



Street Art as Tropical Heritage in Semeling: Emplacing Rural Tourism in Kuala Muda District, Malaysia

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Abstract

Serving as a form of aesthetic enhancement, street art encompasses artistic activities created on buildings within urban areas. Street art has become a drawcard for heritage tourism in Malaysia. This art frequently incorporates motifs of tropical flora and fauna, along with symbols from Malay and other ethnic groups, to accentuate its distinctiveness. The colours used are vivid and contrasting to highlight the tropical atmosphere as alive and fresh. Street art in Semeling, a town in Kuala Muda District in the northwestern state of Kedah, Malaysia, emphasises elements of history, culture, and nature that highlight tropical themes, as well as various popular culture characters and memes. However, Semeling, unlike, southern Peninsula Malaysia towns, receives few tourists. The town's street art holds potential to enhance heritage tourism and cultural understanding in this more remote tropical rural landscape. Importantly, street art enhances the town's sense of place with its tropical environment, history, and culture, thus offering a form of heritage tourism that is emplacing rather than displacing of local residents.

Keywords: Semeling town, Kuala Muda District, Malaysia street art, tropical heritage tourism, tropical rural tourism, emplacing

Introduction

Street art, or “post-graffiti,” consists of images, characters, and shapes produced or applied to the wall surfaces of buildings in urban spaces deliberately seeking communication with a larger circle of people (Bengtson, 2014; Blanché, 2015; Pogrmic & Đerčan, 2021). Street art has traditionally been seen as negative and often banned as it is “made outside the formal sphere of public art or without permission on someone else’s property” (Young, 2014; Chackal, 2016; Nomeikaite, 2020). Although street art has previously been considered “an urban blight that needs to be erased,” it is now being reconceptualized as “enriching the urban landscape” (Fleischmann & Mann, 2018, p. 85). “Street art has always been a subject of debate...labeled vandalism or art depending on the temperament of the observer” (Chaudury & Lundberg, 2018, p. 123). In this respect, it is still debated as to whether or not street art represents an artistic activity (Sadati et al., 2015; Nomeikaite, 2017a); while some art activists, such as Hall, (2017) and Okwir (2025) (Anonymous, 2024), support post-graffiti as art work, others do not recognize it as a branch of art (Hoppe, 2009 a,b; Kecici, 2021).

This vagueness in the conception of street art makes it challenging to present the activity within the context of heritage. To address this issue, Mezzino (2017) and Nomeikaite (2022), have put forward the notion of “heritagization” to ensure that street art can be classified as a heritage asset. With the effort to recognize street art as a form of cultural heritage, there still remain several issues regarding its place in “rights to the city” and its components. In the conceptualisation of rights to the city, Ramli & Ujang (2020) and Sheikh et al., (2023) have provided an alternative vision for a city where residents deserve the right to manage the urban space for themselves, and in thus doing, create a sense of place. Furthermore, the urban landscape itself requires practices that allow an improvisational process that ultimately gives birth to creativity (Muller & Trubina, 2020; Nomeikaite, 2021; Jaatsi & Kymäläinen, 2023; Hannerz & Bengtson, 2024) and requires the existence of activities that contribute to this direction. Within these contexts, street art is recognized among the efforts that can achieve this goal.

Street art is not merely imagery, but also involves urban life with its atmospheric, spatial, sensorial, and affective experiences. Thus, there is a need to engage with various views and perspectives relating not only to the image aspect of street art but also to its relationship with the urban, natural, and cultural landscape. Performance- and impact-based approaches may capture different sensory perceptions and experiences of street art and its relationship to the physical environment (Nomeikaite, 2017b, 2019). In the context of street art in Semeling town in rural Kedah, Malaysia, the authors argue that the tropical environment is an important aspect of the

relationship of street art to creating a sense of place. It is pertinent to remember that while the tropics of Malaysia—including geology, rainforests, rivers and seas—provide a diversity of ecosystems and natural habitats for flora and fauna (Mohd Nor et al., 2019; Muhammad & Yacob, 2020), the products of this tropical nature have also shaped the history and cultures of the country.

Malaysia's climate is characterised by hot and humid weather throughout the year, with average temperatures ranging from 25°C to 35°C daily and high air humidity of around 80% (Ho, 2018; Izzati et al., 2023). The abundant rainfall averages 2000 to 3000 mm annually (Ibrahim et al., 2016; Mohamed Yusof et al., 2024) over two monsoon seasons that affect different parts of the country. In line with these characteristics of an equatorial climate, Malaysia is rich in varied and diverse tropical forests which enables high biodiversity (Buslima et al., 2018; Othman et al., 2023).

The country has an abundance of paleo-environment advantages which offer many environmental tourism sites (Ali et al., 2021a; Ali, 2022), along with heritage and culture (Marzuki et al., 2021), history (Ali et al., 2021b), and archaeological sites (Abd Halim & Saidin, 2021; Abd Halim et al., 2021; 2022; 2025a; Ali et al., 2023). While the tropical environment is highly significant in the development of sustainable nature-based tourism locations, this tropical nature has also been significant for human settlement, trade, farming, and material production.

Thus, while the district of Kuala Muda, in the northwestern Malaysian state of Kedah, offers many environmental tourism scenarios, this research paper specifically notes the strong potential for tropical heritage tourism through the street art in the town of Semeling. The tropical environment and associated heritage of Malaysia influences many of the street art themes, including history, culture, and tropical flora and fauna, alongside popular culture characters and memes. Unlike most urban street art, Semeling town is located in a rural area far from the peninsular's main cities and touristic attractions. Thus, heritage tourism development through street art in Semeling offers the potential for economic development and local empowerment in an area neglected by the unequal flows of tourism. This paper proposes that street art and tropical heritage tourism in the town of Semeling can contribute to the local rural economy and to enhancing historical memory and cultural understanding, improving community life.

Kuala Muda's Tropical Landscape

The district of Kuala Muda is in the northwest of the state of Kedah, Malaysia (Figure 1). The Straits of Malacca border the district on the west, while the Baling and Sik districts border it on the east. The northern part of the district is marked by Mount Jerai

[Gunung Jerai], the highest peak in Kedah (1,217 metres) (Komoo & Said, 2019), which is shared with the Yan and Pendang districts in the north and the Kulim district in the south (Nadaraja, 2022; Saidin, 2022: 2023).

Figure 1. Kuala Muda District Map



The Kuala Muda District contains 16 subdistricts with diverse tropical natural landscapes. (Source: Ali et al., 2021a; Ali, 2022)

Two main rivers, Sungai Muda and Sungai Merbok, as well as branches of both, flow through the district (Saari, 2019; Abd Halim, 2019). Kuala Muda District contains a wide range of tropical landscapes, including islands, seas, beaches, mangroves, rivers, valley plains, rice fields, hills, waterfalls and the mountain terrain of Gunung Jerai. The Forestry Department of Peninsular Malaysia is responsible for two forest reserves in the Kuala Muda District: the Jerai Forest Reserve (over 8,000 hectares) in the Jerai Mountains (Mukim Merbok, Bujang, and Semeling), and the Merbok Mangrove Forest Reserve (over 3,000 hectares) around Sungai Merbok (which includes the area of Semeling) (Mohd Nor et al., 2019).

The diversified topography of Kuala Muda avails its citizens with many ways to create revenue. The sea and river provide economic resources for fisheries, which support various industries including farming, sales, and marketing. These industries are managed both privately and by companies, leading to the establishment of what is known as a whisper market in Kuala Muda—a traditional market for sea catches where prices are determined by the whispering method (Muhamad Mas'ad, 2018).

The mangrove landscape is also home to several fishing activities, as well as businesses that export mangrove timber and make charcoal. Farmers primarily use the valley plains and hilly areas for agriculture, particularly rice fields, and palm and rubber plantations. Houses and businesses also occupy these areas. The Kedah state still allows granite quarrying (Ali et al., 2019) which is carried out in Jerai's hilly area, even though most of it is a forest reserve. There are hotels for tourists to stay in. The variety of geological and ecological specialities has helped the Kuala Muda District's economy grow and improve.

Heritage Tourism

Tourism, as Alister & Wall (1982), Ali & Salleh (2010), and Bhattacharya et al. (2024) explain, is when someone leaves their home to visit another place for leisure or adventure. It is a short trip away with the promise of returning. Tourism can be divided into different forms, such as history tourism, sports, health, religion, and others (Camilleri, 2017). Tourism has the potential to boost the economies of the places where tourists visit, especially if local residents are involved in the associated on-the-ground industries.

Heritage tourism, is when people travel to places that have fascinating and unique cultural and natural heritage (Prentice, 1993; Arumugam et al., 2023). In this context, travel's goal is to experience the realness of place through material culture and activities that reveal the stories and people of the past and present within a certain location.

Norhanim (2006) and Thuyet (2023) argue that heritage tourism is subjective and broadly conceived, but usually seeks signs of the remnant of riches of a place. Hence, heritage tourism is related to many other types of tourism, such as historical tourism, cultural tourism, legacy tourism, archaeological tourism, geological tourism, and ecological tourism. Ursache (2015) and Hoang (2021) propose that tourism can make a country's heritage famous, both as a source of income (Puah et al., 2018; Song et al., 2024), and as an effective way to protect heritage under the auspices of World Heritage (Ardiwidjaja, 2020; Zhang et al., 2023). The history of the tourism sector shows that heritage tourism has changed substantially over time.

In the 21st century, travellers are keen to learn about their surroundings, where they came from, and their past (Ali, 2022) in order to give themselves a sense of their place in the world. Lowenthal (1985) and Murphy et al. (2017) assert that heritage tourism transcends mere historical tourism, for it can provide people with a taste of the past in the present. Europe has been particularly aware of historical and heritage tourism,

with such businesses becoming strong sources of income for various European countries (Ashworth & Larkham, 1994; Panzera et al., 2021).

The National Heritage Act 2005 divides cultural heritage into two types: tangible and intangible (Mohd Yusoff et al., 2010; Khairuddin, 2022). Tangible heritage is something that can be seen and kept, while intangible heritage is the opposite (Foo, 2019). Tangible cultural heritage (Vecco, 2010; Amali et al., 2022) encompasses cultural heritage sites, historical land sites, historical cities, monuments, cultural landscapes, natural sacred sites, mobile cultural heritage (artefacts), museums and galleries, handicrafts, documentary and digital heritage, cinematographic heritage, and underwater heritage. Intangible heritage (Foo, 2019; Sinibaldi & Parente, 2020; Makhloufi, 2024) encompasses oral traditions, languages, festive events, rituals and beliefs, music and songs, performing arts, visual arts, traditional medical practices, literature, culinary traditions, sports traditions, and traditional games. Natural heritage encompasses evidence from national parks, state parks, marine parks, forest reserves, wetlands, mangrove forests, wildlife reserves, mergastua, Orang Asli [indigenous peoples'] reserves, wildlife conservation centres, rivers, lakes, and the sea (Abd Halim et al., 2025b). Natural legacy includes the Earth's plants and animals as well as its terrain (Lv et al., 2025). All of these are national treasures that show the country's and its people's history.

Regarding natural heritage sites, UNESCO has promoted the Man and Biosphere (MAB) (Pool-Stanvliet, 2018) and International Geoscience and Geoparks (IGGP) (Zourus, 2017; Catana & Brilha, 2020) programmes to protect and preserve natural heritage sites. In the case of cultural heritage, UNESO has initiated the World Heritage Site (WHS) programme (Shabani et al., 2020) which lists sites of outstanding cultural and natural heritage which are of outstanding value to humanity. For example, Cat Ba, Vietnam (MAB) (Thong et al., 2021); Geopark Langkawi, Malaysia (IGGP) (Komoo et al., 2018); and Borobudur, Indonesia (WHS) (Kausar et al., 2024); have each been designated UNESCO World Heritage sites. Beyond conservation and preservation, these sites have become successful in the heritage tourist business.

Street art is usually considered part of historical and cultural tourism. Street art typically shows many different subjects, some of which are cultural, social, economic, or historical characteristics of the local community that can be turned into a sustainable cultural heritage value. This means that heritage is something that is passed down from one generation to the next in the form of the culture and nature (Banda et al., 2024) found in a particular place (town, region, state, or country). It is the most significant part of describing a place's national identity (Katyukha et al., 2025). In the case of Semeling in Kuala Muda district, the tropical environment becomes closely entwined with the history, practices, and cultures of the locals and is depicted in the

town's street art. In this scenario the tropics and heritage tourism arise together through this art and offer a sense of place for both locals and tourists.

Street Art in Peninsular Malaysia: A Literature Overview

Street art is not new to Malaysia and the Peninsular has several notable street art cities including Georgetown on the island of Penang, the old port town area of Malacca [Melaka], and Ipoh city and Teluk Intan town in Perak, among others. Each location produces a street art style particular to place.

Georgetown in Penang is a UNESCO World Heritage Site that has used street art with the aim of retelling the town's history and culture through local people's voices (Sadati et al., 2015). The walls of George Town's old colonial and post-colonial buildings are 2D sculpted in steel rods which depict touching caricatures that demonstrate to tourists the nuances of each street. Most of the street art is intriguing because it uses amusing and unique pictures and words to promote the street images (Ong, 2023). There are also many murals in Georgetown that were created in different parts of the Old City with the theme "Mirror George Town" (Wu & Cao, 2021). Even though some of them don't have anything to do with the local culture and way of life, they are quite valuable as works of art and were painted by well-known artists like Ernest Zacharevic. The paintings aim to create a sense of embodied placemaking, demonstrating the human aspects of urban space and often depict everyday scenes of people in place (Ng, 2013). Studies by Liang (2017) and Cheng et al. (2023), indicated that more tourists are coming to Georgetown because of the street art, which affords them more places to see historical monuments and buildings alongside street art.

In Banda Hilir, the old fortress and river area of Malacca, the principal themes of street art include tranquillity, environmental landscapes, familial unity, and Malacca identity. Many are painted in bright colours reminiscent of tropical flora, others are more subdued and emphasise local culture and everyday life. Pathways through the city and boardwalks along the river edges allow people to stroll around to see the street art. This arrangement is good for businesses as tourists can also visit museums and eat at restaurants while on the street art path. The link between cultural sites, tourism activities, and street culture is enhanced. This approach is especially crucial for the tourism industry, and it helps residential area outside the main tourist zone remain liveable (Wan Mohamed et al., 2023).

Georgetown in Penang, and the Bandar Hilir district in Malacca, are just two of the tourist spots in Malaysia that have used street art and murals to boost their tourism industry. Ipoh city in Perak has likewise invested in street art to enhance its tourism allure alongside its well-established and highly respected food culture. The city

commissioned the street artist Ernest Zacharevic (who previously did several Penang wall paintings), and his work sits alongside paintings done by local artists. The themes of the mural art include patriotism, through visual elements bringing together different ethnic groups in Malaysia (Abdullah, 2024; Ahmad Radzi et al., 2019), as well as nostalgia, local café culture (for which the city is famous), and the region's rich multi-cultural history.

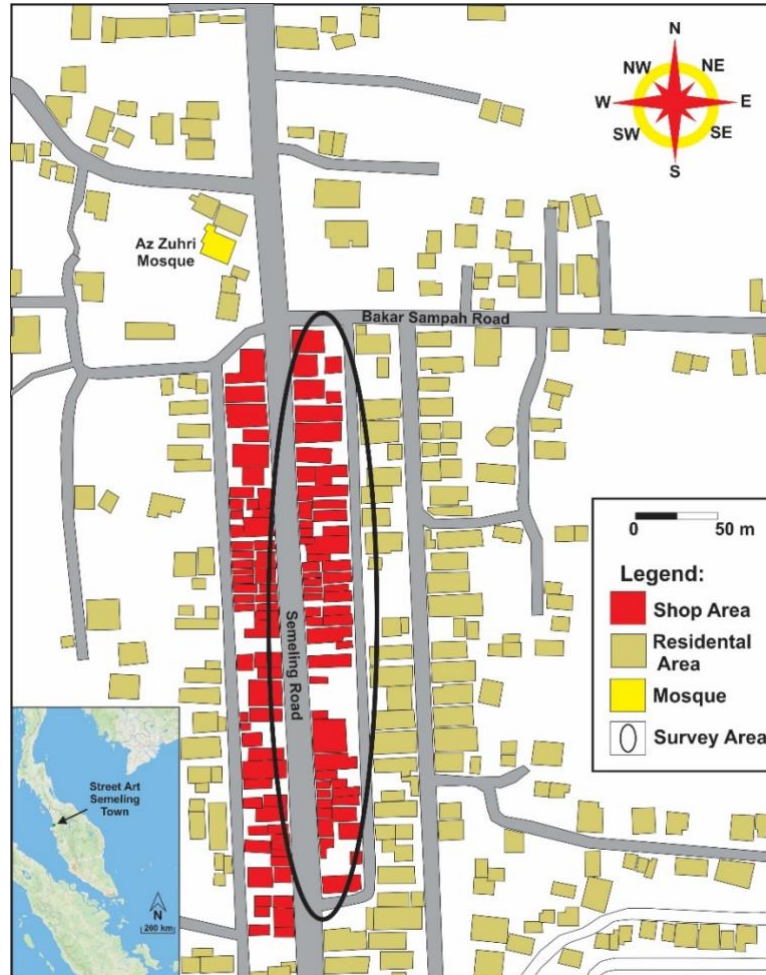
The town of Teluk Intan, also in Perak, began as a community collaboration between local university students and professional artists and is very much a local initiative. The wall art depicts scenes of local culture and heritage from its famous foods to depictions of local fauna that draw attention to environmental concerns. The works also include pop art, which gives a creative edge (Abdul Razak et al., 2023). In the rendering of popular culture there is an obvious link with the work of graffiti artists who employ words, which they call "letters" in their culture (Chavez, 2017). "Tagging", "throw-ups", and "bits" are types of letters. The letters refer to the names of artists, such as: Seik27, Asmoeroc, Akid, Escapeva, Kenji, and Cloak (to name only a few well-known Malaysian graffiti artists). At the same time, the images depicted in this style of street art refer to famous characters from popular culture, including cartoons, superheroes, entertainers, or characters from online games (Muhammad et al., 2022).

This selective literature review of street art in Malaysia indicates that street art is not just used in UNESCO world heritage sites; it has also been incorporated into urban sites to enhance the aesthetics of the built environment. The beautification of cities and towns through these kinds of artistic activities help make public areas more trustworthy, they support sustainability, and create landmark streets and buildings (Salim, 2023). At the same time, they have also been valuable in attracting tourists (McClinchey, 2024). If done correctly, street art can enhance sustainable and ongoing tourism in an area (Nargiza & Hadicha, 2024), while also encouraging meaningful encounters and return visits.

Semeling Street Art: A Survey

The coordinates for street art in Semeling Town range from 5°42'00" N and 100°28'20" E to 5°42'12" N and 100°28'19" E. There are about 95 paintings on the walls of buildings in Semeling town. These paintings span a wide range of topics, including history, culture, nature, arts, characters, and memes. The term "ancient Kedah" painted on the walls of buildings is an example of street art with a historical subject. It references findings of the archaeological research undertaken in this area from the 1840s until now (Abd Halim & Saidin, 2025).

Figure 2. Map of Street Art Locations in Semeling



(Source: The Authors)

Historical-themed street art can be seen through the word *Kedah Tua* [ancient Kedah] on the wall of the building, which shows the uniqueness of historical elements in this area (Figure 3a). The theme is synonymous with results of archaeological studies conducted in the region since the 1800s by the colonial British administration (Low, 1848, 1849) to the present (Abd Halim et al., 2025a, b), which reveal evidence of the ancient Kedah Kingdom dating back to the 6th century BC. Such archaeological studies have recorded the discovery of iron smelting workshops, river jetties, ports, rituals (Abd Halim & Saidin, 2025), Buddhist and Hindu monuments (Allen, 1988), sculptures, inscriptions (Rodziadi Khaw et al., 2018), and trade artifacts (Leong Sau Heng, 1973) that prove the existence of this ancient Kedah civilisation.

Additionally, one street art wall painting depicts a panorama of Gunung Jerai (Mount Jerai), which symbolizes the progress and development of the ancient Kedah Kingdom

(Figure 3b). Gunung Jerai has historically been used as a landmark for merchant ships to reach the port area of ancient Kedah (Omar et al., 2010; Rodziadi Khaw et al., 2019) and thus symbolically reflects the importance of the mountain in the development of the ancient Kedah Kingdom as the preeminent maritime kingdom in Southeast Asia.

Figure 3: History street art theme of ancient Kedah (a) and Mount Jerai (b)



These two themes show the uniqueness of this area in the historiography in Malaysia.
(Source: The Authors)

Street art with cultural elements is also traced through the depiction of the traditional economic system of the people in this area. Panning and mining activities have historically been important to the town and its inhabitants (Figure 4). This phenomenon, in turn, is a result of the natural geological diversity around Mount Jerai, which includes deposits of iron ore (Bradford, 1972; Abd Halim et al., 2023) and tin (Burton, 1988; Abd Halim et al., 2024). Iron ore activity in this region has been traced back at least 2,600 years, with the likely location of mines in the area of Inas Hill, Merbok, Batu 5 Village, Paya Suri Village, and Ayer Nasi Hill, Semeling (Abd Halim et al., 2023). The tin mining activity commenced much later during the British colonial era. It was carried out in the Semeling-Tok Pawang area which still reveals the remains of a tin mine. Tin mining activities are expected to have commenced around the time of the development of tin mining and production in other states in colonial Malaya (Ahmad & Jones, 2018; Rönnbäck et al., 2022; Md. Hamzah & Jusoh, 2023).

Figure 4: Cultural view of panning and mining activities in Semeling area



This panorama of mining activities reveals unique characteristics of the culture of the early Semeling area set against the backdrop of the traditional stilt houses of the Malay community.
(Source: The Authors)

The street painting of a man mining and panning (Figure 4), depicts a background view of traditional houses. It is representational of the way people lived in villages in the northwestern areas of the Malay Peninsula, where they built stilt houses out of rainforest wood planks and made thatched roofs (Alim & Omar, 2022). This wall painting shows clearly how the art piece represents both the community's traditional way of life and its economic activity. In this regard the art is a symbol of identity and harmony.

The theme of tropical nature was also used as an element in the making of street art in Semeling town (Figure 5). The natural elements that depict the sceneries of the sea, sand, and coconut palms, as well as birds in flight, are synonymous with Semeling town's surroundings. Academic studies have concluded that the geography around Semeling offers a variety of landscapes, from islands, seas, beaches, mangroves, rivers, valley plains, rice fields, hills, and waterfalls to the mountain peaks of Mount Jerai (Abd Halim et al., 2024).

Figure 5: Tropical flora and fauna (a) coconut palms and birds flying (b) fish swimming



(a)



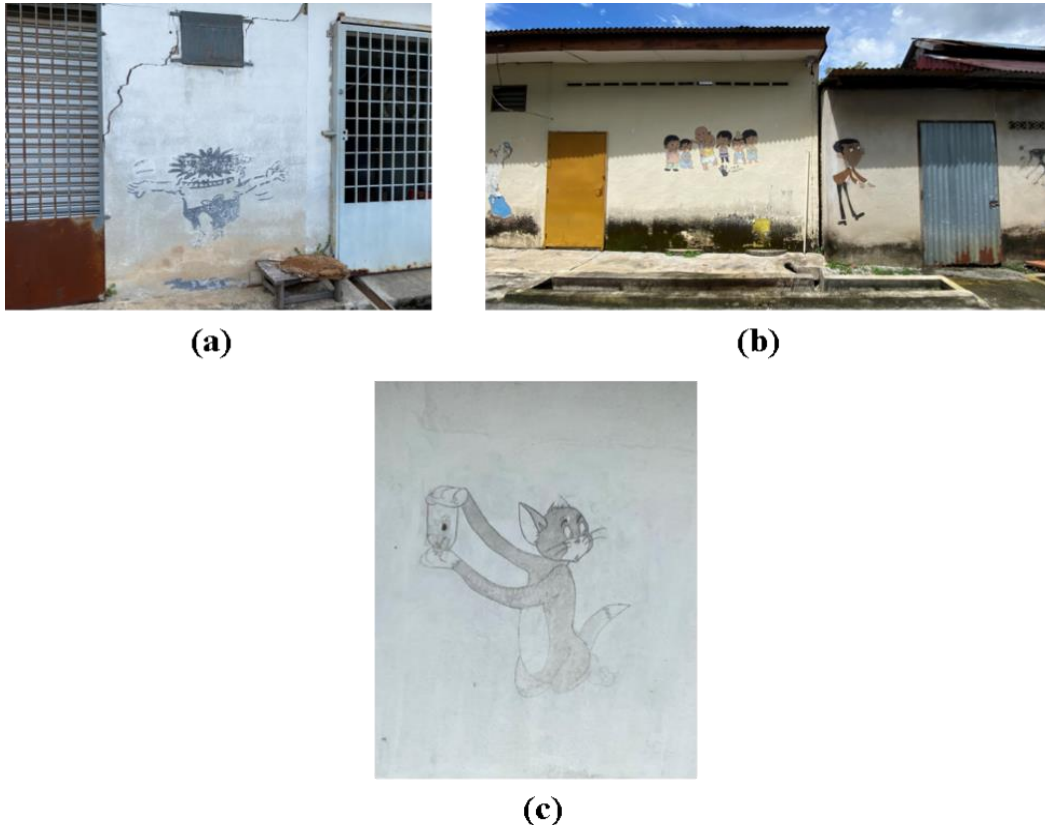
(b)

Tropical flora and fauna which is part of the local identity of place around the area of Semeling
(Source: The Authors)

This theme is consistent with research that shows there are about 80 species of Merbok mangrove birds (Gregory-Smith, 1994) and 30 species of migratory birds (Noske, 1995). These birds help make Semeling town's surrounding ecosystem unique. In addition to birds, the area has documented eight species of mammals, 13 species of amphibians (Aldrie & Latiff, 2006), more than 100 species of fish (Mohsin & Ambak, 1983), and eight species of prawns (Sarker et al., 2013). Street art is one way in which to document and reflect upon these tropical surroundings.

Additionally, themes of popular culture and animation characters have also been identified as dominant elements expressed in street art in Semeling (Figure 12). Cartoon characters include Kampung Boy, Upin-Ipin, Mr. Bean, and Tom and Jerry among others.

Figure 6: Kampung Boy (a), Upin-Ipin and Mr. Bean (b), and Tom and Jerry (c).



Animation characters include both Malaysian and Western representations. (Source: The Authors)

Kampung Boy (Templer, 2015; Beng & Mohamed Nor, 2025) and Upin-Ipin (Mahmor & Hashim, 2015; Mahdi et al., 2019) are popular characters in Malaysian cartoon animation and are highly sought after by many children in the country. In addition, the characters of Mr. Bean (Fatima, 2015) and Tom and Jerry (Mohiur Islam et al., 2021) are internationally popular and synonymous with being a public spectacle in Malaysia. These characters bring memories and nostalgia of childhood to Malaysians. Caricatures in animation and movies are part of the contemporary entertainment element of everyday life in Malaysia. Significantly, through these depictions the town of Semeling is placed within the wider popular culture society of Malaysia and in the international global culture of mass entertainment.

The last character recorded in the street art survey of Semeling town is a meme (Figure 7). This meme employs humorous elements to enhance the atmosphere

during tourist visits to this area. The meme caricature is also easy to remember, being accompanied by short satirical comments that are quite entertaining and rich in interpretation (Budiyono & Sony Kartika, 2017). The purpose of producing caricatures is to inspire a rethinking and re-creation of reality. They encourage reflection through humorous messaging or satire (Budiyono & Sony Kartika, 2017).

Figure 7: Meme caricature in Semeling street art



(Source: The Authors)

Potential of Semeling Street Art and Heritage Tourism

Street art in the town of Semeling possesses significant potential for development as a heritage tourism product. However, this also necessitates the employment of various techniques and methodologies to ensure the dissemination of primary data pertaining to the uniqueness of this area to the broader tourism community. Research conducted in Malaysia (Ong, 2023), Indonesia (Carollina, 2023; Mansfield et al., 2023), Thailand (Trakulmaykee et al., 2025), Dubai, the Netherlands, Russia, England, Germany, and Belgium (Komar, 2022) has demonstrated that street art heritage sites have become significant tourist attractions in cities from tropical Southeast Asia through to the temperate countries of Europe. The special consideration in the case of Semeling town is that it has the potential to contribute to growth in tourism in a rural area of Kuala Muda District in the state of Kedah, northwestern Malaysia, an area that receives far less tourism attention. However, to attract tourists will require several strategies.

Technology applications offer an important way for Semeling to make tourists aware of its street art. For instance, street art in Songkla, Thailand, uses augmented reality (AR) apps and QR codes (Trakulmaykee et al., 2025), while art in Dubai (Alhumayani, 2022), the Netherlands (Biljecki et al., 2015), Russia (Anonymous, 2022), England (Boscaino, 2021), Germany (Yan et al., 2019), and Belgium (Anonymous, 2021) is made using 3D techniques. These locations demonstrate how important it is to use technology to build tourism destinations.

Another way to attract more tourists is to plan a heritage tourism festival. There is an international archaeological site called the Sungai Batu Archaeological Complex (SBAC) near Semeling that might be used as a springboard to plan a tourism festival between the archaeological site and the site of street art. Abd Halim et al. (2025a) have documented the organisation of tourism festivals in SBAC, including the *Festival Kedah Tua* in 2016 and 2019, the *Festival Warisan Kraf dan Makanan Tradisi Kedah Tua*, and the *Jerai Geopark Warisan Selayar* in 2023, which has augmented tourist visitation to this region. The organisation of tourist festivals are proven ways to draw attention to tourist spots around the world.

A further strategy is to work with tourism groups in this area to create a guided tour package for Semeling town street art. Research by Abd Halim et al. (2025a) in SBAC shows that there is a tourist NGO that is actively delivering 17 iconic and supplementary tourism packages surrounding the archaeology of SBAC. Although the town of Semeling lies only approximately 3 kilometres from the SBAC, the current tourism packages do not address the town. It is suggested that a unique tourism package be produced for Semeling street art so that it doesn't get left out of the must-see places in the Kuala Muda District of Kedah, Malaysia.

Moreover, social media advertising can significantly contribute to highlighting Semeling town street art. To date a social media strategy has not been developed and only tourists who post pictures and information about their experiences on social media note the street art. While tourists' efforts contribute to the area's promotion, further concrete steps are necessary. Stakeholders, tourist NGOs, and local communities need to work together to promote Semeling as a new hotspot for street art and tropical heritage tourism.

Potential Street Art and Urban Heritage Issues

The emergence of street art as a facet of historical tourism is frequently associated with adverse views, governance and regulation, tensions between traditional and contemporary art, as well as ethical and marketing concerns. Some people consider street art a form of vandalism (Zainodin, 2018), which is perceived as a crime that

requires legal action. This has made it difficult for street artists to work openly in making their art on walls and in proposing street art projects.

Thus, if legal restrictions are too prohibitive street art cannot thrive. On the other hand, if management and control are weak, street art can become disorganised and overwhelming. This has happened in Georgetown, Penang, where too many murals on the walls of buildings have become detrimental to the area's beauty and cultural history (Wan Ali, 2021). Additionally, graffiti, spray painting, and other activities have destroyed some street art due to insufficient legal supervision (Abdul Rahim, 2020).

It is also important to think about the tension between traditions and modern art. The tension between street art and urban heritage arises from their differing objectives and perspectives. Street art is a new form of expression that typically includes strong, critical, and dynamic works (Kang, 2025). In contrast, cultural heritage focuses on conserving a site's structure and historical worth (Kiarie, 2024). When street art is seen as a danger to the physical and artistic worth of material heritage, this results in a clash of beliefs. The nexus of street art as urban heritage requires a flexible and long-lasting structure of governance so that the street art that is created doesn't detract from the cultural legacy that is already present. This ultimately enhances legacy vitality while preserving the heritage value (Wan Ali, 2021; Selamat et al., 2024).

Issues related to ethical and commercial values also pose a dilemma in producing quality street art. Street art is born from artistic expression, and any pressure for commercial adaptation will cause artists to face risks to the integrity of their creativity if their work is forced to be adapted to meet market demands and touristic agendas (Aziz et al., 2021). This commercial pressure can cause artists to resort to following trends in order to produce popular work to the detriment of the deeper focus on local heritage, culture, and identity. As a result, an area can lose its high heritage value by simply following street art trends.

Conclusion

The production of street art in Semeling town, despite facing several issues and challenges in regard to heritage tourism development, has shown a positive impact with an increase in visitors. There is now a need for cooperation between artists, communities, tourist NGOs, business stakeholders, and local government to ensure that issues that can hinder the development of this area as a tourist location are addressed solidly. Street art in Semeling has the potential to development street art in conjunction with tropical heritage tourism to draw tourists to the town and the Kuala Muda district. Such a strategy is on par with the street art development in cities of Georgetown, Malacca, Ipoh, and Teluk Intan.

In the town of Semeling, the tropical environment and its associated heritage influence many of the street art themes, including history, culture, and tropical flora and fauna, alongside popular culture characters and memes. Semeling town, located in a rural northern region far from the Peninsular Malaysia main cities and touristic attractions, offers the potential for economic development and local empowerment in an area mostly neglected in the unequal flows of tourism. This paper proposes that street art and tropical heritage tourism in the town of Semeling can contribute to the local rural economy and to enhancing historical memory and cultural understanding, thus improving community life for a better and sustainable future. As has been argued regarding the potential of tropical futurity, street art “is inherently democratic, transforming public spaces into interactive platforms....murals and other urban artworks invite direct participation and engagement, fostering inclusive dialogue” (Cedeño-Vega, 2025, p. 98). Rather than causing a sense of alienation or displacement, Semeling street art with its theme of tropical heritage, acts as a way of emplacing local artists and residents in the co-development of meaningful tourism.

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We hereby provide consent for the publication of the manuscript detailed above, including any accompanying images or data contained within the manuscript.

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