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Governing the Dark: Institutional Legitimacy and Dark Tourism Governance in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how tourism authorities in Malaysia conceptualize dark tourism (DT) and assess its place within tourism governance. Drawing on 28 semi-structured interviews with tourism authorities at the federal, state, and regional levels, the study uses reflexive thematic analysis to examine how institutional actors interpret, frame, and assess difficult heritage within national and subnational tourism contexts. The findings show that DT remains institutionally marginal not because relevant sites are absent, but because difficult heritage is filtered through struggles over meaning, legitimacy, moral appropriateness, and destination image. The analysis generated three interrelated governance processes: discursive uncertainty, cultural-moral boundary work, and reputational governance. In particular, DT was frequently conflated with paranormal tourism, a framing that shifted institutional attention toward questions of appropriateness and destination image and constrained its recognition as a legitimate tourism category. The study further demonstrates that difficult heritage becomes institutionally visible within tourism only when it can be framed as educationally meaningful, culturally legitimate, and compatible with broader destination narratives. By shifting analytical attention from tourist demand to institutional governance, the paper contributes to DT scholarship by conceptualizing dark tourism not as a fixed category of sites or experiences, but as an institutional construct produced through framing, legitimacy filtering, and reputational management. The study also adds a non-Western perspective to DT research by showing how religion, collective memory, and cultural sensitivity shape the governance and public representation of difficult heritage in a culturally plural tourism context.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Dark tourism (DT), commonly understood as travel to sites associated with death, suffering, or trauma, has become an established area of tourism scholarship over the past three decades (Foley & Lennon, 1996; Seaton, 2009; Stone, 2012). Existing research has focused predominantly on visitor motivations, site typologies, interpretation, emotional engagement, and memorial consumption. Recent reviews confirm that the field remains heavily oriented toward tourists and sites, with comparatively little attention to the institutional processes by which difficult heritage is recognized, legitimized, or excluded within formal tourism governance (Mora Forero et al., 2023).

At the same time, DT remains conceptually unstable. Recent scholarship has highlighted persistent ambiguity and overlap between DT, thanatourism, ghost tourism, and related categories, underscoring unresolved definitional boundaries within the field (Rasool et al., 2025). Beyond its academic implications, this instability has institutional consequences, as tourism authorities need to define what counts as DT before they can recognize, frame, and govern it within official tourism agendas.

DT is often understood as engagement with places and histories associated with death, trauma, and suffering, shaping how difficult pasts are encountered and interpreted in the present (Stone, 2006; Sharpley, 2009). This becomes especially significant in contexts where heritage is politically, morally, or

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culturally sensitive. Sites associated with conflict, death, and trauma do not automatically become tourism products; their visibility depends on whether they can be framed as meaningful, legitimate, and manageable within prevailing policy priorities and destination narratives. Rather than treating DT as a fixed category of sites or visitor experiences, this paper conceptualizes it as an institutional construct produced through framing, legitimacy filtering, and reputational governance. From this perspective, difficult heritage becomes tourism-policy visible only when it is rendered culturally acceptable, politically manageable, and compatible with broader destination narratives. In this respect, the study draws on institutional perspectives on legitimacy to examine how tourism authorities determine which forms of difficult heritage become publicly acceptable and policy-relevant within tourism governance systems.

Malaysia offers an instructive setting for exploration of these dynamics. The country contains numerous sites associated with colonialism, war, imprisonment, and collective suffering, yet such places remain marginal to formal tourism promotion. They are often framed as isolated heritage attractions or informally accepted as paranormal curiosities rather than as part of a coherent commemorative landscape. This relative institutional hesitancy is analytically significant in a culturally plural, Muslim-majority context, where representations of death, memory, and suffering are shaped by intersecting moral, religious, and political sensitivities.

Although DT scholarship in Malaysia has expanded in recent years, it has focused primarily on tourists' motivations, perceptions, behavioral intentions, and development potential (e.g., Polus et al., 2016; Ramlee et al., 2018; Bakar et al., 2020; Gani et al., 2021; Sani et al., 2023). Far less is known about how tourism authorities define, differentiate, and evaluate DT within national and state-level tourism agendas. This gap is consequential, as institutional stakeholders play a central role in determining which forms of heritage are recognized, reframed, softened, or excluded from policy visibility.

To address this gap, this study explores how tourism authorities at the federal, state, and regional levels conceptualize DT and assess its place within Malaysia's tourism governance landscape. Drawing on 28 semi-structured interviews, the paper offers one of the first empirical examinations of how tourism authorities in Malaysia understand and assess DT as a tourism governance issue. The paper argues that DT remains institutionally marginal not because relevant sites are absent, but because difficult heritage must first pass through processes of institutional legitimation that render it conceptually intelligible, morally acceptable, and reputationally manageable within official tourism discourse. In doing so, the study shifts analytical attention from tourist consumption to the governance processes through which difficult heritage is selectively recognized, moderated, and incorporated into tourism systems. It contributes to DT scholarship by demonstrating that institutional recognition is not a neutral response to site existence but a governance process shaped by discursive legibility, moral filtering, and reputational calibration. The study therefore extends existing understandings of DT beyond site typologies and visitor experience by conceptualizing DT as an institutional outcome shaped by governance practices of framing, legitimacy, and public representation within culturally sensitive tourism contexts.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite growing academic engagement with dark tourism (DT) over the past three decades, much of the literature remains centered on visitor motivations, emotional responses, and site typologies (Stone, 2006; Biran et al., 2011; Kang et al., 2012). Although this work has significantly advanced understanding of tourist behavior and the consumption of traumatic heritage, less attention has been paid to the institutional conditions under which such heritage is recognized, framed, and incorporated into tourism. In other words, while scholars have examined why visitors engage with dark sites and how they are experienced, fewer studies have addressed how these places come to be officially acknowledged, interpreted, and legitimized within tourism systems. This omission is particularly evident in culturally complex, non-Western contexts such as Malaysia, where the public representation of death and suffering may be shaped by distinct cultural, religious, and political considerations (Masanti, 2016; Tan & Lim, 2018).

In the Malaysian context, existing studies identify sites associated with colonialism, war, imprisonment, and collective suffering, yet their integration into formal tourism narratives remains limited (Braithwaite & Lee, 2006; Mohd Zahari et al., 2016; Tan & Lim, 2018). Rather than being consistently positioned as commemorative or educational heritage, such sites often occupy an ambiguous place in national tourism discourse. This suggests that DT's limited visibility in Malaysia reflects broader questions of legitimacy, framing, and institutional positioning. Accordingly, understanding DT in Malaysia requires moving beyond site inventories and visitor interest to examine how tourism institutions define, prioritize, and represent difficult heritage.

2.1 Dark Tourism, Governance, and Legitimacy

Dark tourism (DT) scholarship has expanded significantly since the 1990s, shifting from definitional and typological debates to broader concerns with commodification, authenticity, and political meaning (Foley & Lennon, 1996; Seaton, 1996; Stone, 2006; Sharpley, 2009). Much of the earlier literature focused on visitors, site typologies, and the consumption of traumatic heritage, particularly in Western contexts (Light, 2017). While this work remains foundational, it offers only a partial account of how dark heritage becomes visible within tourism. Sites associated with death, suffering, or conflict do not automatically become tourism products. Their visibility depends on whether institutions recognize them, whether narratives frame them, and whether the public considers them legitimate. This shifts analytical attention from demand-side questions about visitor consumption to supply-side processes of recognition, categorization, and governance.

Scholarship has increasingly focused on the governance of DT, particularly the institutional and political processes by which difficult heritage is recognized, framed, and managed (Heidelberg, 2015; Lischer, 2019). This shift highlights how institutional actors shape what is remembered, how it is interpreted, and which meanings can circulate publicly. Lischer (2019) argues that memorial and atrocity sites are embedded within wider politics of memory, in which state and institutional actors influence how trauma is narrated and understood. Ashworth (2004) similarly observes that heritage is a selective process, shaped as much by present priorities as by the past itself. What is preserved, promoted, or marginalized therefore reflects historical significance alongside contemporary political, cultural, and institutional priorities.

Tourism authorities, heritage agencies, and related institutions play a central role in determining whether difficult heritage can be incorporated into formal tourism discourse (Heidelberg, 2015). Timothy & Nyaupane (2009) note that heritage tourism development depends on coordinated governance among state bodies, local institutions, and cultural actors. When such coordination is limited, fragmented, or politically sensitive, sites associated with trauma may remain weakly institutionalized or ambiguously positioned. This is particularly relevant when difficult heritage intersects with contested memory, religious sensitivity, or concerns about destination image.

Global examples clearly illustrate these dynamics. Some sites, such as Auschwitz-Birkenau, are embedded in highly formalized commemorative and educational frameworks, while others, such as Alcatraz, have been incorporated into more commercial tourism circuits (Lennon & Foley, 2000; Ryan & Kohli, 2006). In each case, institutional framing determines whether the site is understood primarily as a memorial, educational resource, heritage attraction, or entertainment space. As Stone (2012) argues, DT sites function as moral arenas where memory, identity, and public meaning are negotiated. The significance of such sites therefore lies not only in the events they commemorate but also in how they are publicly interpreted and socially authorized.

These dynamics also raise important ethical questions. Sharpley (2009) highlights the tension between remembrance and commodification, especially when sites of suffering are integrated into tourism economies. Lischer (2019) further warns that dominant interpretive narratives may not align with local memory, community priorities, or the complexity of historical experience. Questions of narrative authority therefore remain central to the field, including who tells the story, for whom, and under what institutional or cultural constraints.

Media and popular discourse also shape representation. Blom (2000) shows that tourism imaginaries are constructed through representational framing, which can privilege spectacle, novelty, or affect over historical depth. In settings where institutional interpretive strategies are limited or inconsistent, public understandings of dark sites may be shaped by sensational or entertainment-oriented narratives. In the Malaysian context, some sites associated with difficult heritage, particularly the Penang War Museum, have circulated through both wartime and paranormal framings. Originally built as a British military fortress, the site is also widely known as Bukit Hantu ("Ghost Hill") and has been promoted through haunted-site narratives, illustrating how supernatural framings may complicate its interpretation as difficult heritage (Tan & Lim, 2018). Such framings may increase visibility, but they can also displace historical interpretation and weaken the commemorative or educational legitimacy of these places within formal tourism discourse.

These concerns are especially important in non-Western contexts. Yoshida et al. (2016) warn that Eurocentric DT frameworks cannot be applied across settings without attention to local cultural values and moral worlds. In many Asian contexts, representations of death, trauma, and memory are shaped by religion, collective identity, and social norms (Masanti, 2016; Bhati et al., 2021). This perspective is particularly relevant to the Malaysian context, where questions surrounding difficult heritage remain closely connected to broader issues of legitimacy, appropriateness, and public representation (Masanti, 2016; Mohd Zahari et al., 2016). Taken together, these debates highlight the need to understand DT as an institutional and cultural process through which difficult heritage is made publicly visible and legitimate within tourism, extending beyond its conventional framing as a visitor experience.

2.2 Malaysian Dark Tourism in Regional Context

Across Southeast Asia, difficult heritage has been integrated into tourism unevenly. In Vietnam, sites such as the Cu Chi Tunnels have become visible within commemorative, interpretive, and heritage-oriented tourism narratives (Henderson, 2000). Cambodia likewise shows how sites of trauma may be incorporated into public heritage and tourism discourse (Lennon, 2009). Elsewhere in Asia, sites such as Reflections at Bukit Chandu in Singapore and memorial landscapes in Taiwan illustrate how traumatic pasts may be publicly curated without relying on overt spectacle (Muzaini & Yeoh, 2005; Chang, 2014; Caicedo, 2024). These regional cases suggest that the tourism visibility of difficult heritage depends not only on the presence of sites but also on how institutions frame them and culturally position them.

In this broader context, research in Southeast Asia has largely focused on visitor motivations, emotional responses, and behavioral intentions (Bhati et al., 2021; Tim et al., 2022). Existing work has highlighted educational interest, historical curiosity, and identity-related engagement, including in studies of culturally embedded sites such as Jalan Ampang Muslim Cemetery (Mohamed Afla et al., 2023). Chang's (2014) study of Hsiaolin Village Memorial Park similarly points to cognitive, affective, and spiritual forms of visitor engagement. However, while foundational DT scholarship has provided important conceptual grounding (Foley & Lennon, 1996; Stone, 2006), research in the region, particularly in Malaysia, has paid comparatively little attention to institutional governance, policy positioning, and questions of public legitimacy (Masanti, 2016; Mohd Zahari et al., 2016; Sani et al., 2023). Existing work therefore offers more insight into visitor engagement with difficult heritage than into how such heritage becomes institutionally recognized and positioned within tourism.

Malaysia is a particularly relevant case within this regional pattern. The literature identifies a range of dark tourism (DT) sites, including Jerejak Island, Sandakan Memorial Park, Bidong Island, the Penang War Museum, Jalan Ampang Muslim Cemetery, and surviving British pillboxes in Kelantan (Ibrahim & Chai, 2008; Tan & Lim, 2018; Hashim et al., 2021; Mohamed Afla et al., 2023; Adnan et al., 2023). Yet scholarship consistently points to weak or inconsistent institutional integration of these sites within Malaysia's tourism landscape (Mohd Zahari et al., 2016; Ahmat et al., 2021; Sani et al., 2023). Although tourism policy has long emphasized diversification and heritage development, dark heritage remains peripheral to destination strategy and branding, despite earlier recognition of its niche economic potential (Bhuiyan et al., 2013; Tourism Malaysia, 2019; Mohd Zahari et al., 2016). At the site level, studies repeatedly note limited infrastructure, weak interpretation, inconsistent promotion, and fragmented institutional support (Ibrahim & Chai, 2008; Hashim et al., 2021; Mahbob et al., 2013). Existing scholarship suggests that DT's marginal position within Malaysia's tourism landscape reflects broader institutional and representational challenges beyond the mere availability of relevant sites (Mohd Zahari et al., 2016; Ahmat et al., 2021; Sani et al., 2023).

This unevenness is not only institutional but also representational. Malaysian scholarship suggests that sites associated with war, death, and tragedy are often approached cautiously because they intersect with grief, reverence, cultural beliefs, and politically sensitive histories (Kheng, 2007; Masanti, 2016). Kheng (2007, p. 47) argues that post-war memory in Malaysia has often been managed to "exorcise the ghosts of the war," particularly when it touches on occupation-era violence and difficult inter-ethnic histories. Related studies also highlight sensitivity surrounding death and mourning, concerns about appropriateness in a multi-religious context, and caution toward tourism forms that may appear commercially exploitative or misaligned with Malaysia's preferred destination image (Masanti, 2016; Sani et al., 2023). This points to a broader constraint in the Malaysian context, where the visibility of difficult heritage is shaped by both institutional underdevelopment and wider moral, cultural, and political sensitivities surrounding public representation.

Nevertheless, most Malaysian DT research has focused on visitor interest, development potential, behavioral intention, or site-specific experience (Polus et al., 2016; Ramlee et al., 2018; Ahmat et al., 2021; Bhati et al., 2021; Tim et al., 2022). As a result, scholars have paid limited attention to how tourism institutions conceptualize DT, distinguish it from related categories, or assess its legitimacy within policy and promotional practice.

Despite growing attention to governance and legitimacy in DT scholarship, little research has explicitly drawn on institutional perspectives to examine how tourism authorities determine which forms of difficult heritage become recognizable, acceptable, and governable within official tourism systems. Institutional legitimacy offers a useful lens because it highlights how organizational actors construct acceptable categories, regulate public representation, and authorize particular forms of heritage within policy and tourism discourse (Suchman, 1995; Scott, 2013). From this perspective, DT is not a fixed category of sites but an institutional outcome shaped by framing and legitimation processes.

A key gap remains in understanding how tourism authorities in Malaysia conceptualize DT and how that shapes its place within the broader tourism landscape. Institutional recognition determines whether difficult heritage is treated as a legitimate component of tourism development, as reflected in planning priorities, promotional strategies, funding support, and interpretive practice. Without clear official positioning, tourism actors may be uncertain about how to frame and incorporate such sites into tourism products. An institutional perspective is therefore essential to understanding how DT is authorized, structured, and either integrated or marginalized within Malaysia's tourism system.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory design within an interpretivist paradigm to examine how tourism authorities in Malaysia understand, classify, and evaluate dark tourism (DT). Given the study's focus on institutional meaning-making and governance practice, a qualitative approach was appropriate for exploring how DT is interpreted, framed, and positioned within official tourism contexts. The study adopted an interpretivist orientation because it is concerned not with whether DT exists as a fixed or objective category, but with how institutional actors socially construct and negotiate it within specific organizational and cultural settings (Alharahsheh, 2020). The design was therefore suited to examining how policy-relevant meanings surrounding DT are produced and interpreted within tourism governance.

A purposive, criterion-based sampling strategy targeted key participants in decision-making roles within tourism governance structures. All tourism authority offices across Malaysia's states and federal territories were invited to participate, and interviews were conducted with those institutions and representatives who agreed to take part. A total of 28 in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives from state-level Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC) offices, state tourism authorities, regional Tourism Malaysia offices, and Tourism Malaysia headquarters. Participants held decision-making and managerial roles across tourism planning, destination management, communication, and heritage-related functions, and were selected based on their direct involvement in these areas.

The sample was designed to capture variation across institutional levels and territorial contexts, enabling the analysis to reflect both shared governance logics and place-specific differences in how difficult heritage is understood and managed.

Data were collected through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews, allowing participants to elaborate on context-specific issues while maintaining consistency across key thematic areas. Interview prompts focused on participants' understandings of DT, site examples, perceived opportunities and constraints, governance considerations, and views on destination image, cultural sensitivity, and policy relevance. Interviews were audio-recorded with verbal consent, transcribed verbatim, anonymized, and securely deleted after transcription. Interview duration ranged from 45 to 60 minutes.

Interview data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis, drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework and their subsequent conceptualization of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The analysis began with repeated readings of the transcripts to build familiarity with the data, followed by inductive coding. Codes derived from participants' accounts were compared across interviews to identify recurring patterns, which were then grouped into broader categories and themes (Naeem et al., 2023). In line with Braun and Clarke (2021), themes were interpretive constructions generated by the researcher and refined iteratively throughout the analysis.

NVivo 15 was used primarily for data organization and retrieval, while theme development remained researcher-led and interpretive. Consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, the researcher acknowledged their interpretive role in shaping thematic development throughout, with attention to ambiguity, variation, and divergent institutional perspectives.

The researcher considered positionality throughout data collection and analysis. The researcher approached the study as a PhD researcher exploring dark tourism and difficult heritage, and as a non-Malaysian researcher with no professional affiliation to the tourism authorities included in the study. This position provided some distance from institutional routines and assumptions within the Malaysian tourism sector, while also requiring careful attention to locally specific cultural, religious,

and political meanings. During coding and theme development, reflexive attention was given to the risk of interpreting participants' accounts through pre-existing academic understandings of dark tourism or through an external cultural lens. Coding therefore remained attentive to participants' own terminology, explanations, and divergent perspectives, particularly where dark tourism intersected with heritage, religion, paranormal associations, cultural sensitivity, and destination image.

Table 1 presents the institutional composition of the interview sample, including participating offices, governance levels, and the distribution of participants across these categories.

Ethical protocols for low-risk qualitative research were followed throughout. Participants were informed of the study's aims and their right to decline participation or withdraw at any time. Because participants held official roles and the topic involved potentially sensitive institutional views, the study omitted written consent forms to reduce identification risks; instead, verbal informed consent was obtained in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines. Formal institutional approval was granted by MOTAC and TM, facilitating access to relevant state and regional offices. To preserve anonymity, each interviewee was assigned a coded identifier (e.g., A-1, A-13), which is used throughout the findings.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents findings from 28 semi-structured interviews with representatives of MOTAC state tourism offices, state tourism authorities, TM regional branches, and TM headquarters. It explores how Malaysia's tourism authorities understand dark tourism (DT) and assess its legitimacy, development potential, and place within the national tourism landscape.

The findings indicate that difficult heritage becomes visible in tourism governance only when it passes through three interrelated institutional filters: conceptual legibility, cultural legitimacy, and reputational manageability. These filters shape how sites are classified, justified, and publicly positioned in official tourism discourse. Accordingly, the analysis is organized around three linked processes: discursive uncertainty, cultural-moral boundary work, and reputational governance.

4.1 Discursive Uncertainty

To establish a shared conceptual baseline, participants were asked to define "dark tourism" (DT). Responses revealed fragmented and uneven institutional understandings among the 28 tourism authority representatives. Thirteen participants (46.4%) offered definitions broadly aligned with academic interpretations, referring to sites of tragedy, conflict, or memorialization. Others either reported unfamiliarity with the term (35.7%) or associated it primarily with paranormal or ghost-related activities (17.8%). Rather than functioning as a stable institutional category, DT appeared unevenly understood and open to competing interpretations. This aligns with the wider literature, which has repeatedly noted the conceptual elasticity and definitional indeterminacy of DT as a field of inquiry (Stone, 2006; Light, 2017).

Reactions to the term itself revealed that the difficulty extended beyond definition to institutional concerns. Several participants viewed the word "dark" as carrying morally uncomfortable or publicly problematic connotations. As participant A-6 put it, "The word 'dark' usually comes with bad, evil, horrible… terms that are not really good." This hesitation aligns with longstanding critiques of "dark tourism" as a morally coded and conceptually unstable label, dependent on socially constructed judgments rather than any intrinsic quality of sites (Stone, 2006; Sharpley & Stone, 2009; Seaton, 2009; Jamal & Lelo, 2010).

For state-level actors in particular, the category appeared difficult to mobilize without clear policy sanction, especially when it might be perceived as politically sensitive or misaligned with preferred destination narratives. The unease surrounding the term therefore reflects broader institutional uncertainty about the recognition and governance of difficult heritage.

Some officials proposed alternative labels such as "heritage," "memorial," or "remembrance tourism," which seemed to fit more comfortably within formal tourism discourse and Malaysia's established destination image, typically associated with ecotourism, gastronomy, and family-oriented attractions. As participant A-5 explained, this is already evident in practice: "We do not promote those sites as dark… we promote them as heritage places. To me it's just common tourism." Such relabelling places difficult heritage within more administratively familiar and publicly acceptable categories. In this sense, naming functions as a governance mechanism that

Table 1. Overview of participating institutions and interview sample

Institutional category	Governance level	Participating offices	Number of participants
Tourism Malaysia Headquarters	Federal	Putrajaya	1
Tourism Malaysia Regional Offices	Regional	Central Region (Kuala Lumpur); Northern Region (Georgetown); East Region (Kuantan); South Region (Johor Bahru); Sabah/Labuan (Kota Kinabalu); Sarawak (Kuching)	6
State-level MOTAC Offices	State	Selangor, Perak, Penang, Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan, Terengganu, Pahang, Johor, Sabah, Sarawak	11
State Tourism Authorities	State	Johor Tourism; Sabah Tourism Board; Tourism Melaka; Tourism Perak; Negeri Sembilan Tourism Board; Tourism Terengganu; Labuan Corporation – Department of Tourism, Culture and Arts; Sarawak Tourism Board; Putrajaya Corporation (PPJ) – Putrajaya Tourism; Tourism Pahang	10
		Total	**28**

Note: Participants occupied predominantly senior and managerial positions: 14 Directors, 5 Assistant Directors, 1 Chief Executive Officer, 1 Chief Operating Officer, 4 Tourism Officers, 1 Head of Division, 1 Senior Manager, and 1 Assistant Manager. Participant roles are reported in aggregate and are not linked to specific institutions to preserve confidentiality.

renders certain pasts legible while others are softened or obscured. This aligns with broader arguments that difficult pasts are selectively framed by present-day priorities and that the label "dark tourism" itself may be analytically and publicly problematic (Ashworth, 2004; Sharpley & Stone, 2009; Bowman & Pezzullo, 2009).

Wider representational contexts further reinforce this discursive instability. Across the interviews, terms such as "ghost," "haunted," "sensitive," "respect," and "politics" recurred in discussions of potential DT sites, suggesting that participants interpreted these places through overlapping supernatural, moral, cultural, and political frames. As participant A-3 explained, "In Malaysia wherever there is a dead body it's automatically the ghost involved in the story." This aligns with broader scholarship showing that meanings at sites associated with death are culturally produced rather than fixed and that DT often overlaps with ghost and related forms of death tourism (Dimache & Qiu, 2024; Rasool et al., 2025). In the Malaysian context, similar tendencies also appear in local media and popular representations, which often foreground eeriness or paranormal appeal. Institutional ambiguity therefore extends beyond tourism agencies themselves and is shaped by wider representational environments that complicate the stabilization of such sites as formal heritage (Mora Forero et al., 2023).

Although DT is not formally embedded in Malaysia's tourism strategy, all participants identified numerous sites broadly compatible with it, including war heritage sites, colonial-era structures, memorial landscapes, and sites associated with tragedy. Recognition, however, remains uneven, as such places are typically absorbed into broader heritage frameworks that soften explicit engagement with trauma. DT's marginality therefore appears to reflect the absence of a shared interpretive framework that would allow such sites to be coherently positioned. This aligns with Malaysian scholarship, which notes that, despite its acknowledged potential, DT remains only weakly integrated into mainstream tourism planning and destination development (Mohd Zahari et al., 2016; Ahmat et al., 2021; Sani et al., 2023).

Despite this ambiguity, support for more explicit engagement with DT was widespread across the sample. All participants expressed some support for developing DT more explicitly, with many viewing it as a way to preserve national heritage, strengthen historical awareness, and broaden the tourism offering. Only two responses were conditional, reflecting concerns about implementation and cultural framing rather than outright opposition. Participant A-20 highlighted DT's educational dimension, stating that "the most important thing is maybe education and learning while visiting those sites." Framing DT through education and historical interpretation appears to offer a more acceptable basis for institutional engagement than positioning such sites primarily through morbidity or spectacle (Biran et al., 2011; Kang et al., 2012).

Interview examples illustrate how this plays out in practice. Kellie's Castle, for instance, is often discussed in paranormal terms rather than through historical interpretation, while sites such as the Sandakan–Ranau Death March Trail and Bidong Island are recognized as historically significant yet remain unevenly positioned within tourism discourse. Their visibility appears to depend not only on historical significance but also on the narrative forms through which they are made legible within tourism (Dimache & Qiu, 2024). Institutional visibility therefore depends on whether a site can be stabilized within a recognizable and policy-compatible narrative (Heidelberg, 2015).

Discursive uncertainty therefore operates as an institutional condition rather than a purely semantic issue. DT remains fluid, context-dependent, and open to competing interpretations across institutional and public domains. In particular, conflating dark tourism with paranormal or ghost tourism can shift institutional evaluation away from the political and historical significance of difficult heritage and toward questions of taste, appropriateness, and destination image. This reframing may give institutions a less politically explicit basis for marginalizing or declining such sites by recasting contested history as matters of taste, appropriateness, or destination fit. Difficult heritage may therefore be acknowledged in practice while remaining only weakly consolidated within policy discourse. Discursive uncertainty thus functions as a governance filter through which difficult heritage must first be rendered conceptually legible before it can be formally recognized and promoted.

4.2 Cultural-Moral Boundary Work

Beyond questions of terminology, interview data indicate that tourism authorities assess dark tourism (DT) sites through culturally embedded judgments about propriety, dignity, and public acceptability. Participant A-4 described this as "a delicate balance between respectful remembrance and exploitation." Sites associated with death, tragedy, or spiritual disturbance are therefore evaluated not only for tourism potential, but also for whether they can be publicly interpreted without violating local moral and cultural boundaries. Institutional acceptance depends on how difficult heritage can be rendered narratable and institutionally defensible, reflecting broader tensions between remembrance and commodification in which institutional actors regulate acceptable forms of public remembrance and historical interpretation (Sharpley, 2009; Logan & Reeves, 2011; Dimache & Qiu, 2024; Mohanty et al., 2026).

This is reflected in participants' repeated emphasis on "respect," "sensitivity," and the appropriate treatment of the dead. As participant A-22 noted, "Some families will feel offended… they might say that we shouldn't have brought the memories like that because they are the families of the victims." In Malaysia's multireligious context, representations of death intersect with Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, and Chinese commemorative traditions, making public interpretation inseparable from moral acceptability (Masanti, 2016; Tay, 2015; Yoshida et al., 2016). Boundary work was also evident in efforts to separate historical interpretation from religious sensitivity, as reflected in participant A-28's view that "History is one thing… and religion is religion." This illustrates how institutional actors distinguish between historically grounded narratives and those perceived as culturally or religiously inappropriate.

Interview data further indicate that authorities distinguish between forms of difficult heritage that can be framed as respectful remembrance and those that risk being interpreted as exploitative, sensational, or taboo. Across the interviews, participants expressed a preference for educational and commemorative approaches to DT, while entertainment-oriented or affect-driven interpretations were generally viewed

as less institutionally appropriate. As participant A-6 emphasized, "Going to the place of death doesn't necessarily mean going to hunt the ghost. Most of people go to give respect to the deceased." Institutional acceptance increases when sites are anchored in wartime memory, colonial history, resilience, or heritage learning, rather than in paranormal consumption or affective thrills. As participant A-4 observed, "Dark tourism often highlights stories of resilience, courage, and cultural identity during challenging times." Such positioning aligns with arguments that DT is legitimized through reflection, education, and historical engagement rather than morbid consumption (Biran et al., 2011; Kang et al., 2012).

As participant A-24 noted, "We study history in schools, so we can put this under educational tourism and we can get them to learn, like on-site learning about the history. Why not?" Educational framing therefore aligns visitation with learning, civic value, and heritage transmission rather than spectacle (Mahbob et al., 2013; Chang, 2014).

When asked to identify countries they considered to have developed DT effectively, participants most often cited Japan, Vietnam, and Germany. These cases were valued for their disciplined framing of death and tragedy through remembrance, education, historical significance, and national reflection. Cultural-moral boundary work therefore shapes not only which sites are promoted but also which pasts become narratable within tourism governance, consistent with arguments that difficult heritage is selectively framed within broader narratives of identity and legitimacy (Ashworth, 2004; Stone, 2012).

The interviews also highlight important subnational variation in how these boundaries are negotiated. Interview accounts highlighted Sabah, Perlis, and Terengganu as contexts where spiritual concerns, community sensitivities, and local political-cultural norms may require particularly careful approaches to difficult heritage. This aligns with Masanti's (2016) analysis of the Sandakan–Ranau Death March, in which reverence for the dead and discomfort with commodification shaped engagement. Acceptance is therefore uneven, shaped by local ethical, spiritual, and political expectations (Dimache & Qiu, 2024). As participant A-4 remarked, "we need to find our own way," underscoring the importance of contextual calibration over policy transfer.

The interviews indicate that acceptance of DT in Malaysia depends less on sites' inherent characteristics than on whether they can be institutionally framed, publicly interpreted, and integrated into broader heritage and tourism structures without moral dissonance. Local participation was also identified as an important mechanism for making difficult heritage socially and politically acceptable, particularly where state involvement remains cautious. This reflects broader Malaysian tourism governance dynamics, characterized by coordination across actors and administrative scales (Zulkefli et al., 2017).

Acceptance is also closely tied to memory and identity, as participant A-22 observed, "If we don't do that, the younger generations will end up forgetting about the past… Without the history, we don't really know who we are… It's our history, it's our identity." Difficult heritage therefore functions as both a tourism product and a medium through which collective memory and identity are negotiated and sustained (Stone, 2012; Muzaini & Yeoh, 2005; Dimache & Qiu, 2024).

At the same time, many potentially significant sites remain underdeveloped, weakly interpreted, or only partially recognized in official tourism discourse. This pattern is evident in recent work on Bidong Island, where historically sensitive heritage has tourism value yet remains constrained by limited development and interpretive challenges (Adnan et al., 2023). As participant A-11 noted, "If we promote those places that means that we maintain them and will end up preserving them. We need to get those youngsters to preserve the traditions, to continue those traditions." Tourism is therefore viewed as both a potential risk and a mechanism for preservation, visibility, and intergenerational continuity.

Overall, cultural-moral boundary work determines whether difficult heritage can be rendered publicly acceptable and institutionally supportable. Sites become more governable when framed through remembrance, education, and identity rather than as taboo or spectacle. However, moral acceptability alone is insufficient, as culturally defensible sites must still align with broader destination and policy priorities.

4.3 Reputational Governance

Interview data suggest that even when tourism authorities recognize the historical and interpretive value of dark tourism (DT), they remain attentive to how such sites intersect with destination image, public representation, and institutional legitimacy. DT in Malaysia is therefore shaped by reputational considerations that influence how difficult heritage is made visible, framed, and institutionally normalized. By reputational governance, this study refers to authorities regulating the visibility, interpretation, and narrative positioning of difficult heritage to maintain destination image and institutional credibility. Interview accounts suggested greater institutional support for difficult heritage when framed through educational, commemorative, or historically meaningful narratives aligned with broader tourism priorities, while sites perceived as overly negative, sensational, or politically sensitive tended to be approached more cautiously. This reflects broader arguments that difficult heritage is governed through selective narrative framing and publicly acceptable forms of remembrance (Ashworth, 2004; Logan & Reeves, 2011; Dimache & Qiu, 2024).

This is evident in participants' descriptions of DT as positioned outside Malaysia's dominant tourism identity, which remains strongly associated with ecotourism, gastronomy, family-oriented attractions, and celebratory heritage. Against this backdrop, sites associated with trauma, conflict, or death are more likely to be selectively promoted, narratively moderated, or absorbed into less contentious heritage categories. As a result, DT-relevant sites remain difficult to integrate into a destination narrative expected to be broadly positive and publicly acceptable. This reflects broader dynamics in which difficult heritage is selectively incorporated into tourism narratives through interpretive framing and identity management (Stone, 2012; Dimache & Qiu, 2024). Malaysian scholarship likewise shows that difficult heritage remains weakly integrated into mainstream tourism branding (Bhuiyan et al., 2013; Mohd Zahari et al., 2016).

This pattern is visible in the uneven positioning of specific sites. Kellie's Castle, for example, is often framed by paranormal intrigue rather than sustained historical interpretation, while the Sandakan–Ranau Death March Trail and Bidong Island remain relatively marginal despite their

historical significance (Adnan et al., 2023). Similarly, sites in Penang, such as Fort Cornwallis and the Protestant Cemetery, are more often presented as general heritage attractions than as explicitly difficult or dark heritage. These examples suggest that visibility depends as much on alignment with institutionally acceptable tourism narratives as on site significance (Heidelberg, 2015; Ahmat et al., 2021).

Some participants also tied this cautious positioning to broader policy considerations. Many described DT as politically sensitive and institutionally peripheral, particularly in federal decision-making. For instance, participant A-2 stated, "Higher authorities are often stopping the ideas by saying that DT will not leave a good image of Malaysia." This caution was also evident in accounts of active narrative filtering. In relation to this, participant A-15 explained, "We need to think about preserving the king's image also… Even if there were some really bad stories, we can keep the surface of the story and hide the rest… We really keep and present the surface of the stories; we don't want to expose everything." This aligns with scholarship showing that difficult heritage is often selectively narrated to protect national image, institutional legitimacy, and political cohesion (Logan & Reeves, 2011). This selective visibility was also linked to institutional constraints, with participant A-15 further noting that "Even if sometimes we don't really agree with that, but we need to comply with the rules and guidelines," indicating that reputational governance is shaped by hierarchy, procedural compliance, and institutional risk aversion.

At the same time, reputational caution does not necessarily prevent development but instead shapes how difficult heritage is strategically repositioned within tourism discourse. Participants were generally more open to DT when it was framed through education, remembrance, or resilience. International examples, including Hiroshima, Tuol Sleng, and the Cu Chi Tunnels, were cited as models for presenting painful histories without generating stigma. As participant A-1 noted, "We need more than just a museum with text panels… Malaysia could do the same with our war sites," while participant A-21 emphasized "learning from the past," reinforcing the role of pedagogical framing (Chang, 2014; Kang et al., 2012). Authorities also highlighted the importance of strategic reframing, with participant A-27 stating that "Even if it's negative, we need to do some rebranding…" Similarly, embedding DT within broader tourism products was viewed as a practical way to reduce sensitivity and broaden public appeal. As participant A-2 explained, "You need to mix a few categories into one package." These responses suggest that difficult heritage is selectively repositioned through tourism logics centered on education, thematic integration, and destination compatibility, consistent with recent arguments that dark heritage is made publicly viable through interpretive framing and institutional mediation (Dimache & Qiu, 2024; Mohanty et al., 2026).

However, such approaches are not considered directly transferable. Reputational governance appears shaped by local branding priorities, governance structures, and political and cultural sensitivities. Subnational variation further reinforces this pattern. In Johor, fragmented governance complicates positioning; in Terengganu, WWII-related sensitivities shape representation; and in Penang, dense heritage landscapes coexist with caution about associating tourism too closely with death. Governance therefore operates unevenly across contexts but consistently by calibrating narrative visibility and institutional risk management, supporting the argument that difficult heritage is negotiated across multiple scales rather than uniformly applied (Timothy & Nyaupane, 2009).

Digital platforms were identified as another important dimension of reputational governance. While some officials acknowledged the growing role of TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube in shaping public awareness, they also noted that uncontrolled circulation can detach sites from historical context and privilege spectacle over reflection. Coordinated digital storytelling was therefore seen as necessary for interpretive stewardship, ensuring that difficult heritage is encountered through educational, historically grounded frames. Digital communication thus becomes part of how difficult pasts are selectively mediated and publicly represented.

Overall, the findings suggest that Malaysia selectively incorporates DT into tourism governance, guided by reputational considerations. Authorities appear more willing to support sites that align with educational and commemorative narratives, while politically or culturally sensitive histories are cautiously framed or less publicly visible. This selective incorporation also aligns with broader patterns of historical sanitization, as participant A-2 observed, "in history syllabus is only the good part." Despite growing academic and site-level interest, translation into sustained policy and promotional integration remains limited (Bhuiyan et al., 2013; Mohd Zahari et al., 2016; Ahmat et al., 2021). At the same time, hybrid forms of development were viewed more positively, as participant A-12 noted: "it offers learning along with adventure… it can be enriching." These findings suggest that difficult heritage is more institutionally viable when strategically repositioned through forms that are educationally, culturally, and reputationally compatible.

The interview data suggest that DT becomes more institutionally viable when it is rendered conceptually legible, culturally legitimate, and reputationally manageable. Reputational governance therefore shapes the visibility of difficult heritage by influencing how the past is framed, interpreted, and integrated into destination strategy.

5. Conclusion and Implications

5.1 Conclusion

This study offers one of the first empirical accounts of how tourism authorities in Malaysia understand and evaluate dark tourism (DT) as a tourism governance issue. Drawing on interviews with institutional stakeholders across all states and federal territories, the findings show that DT remains marginal not because relevant sites are absent, but because difficult heritage is filtered through institutional judgments about meaning, appropriateness, and destination image.

Across the analysis, three interrelated processes were identified and developed: discursive uncertainty, cultural-moral boundary work, and reputational governance. Together, these findings show that difficult heritage is selectively recognized, softened, or marginalized depending on how it is named, morally assessed, and publicly positioned. Ultimately, DT in

Malaysia is best understood not as a fixed tourism category awaiting development, but as a contested field of heritage governance in which the visibility of difficult pasts depends on how institutions and other actors name, frame, and legitimize them.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

The study contributes to DT scholarship by shifting analytical focus from tourist consumption and site typologies to the institutional production of DT within governance systems. The findings demonstrate that DT is not a self-evident or naturally occurring category but one shaped by processes of classification, moral evaluation, and reputational negotiation. By foregrounding institutional legitimacy, the study extends existing understandings of how difficult heritage becomes selectively visible, narratable, and governable within tourism discourse. The findings also contribute a non-Western perspective to DT scholarship by illustrating how religion, collective memory, and cultural sensitivity shape governance practices in a culturally plural context such as Malaysia.

The findings further suggest that conflating dark tourism with paranormal tourism can itself function as a governance mechanism, reframing difficult heritage through questions of taste, appropriateness, and destination compatibility rather than solely through its historical or political significance.

5.3 Practical Implications

The findings suggest that engagement with difficult heritage in Malaysia is more institutionally viable when framed through education, remembrance, cultural sensitivity, and historically grounded interpretation rather than spectacle or novelty. Tourism authorities may therefore benefit from clearer interpretive strategies, stronger interagency coordination, and the involvement of local communities in framing and managing sensitive heritage sites. The findings also highlight the importance of coordinated digital storytelling and hybrid tourism packaging to present difficult heritage in educationally grounded and culturally acceptable forms.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

A key limitation of this study is limited access to federal-level policymakers, particularly at MOTAC headquarters, whose participation could not be secured during data collection. As a result, the findings reflect state and regional institutional and operational perspectives more strongly than federal policy direction. Future research should explore how national policy agendas and interagency coordination shape the governance of DT in Malaysia. It could also assess policymakers' tourism-related educational backgrounds, sectoral knowledge and expertise, identifying potential gaps that may affect informed decision-making about DT development. Another avenue for future research is the relationship between difficult heritage and community-based development in Malaysia, particularly in rural and remote contexts where historically significant sites are located.

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