it as a perfect habitat and sanctuary for birds. Branches that reach over the clear water are where the birds perched on to feed on fishes. The interactions between the flora and fauna shapes an ecosystem that was led on by unseemly manmade intervention of over 100 years back.

Heritage trees can be considered as the heart of a particular historic interest of a site. When one of the raintrees at 'Raintree Walk' collapsed due to a broken root, locals were saddened by the news as the raintrees hold sentimental values. But instead of removing the fallen tree, the Taiping Municipal Council propped it up using heavy-duty metal bars. It then added more value to the tree despite the physical interference. A rare occurrence and decision making that comes before social comfort.

ABOVE The sun rays shine through the crowns of *Samanea saman* at the Raintree Walk hitting the tarmac. 37 trees altogether within one frame of perspective – lined alongside the 630-metre street. This street has since been closed off to motor vehicles in 2017 to help preserve these trees. Resilient to be standing the test of time, this puts these trees over 140 years of age. (Photo Credit: James Teoh)



Photo Credit: James Teoh



Photo Credit: Hams Nocete | Flickr



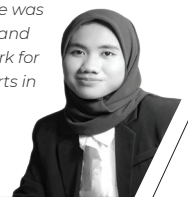
MIDDLE Scenery of Taiping Lake Gardens with Bukit Larut backdrop (Image source : Hams Nocete | Flickr)

A Reminiscence of an English Garden

Taiping Lake Gardens appears as a reminiscence of English Gardens which is ideally planned against a back drop of forested surroundings with grouping of trees in the background. The landscape was designed to adopt the characters of an English Garden with gently rolling hills and water. Historical to the English landscape movement, the design was planned to allow natural element to grow freely where existing elements remains unchanged. Amid the unshaken beautifully forested surroundings appearing before Bukit Larut's mountainous horizon, Taiping Lake Gardens evolve tremendously in its land use over the decades, from mining pools to private property to public realm.

Physical realm holds a significant power to translate memories and legacies for them to be recalled and appreciated. In Malaysia, Taiping Lake Gardens is one of the best representations as a physical link between the past and the continuity that the living environment brings. It is a reminiscence of the British's legacy and an embrace to the site's physical changes over the historical timeline. With a proper conservation approach, Taiping Lake Gardens arguably continues to become a landmark of memories that started decades ago and lives on in the memories of generations to come.

Awarded the Best Research Paper Award and 1st place in Landscape Architecture and built environment research competitions respectively in 2017, Yasmin Helmi dives deeper into her interest in sustainable urbanization and has implemented it throughout her professional experience as a landscape architect, sustainability analyst and a Graduate Member of ILAM. She was part of the team in Gamuda Land to formulate a policy framework for spearheading the group's efforts in biodiversity enrichment and sustainable landscape management.



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