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Maxwell Hill: Exploring from Built Environment and Historical Perspectives

Abstract

British colonial remains deserved to be declared as cultural heritage in Malaysia because they are among the tangible evidence from the past and possess outstanding architectural value that exists in this country. Interestingly, buildings are not the only ‘footprints’ that the British left in this country, but there are unique places that were used by colonists when they settled in this country, called as hill stations. The existence of hill station portrays human intelligence in taking advantage of the natural environment
to soothe the needs of the British people who had to live in the tropics for prolonged periods of time. In Malaysia, hill stations were developed starting from Penang Hill (Bukit Bendera), Maxwell Hill (Bukit Larut), Fraser’s Hill (Bukit Fraser) and Cameron Highlands, which emerged since 1920s. This study explores Maxwell Hill from the perspectives of its built environment and historical value. This hill station has not been subjected to many studies, compared to other hill stations. This paper also intends to ensure Maxwell Hill is not neglected. A holistic qualitative methodology including in-depth literature reviews and on-site observations of Maxwell Hill was conducted in 2017. Based on this study, it was found that the settlement was related to the British colonial social culture, but majority of the original bungalows are abandoned and deteriorated over time.

Keywords: Maxwell’s Hill, Hill Station, British Colonial Heritage,

1. Introduction

From the late 18th century to 1957, the British has occupied Malaya (before we gained independence) with the interest of territorial and power control over this country. The era of British colonialism in Malaya was so entrenched that it gave them opportunities not only to have influence on power and administration system, but also to imprint their culture on our surroundings such as British colonial architecture, especially in the Federated Malay States and Strait Settlements.

Although Malaysia has gained independence since 1957, British colonial architecture in this country can still be seen on many buildings. In fact, some of these buildings are registered as heritage buildings under National Heritage Act (2005) that represent parts of Malaysian cultural heritage (Ahmad, 1993).

Ahmad (1997) has argued that some of British colonial remains deserved to be protected as heritage buildings because they are tangible evidence from the past, and possess outstanding architectural values that exist in this country. Interestingly, buildings are not the only ‘footprints’ that the British left behind, but also unique places they used called hill stations.

According to records and old books, there are four British colonial hill stations in Malaya since the late 18th century (S. Robert Aiken, 1994; Butcher, 1979; Crossette, 1999; Sim, 1946; Willis, 1936). The existence of hill stations portrays human intelligence in taking advantage of the tropical landscape to soothe the needs of the British in this country (S. Robert Aiken, 1994; Crossette, 1999; Kenny, 1997; Spencer & Thomas, 1948).

Thus, this paper was carried out to explore one of four hill stations from the perspective of its built environment and historical value in order to understand its concept. Maxwell Hill, or locally known as Bukit Larut, located in Taiping, Perak, is one hill station that is not rigorously studied compared to others.

According to research conducted by Zaini, Ali and Kayan (2017), it was found that there are limited available sources on Maxwell Hill’s historical background and built environment research. Hence, this study is intended to be one of the starting researches that explores Maxwell Hill as a medium to avoid further negligence on this unique landscape.

2. British Hill Stations

Hill stations are peculiar landscapes located on hilltops, which were created by the European; British and Dutch, as well as the American in their colonies, especially in the Orient. British colonial hill stations did not only exist in Malaya, but also in British Raj (India) (Crossette, 1999; Spencer & Thomas, 1948; Westlake, 1993). Hill stations were created in
the first place by the British as a way to avoid the unpleasant hot weather and environment as well as from the reach of mosquitoes.

In addition, these colonists were far from home. Based on the government’s leave policy, the British officers were not allowed to return to England frequently. It was documented that many of Europeans suffered from tropical pressure that affected their mental health (Butcher, 1979; H.T. Ross, 1937; Kennedy, 1996; W.T. Wood, 1895).

Many of them retreated to higher altitude as they found that it is colder and brought comfort to their health, while staying out of the reach of mosquitoes (Baker, 2014). A few historical documents highlighted hill stations were popular in 19th century, where the stations bring to memory the lifestyle they might have led in their own country (S. Robert Aiken, 1994; Crossette, 1999; Francis, 2015; Webers & Idris, 2016).

In Malaysia, hill stations were developed since the late 18th century during the British era — Penang Hill (Bukit Bendera), Maxwell Hill (Bukit Larut), Fraser’s Hill (Bukit Fraser) and Cameron Highlands (S. Robert Aiken, 1987; S. Robert Aiken, 1994; Crossette, 1999). According to Aiken (1994), there were more hill stations designed by British but were unable to be developed due to specific circumstances. He has categorised hill stations in Malaysia into three categories — principal, minor and planned.

Penang Hill, Maxwell Hill, Fraser’s Hill and Cameron Highlands are principal hill stations, Gunung Kledang in Perak, Bukit Kulu in Selangor and Gunung Angsi in Negeri Sembilan are the minor hill stations, and Mount Tahan in Pahang is the planned (never developed) hill station (S. Robert Aiken, 1994).

In 2017, an in-depth study had been conducted to understand the criteria of sites selected by the British to be developed as hill stations as shown in Table 1. It was found that minor hill stations were not developed due to the geographical factor, where they were not located high enough to satisfy the needs of British people (Zaini, Ali, & Kayan, 2017).

Mount Tahan in the other hand is a planned hill station but did not materialise due to political conflicts, where part of the hill was located in Kelantan territory, which was not a Federated Malay States (Butcher, 1979).

It is interesting to find that hill stations in Malaysia were able to be developed from a retreat landscape into a social settlement, despite of its mountainous characteristics, for the British families and friends who were similar in social status to mingle and socialise, to play sports, hang out in pubs, etc. These are proved by the existence of Tudor bungalows, pubs and hotels, and old sport facilities such as tennis court, golf course and lawns (S. Robert Aiken, 1994; Crossette, 1999; Sim, 1946; Willis, 1936).

In India, the geographical characteristics of British hill stations played an important role in social element of the British people as the stations on the highest altitude were for who were of higher social and official elite, while the others were socialising at the lower levels of the hill (Herbert, 2011; Kennedy, 1996).

Although there are no literature on the matter, the settlement

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 1: The geographical characteristics according to hill stations in Malaysia (Zaini, Ali &amp; Kayan, 2017)</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Geographical Feature</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>States/Territory</td>
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<tr>
<td>Penang Island</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summit’s altitude (m)</td>
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<td>Temperature (°C)</td>
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<td>Size (ha)</td>
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organisation of Malaysian hill stations could be similar to those in India. Thus, this study is to explore the settlement setting of hill station by looking at Maxwell Hill.

2.1. Maxwell Hill, Taiping

Maxwell Hill is the second hill station created in Malaya, but the first one on the mainland, as Penang Hill was located on an island (S. Robert Aiken, 1994; Crossette, 1999; Weebers & Idris, 2016). It is located in the northern state of Malaysia called Perak and lies in the heritage town of Taiping. Perfectly located as the backdrop to Taiping, the Maxwell Hill summit is at 1,250 metres above sea level.

As mentioned earlier there are limited historical resources on Maxwell Hill (see Section 3). However, the era of British intervention in Taiping under the Pangkor Treaty 1874 that allowed Taiping to receive British administration might be the starting point of Maxwell Hill’s development. The geographical characteristics of this hill station provided an opportunity to the British to overlook tin mining activities at the lowlands. Maxwell Hill emerged as hill station, which not only served the English officers in Taiping, but also for the English who came to visit this country as written in personal journal by Sim (1946) titled ‘Malayan Landscape’.

The most unique element that has been existed on Maxwell Hill since the colonialism era is the use of Land Rovers as the mode of transport from the lowland to the top. Prior to that, ponies and sedan chairs were the only mode of transportation up the hill (Sim, 1946; Tourism Malaysia, n.d.). Hill stations created and designated by the British in India and Malaya were synonymous with bungalows (Crossette, 1999; Gibby, 2017; Kennedy, 1996; Weebers & Idris, 2016; Westlake, 1993).

Every literature on hill stations stated English bungalows and gardens were part of their developments. There is an archived record in 1947 that highlighted the condition of 10 bungalows and the distance of each bungalow from the foothills to the hill top.

The 10 bungalows on Maxwell Hill are: The Cottage, the first retreat bungalow erected on the hill in 1884 (German, 1927) is nine miles from the hill’s foot or 1,376 metres above sea level, followed by The Box, Hugh Low’s and Speedy’s (also known as The Rest House) bungalows which are eight miles from the hill’s foot, Treacher’s, The Hut, Superintendent’s, Watson’s and Maxwell’s Bungalows were about seven miles away, and finally two Tea Gardens Bungalows which are located at the lowest part of the hill, about four miles from the hill’s foot (Perak Secretary, 1947).

3. Methodology

To achieve its objective, this study was carried out through in-depth and systematic historical review on British hill stations and particularly on Bukit Larut as well as on-site observation. Despite of conducting technical approach similar to other surveying studies, it is crucial for this study to highlight the contribution of holistic qualitative methodology to the field of surveying studies.

3.1 Systematic Literature Reviews

A systematic literature review was undertaken to ensure in-depth understanding on the historical and built environment of Malaysian hill stations and Maxwell Hill. The literature review process was conducted based on relevant criteria from the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) checklist as this approach is able to ensure minimal bias by the researcher in conducting systematic literature review (Moher et al., 2009).

3.1.1. Identification

This approach was started with related articles searches based on following article databases: Web of Science and SCOPUS. The search was conducted using keywords related to hill stations, hill resort, Maxwell Hill, Bukit Larut, Larut Hill and Taiping Hill as shown in Table 2. Careful screening was then conducted to ensure related articles on historical and built environment background on Maxwell Hill were identified.

3.1.2. Screening

Several acceptance and rejection criteria were determined. The journal articles selected must have reviews on the historical background and built environment of Maxwell Hill or Bukit Larut. However, only one article on Maxwell Hill was found on Web of Science and SCOPUS but is not related to research on built environment and historical background. There are 66 articles found in the ScienceDirect database based on keywords and six articles are related to hill stations in Malaysia.

All six articles pointed to characteristics of hill stations but none are related to Maxwell Hill. Hence, this study was preceded with in-depth literature review that involved 10 old books and four archival records that had background literature on Maxwell Hill and British hill stations in India and Malaysia.

3.2 On-Site Observation

On-site observation was conducted in February 2017. On-site
observation is a data collection technique that is used in this study as it is self-exploratory where the observer looks, listens and records the observable phenomena or behaviour in its natural setting and understand them (Golicnik, 2005; Gorman & Clayton, 2005; Silverman, 2006).

As this research objectively explores the built environment and historical perspectives of Bukit Larut according to the hill station concept, the observation conducted were looking at original bungalows and the settlement setting on the hilltop in term of their current condition, materials and location. This study can be considered as a starting point for further exploration. Thus, observation technique is considered suitable method as highlighted by Golicnik and Thompson (2010), where observation is a tool towards gaining deeper knowledge about the site; and that it can serve as an orientation and a starting point for further research (Hussein & Daud, 2016).

It is important to select observation technique as it has specific ways in which researcher observes and records (Simpson & Tuson, 1995). This is including through the kind of occurrence of research will be observing and its context (Hussein & Daud, 2016).

4. Findings and Discussion

Figure 1 shows the topography map of Maxwell Hill. The map portrays the placement of settlement on the hill is between 900 metres and 1,243 metres above sea level. According to Taiping Municipal Council (n.d), The Cottage bungalow is located at 1,389 metres near Caufield Hill, where the road ends there. Based on observations, Maxwell Hill is uninhabited. Existing bungalows are used as lodgings for tourists. Bungalows and other buildings on the hilltop were observed in their current conditions, materials and locations.

There are 10 bungalows in Maxwell Hill (Hasmi, 2017; Taiping Municipal Council, n.d). However, only six

Figure 1: Topography map that shows summit of Maxwell's Hill. (Not to scale). (Map Courtesy: Department of Surveying and Mapping, 2013)
bungalows can be reached by the Land Rover. It is also unfortunate that the oldest bungalow, The Cottage is not accessible by Land Rover and is a restricted area for the visitors as it is currently belongs to Telekom Malaysia.

On observation day, all reachable bungalows are inaccessible as one functioning bungalow was rented by tourists, while the rest were closed, abandoned and in a state of deterioration. Based on the document record, The Cottage was constructed using granite stones and portrayed English architectural

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**Figure 2:** The Hut presently known as Cendana.

**Figure 3:** Federal/Superintendent's bungalow presently known as Angkasa.

**Figure 4:** Unknown bungalow which presently known as Permai View Bungalow.

**Figure 5:** Watson's bungalow presently known as Beringin.

Source: Author, 2017
value (Taiping Municipal Council, n.d). However, the observation conducted found all other reachable bungalows were constructed from timber instead of granite stones, although many of the bungalows were erected in the same time frame similar time interval.

Without a clear historical background, limited granite stones or labour could be the most logical reasons on the use of different materials. Based on-site observation, it has been found that there is no specific settlement setting on the hill as all bungalows and additional buildings are scattered, except that most of the bungalows are located at ridges of the hill.

This is a significant finding as every location of reachable bungalow offers majestic views of the horizon and provides clear views of Taiping town at the lowland. English bungalows in hill station are purposely erected on the ridges as to reflect the social status of its occupants (Herbert, 2011; Kennedy, 1990). It is crucial to highlight this, as it illustrates the key characteristic of social status on Maxwell Hill, which similar to the hill stations in India.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has explored on the setting of Maxwell Hill particularly from built environment perspective based on in-depth historical literature review and on-site observation. Although it was found that Maxwell Hill is no longer inhabited, and some bungalows are left abandoned, the tangible remnants of this hill station portray a unique and foreign cultural landscape existed in this country which illustrate an intelligent interaction between human and their environment.
This paper has also presented the condition, materials and location of bungalows in Maxwell Hill on a surface level as well as the characteristics of the settlement which aligned with the concept of British hill stations. Despite of being overlooked as a unique cultural landscape, more studies are expected to be conducted on built environment of not only Maxwell Hill, but other hill stations in Malaysia.

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