

## OVERVIEW OF FLOATING MARKETS IN THE MEKONG DELTA AND CAI RANG FLOATING MARKET

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**Abstract.** *The floating market is a unique economic-cultural phenomenon formed during the long-term adaptation process of residents of the Mekong Delta to the natural conditions of the Mekong Delta. Not only is it a place for trading activities, but the floating market is also a living cultural space, reflecting the intimate relationship between people and rivers, between livelihoods and cultural identity. This article provides an overview survey of the floating market system in the Mekong Delta, highlighting the role and typical value of the Cai Rang floating market - a symbol of river civilization in the Southwest region, and a national intangible cultural heritage recognized by the State in 2016. Based on the synthesis of documentary sources, the article presents the formation process, operational characteristics, and role of floating markets in the socio-economic life of the region. Thereby, the study deeply analyzes the tangible and intangible values that the floating market brings, from architecture, vehicles, goods, to customs, language, cuisine, and lifestyle of merchant lake residents. Besides, the article also points out the strong changes of floating markets in the modern context, when the development of transportation infrastructure, urbanization, and tourism has changed the traditional function, structure, and livelihood of the community. A typical case is the Cai Rang floating market (Can Tho), which currently serves as both a major agricultural trading center and a prominent cultural tourism destination in the region. However, the process of commercialization and the decline of traditional trade pose many challenges for conservation. From there, the article proposes groups of solutions for sustainable development, emphasizing the central role of the local community in managing, preserving, and exploiting floating market tourism in the direction of "dynamic conservation" - both preserving heritage values and adapting to the changes of the times. Research results confirm that floating markets are not only a unique form of trade but also a unique cultural symbol of the Southwest region, with important significance in shaping regional identity, heritage education, and developing sustainable cultural and ecological tourism. Preserving and promoting the value of floating markets, especially the Cai Rang floating market, therefore not only contributes to local economic development, but also affirms the position of Vietnam's river cultural heritage in the process of international integration.*

**Keywords:** *Cai Rang Floating Market; Cultural Preservation, Floating Market; Intangible Cultural Heritage; Mekong Delta; River Culture; Sustainable Tourism.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Mekong Delta (Mekong Delta) - the southernmost land of To Quoc - is an area blessed by nature with an intricate system of rivers and canals, creating a unique ecological space that many researchers call "river civilization". On that land, people have formed a lifestyle, customs, livelihood, and culture closely linked to the river, in which the market is one of the most vivid manifestations of the process of cultural adaptation and creativity.

Since ancient times, when road traffic was not yet developed, residents of the Southwest region mainly moved and traded by boat and canoe, familiar means of daily life. The exchange

of goods on the river, over time, has developed into floating markets - places where agricultural products, fruits, seafood, and essential goods are concentrated. Not only does it have economic significance, but the market also reflects life.

It stimulates community cultural life, the spirit of open and generous trade, and the intimate relationships of river residents. Today, the connecting market has become a unique cultural and tourist feature of the Mekong Delta, attracting a large number of domestic and foreign tourists to visit and experience. Floating markets such as Cai Rang (Can Tho), Phung Hiep (Hau Giang), Nga Nam (Soc Trang), Long Xuyen (An Giang), or Cai Be (Tien Giang) are not only trading centers, but also symbols of regional cultural identity - a place to converge and spread the value of the river and river civilization. However, in the context of modernization and integration, many traditional markets are facing the risk of disappearing.

The development of road traffic, changes in production and consumption models, along with the trend of commercialization of tourism, have significantly changed the structure, functions, and space of floating markets. Some markets gradually lost their "real trading" nature and became tourist attractions, while the residents of the market faced many difficulties due to the change in birth order.

Faced with that reality, researching, understanding, and comprehensively evaluating the value of floating markets - especially the Cai Rang floating market, Can Tho city - is important. Cai Rang floating market is not only a large agricultural wholesale market in the Mekong Delta but also a national intangible cultural heritage (recognized in 2016), symbolizing the life, spirit, and identity of the people of the Southwest region.

Deep learning about the Cai Rang floating market will contribute to better identifying the relationship between culture and development, between conservation and tourism exploitation in the new context.

## **2. OVERVIEW OF FLOATING MARKETS IN THE MEKONG DELTA**

### *2.1 General overview of the Mekong Delta region*

Mekong Delta (Mekong Delta) is the largest delta in Vietnam, formed by the Mekong River system with a dense network of rivers and canals. This is a land with unique natural conditions - a river civilization - where people live and develop based on rich resources from rivers, canals, and fields. According to the General Statistics Office (2023), this area contributes more than 50% of rice production, 65% of seafood production, and about 70% of fruit production of the country. In that context, the method of trading and exchanging goods via waterways has become a typical cultural feature of residents of the Southwest region, and the connected market was born as a product associated with the natural environment and livelihood conditions.

### *2.2 Concept and Characteristics of Connecting Markets*

According to Huynh Bich Tram (2011), connected markets are a form of market held on the river, where people trade and exchange goods by boat, canoe, or other means, in which the main goods are agricultural products, fruits, consumer goods, and food. A special feature of the connected market is the "water market" method - there are no fixed booths, no boundaries between sellers and buyers, creating a flexible commercial space, closely linked to river life.

One of the most typical symbols of the floating market is the "beo tree" - a bamboo or bamboo pole placed in front of the boat, hanging the products that sellers want to introduce. This is a unique, simple but effective form of advertising, reflecting the creative thinking of river residents.

The connecting market is usually held early in the morning - a time when the weather is still cool, the river is calm, kitchen smoke and the sound of train engines mixed with the sound of sales calls create a vivid picture of the rhythm of life in the West.

### 2.3 The Role of Floating Markets in Socio-Economic Life

Before the development of the road transport system, the connecting market played a central role in the goods distribution network of the Mekong Delta. Large wholesale markets such as Cai Rang (Can Tho), Nga Nam (Soc Trang),

Phung Hiep (Hau Giang) and Long Xuyen (An Giang) used to be gathering and specialized points for goods for the entire region. According to Nguyen Quoc Nghi (2020), markets not only help promote trade but also form natural economic networks, in which residents are both producers and traders, contributing to the dynamism of the river economy.

Socially, the market is also a place for community cultural exchange, demonstrating the spirit of mutual support, sharing and behavioral identity "generosity - sincerity - respect for love" of Westerners. The connecting market space is therefore not only a "place to buy and sell" but also a "living cultural space", a place to preserve the collective memories of the community.

### 2.4 Bamboo Market in Tourism Landscape and Cultural Preservation

In the last two decades, floating markets have been recognized as a unique cultural tourism resource of the Mekong Delta region. "Western river tours" often take the floating market experience as the main highlight, attracting millions of domestic and foreign visitors each year. According to the Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism Can Tho (2024), Cai Rang connecting market alone has welcomed more than 700,000 visitors, accounting for more than 40% of the total number of tourists coming to Can Tho.

However, along with the process of modernization and change in livelihood structure, many traditional floating markets are facing the risk of extinction. The development of road traffic reduces the demand for trading on the river; Young people are less interested in the traditional boat trade; and increased water pollution due to poorly controlled tourism activities.

Dao Ngoc Canh & Nguyen Thi Ngoc Phuong (2016) believe that the preservation of floating markets needs to be approached in the direction of "dynamic conservation" - that is, both maintaining the trade-tourism function and adapting to modern development trends, with community transmission being the center of the transformation process.

### 2.5 Markets Connect Products in the Region

Currently, the River Delta region Cuu Long (Mekong Delta) has about 20 floating markets still operating, distributed along the Tien and Hau river systems and major canals. Although the scale and nature of activities have changed over time, floating markets still play an important role in socio-economic life and are a unique tourism and cultural resource of the region. Some typical baby markets can be mentioned as follows:

- *Phung Hiep Floating Market*

Phung Hiep connecting market, also known as Nga Bay market, was formed around 1915, at the intersection of seven major canals (Cai Con, Lai Hieu, Xeo Vong, Roof Beam, Xeo Dong, Ba Ngan, and canal Quan Lo - Phung Hiep).

During its heyday, Phung Hiep market was considered the largest connecting market in Indochina, gathering thousands of boats every day. Not only is it a trading center for agricultural products, but this is also a "loose market" distributing goods throughout the West and to Cambodia.

Currently, the scale of the market has shrunk, mainly serving tourists and intra-regional trade, but it still retains its historical-cultural value and is a symbol of (old) Hau Giang. The locality is re-planning the market space, combining route development "River tourism in Nga Bay – Phung Hiep".

- *Market Connecting Nga Nam*

Located in Nga Nam town, district Nga Nam, Soc Trang, this floating market is located at the intersection of five rivers (Ca Mau, Vinh Quoi, Long My, Thanh Tri, and Phung Hiep). This is one

of the oldest and strategically connected markets in the regional trade network. With a special location, Nga Nam market used to be a transit point for agricultural products, seafood, and goods from Bac Lieu, Ca Mau, and Hau Giang provinces.

Soc Trang and Can Tho: Currently, although the scale of trade has decreased, the market still maintains regular operations, especially on traditional festivals and Tet holidays, Kinh, Chinese, and Khmer. It is this cultural interference that has created the unique multicultural identity of the connecting market Nga Nam - the place where river cultural values converge and spread in the lower Mekong region.

- *Long Xuyen Floating Market*

Long Xuyen floating market is located along the banks of the Hau River, far from the city center. Long Xuyen is about 2 km. This is the largest connecting market in An Giang province, operating mainly within the locality, serving the needs of exchanging agricultural products, especially fruits and seafood. Different from Cai Rang or Phung Hiep market, which is commercial-tourist, connecting market Long Xuyen still retains its rustic, rustic identity and is less commercialized. Most people here live on boats, considering boats as "home" and "life on the river". It was that authenticity that made Long Xuyen an ideal destination for tourists who want to experience the original river culture.

- *Cai Be Floating Market*

Cai Be connecting market is located on the Tien River, the border between the three provinces Tien Giang, Vinh Long, and Ben Tre. This is a connecting market with a strategic position in the trade of agricultural products and fruits of the Eastern Mekong Delta region. Since the early 20th century, the Cai Be market has been famous as the "fruit basket" of the South, where specialties such as mangoes gather Hoa Loc durian, Ngu Hiep durian, and king orange or gathered.

Cai Lay... Today, the Cai Be market has been included in river eco-tourism routes, connecting with Dong Hoa Hiep Ancient Village, creating a series of attractive cultural-ecological tourism products, attracting a large number of domestic and foreign tourists.

### *Some Other Floating Markets*

In addition to the markets mentioned above, the region of the Mekong Delta also has many small and medium-sized connecting markets, such as:

- **Tra On Floating Market:** specializes in trading sweet potatoes, coconuts, and fruits, and is a traditional trading spot on the Hau River.
- **Vam Xang floating market:** combines the community tourism model, connecting with homestay services and agricultural experiences.
- **Ca Mau Connecting Market:** located on the Ganh Hao River, characterized by coastal areas, and is the intersection between river and river culture.
- **Nam Can floating market:** the commercial and logistics hub of Ca Mau province, and also a unique cultural place for residents of the southern region.

## **3. OVERVIEW OF CAI RANG FLOATING MARKET, CAN THO CITY**

### *3.1. History of Formation and Geographical Location*

The Cai Rang connecting market is located on the Cai River Rang, a branch of the Hau River, and belongs to Le Binh ward, Cai Rang district, Can Tho city. The market is about 6 km from the city center, about 30 minutes by train from Ninh Kieu wharf.

According to local history (Cai District People's Committee Rang, 2018), the Cai Rang market was formed in the early twentieth century, when traders from Phong Dien, Nga Bay, and Phung Hiep regions gathered here to trade rice, fruits, and agricultural products. The name "Cai Rang" is said to come from the word "Ca Rang" in Khmer, meaning a barge or large wharf. Thanks to its convenient location on the waterway connecting Can Tho - Soc Trang - Hau Giang - Vinh Long,

Cai Rang floating market quickly became the largest agricultural wholesale market in the Southwest region. Every day, hundreds of boats gather to buy villages, creating a mesmerizing scene typical of the river region.

### *3.2. Operational Characteristics and Cultural Space*

Cai Rang baby market opens early, from about 4-5 am, and is most crowded at 6-9 am. Large boats often act as wholesalers (residing at the market for many days), while small boats from other branches come to buy goods to distribute. Main goods include fruits, vegetables, agricultural products, breakfast foods, and typical Western products such as vermicelli noodles, pepper pots, and ghee coffee. Tourists can visit the small cruise ship ice market, observe and experience the vibrant trading atmosphere, enjoy floating cuisine, and learn about the lives of river residents. Not only is it a place for trade, Cai Rang floating market is also a unique cultural space, where social-economic-spiritual interactions take place, expressing the profound human values of river residents: Respect, trust, love, peace, respect nature, and value community.

### *3.3. The Role of Cai Rang Floating Market in Developing Tourism in Can Tho, A More Chic City to Attract Money and Entertainment*

Cai Rang is identified as a "key tourism product" and "a typical destination of Western tourism" (Can Tho Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism, 2022). Connecting Market is currently located in the tourist cluster "Floating Cho - Binh Thuy Ancient House - Tourist Village My Khanh", attracting more than 700,000 guests every year. Tourism activities surrounding the market include:

- Visit the market by boat, experience shopping, and have breakfast on the river;
- Learn about lake merchant life through the "Home-stay on the river" model;
- Attend the festival "Cai Floating Market Culture Teeth" held annually in July.

In 2016, the Cai Rang market was recognized by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism National intangible cultural heritage, marking a turning point in the work of preserving and promoting river cultural values.

However, along with the development of tourism, floating markets also face many challenges: the number of commercial boats decreased by nearly 50% compared to the 1990s; Many households changed jobs or moved ashore; Tourism activities are still spontaneous, lacking environmental management and navigation safety.

According to Nguyen Quoc Nghi (2020), without a reasonable management strategy, floating markets are at risk of "deformation" - from a lively trading space into a "tourist performance stage".

### *3.4. Direction of Conservation and Sustainable Development*

Currently, Can Tho city is implementing the Project to Preserve and promote the value of Cai Rang connecting market for the period 2021-2030, with key solution groups:

- Improve dock infrastructure, ensure traffic safety, and water and sanitation;
- Develop specific tourism products (floating cuisine, traditional craft experience tour, river culture check-in);
- Build a community tourism model associated with the sustainable livelihoods of market residents;
- Promote propaganda and education of intangible cultural heritage;
- Establish a co-management mechanism between government, businesses, and the community.

This approach is consistent with the trend of preserving living cultural heritage by UNESCO (2015), emphasizing the active participation of the community - those who directly create and maintain the value of heritage.

#### **4. SOCIO-CULTURAL VALUE OF POOT MARKET**

The floating market is not only a place to trade and exchange goods, but also a "lively space of river culture" - where all economic, social, and spiritual activities of Western residents are reflected naturally, honestly, and deeply.

##### *4.1 Material Value*

The material elements in the floating market demonstrate the high level of human adaptation to the aquatic environment. Boats, canoes, wooden boats, oars, bamboo trees, fish nets, baskets, leaf roofs, monkey fishing... are familiar items but contain a whole store of folk knowledge about techniques, materials, and survival experiences. Every boat is a "mobile house", where people both live and make a living, reflecting the flexible and creative lifestyle of river residents.

The connecting market space is a combination of rivers, boats, people, sounds, and colors. The sound of the engine mixed with the sounds of sales, the scent of fruit mixed with the kitchen smoke floating on the river in the early morning - all create a vivid and lyrical picture, reflecting the unique river civilization that cannot be found anywhere else.

##### *4.2 Intangible Value*

Besides material value, the floating market also carries valuable intangible values. It is a unique way of communicating without words, "beo tree" - where sellers hang their products so that buyers can easily recognize them from afar. It is also a typical culinary culture with rustic dishes such as rice noodles, vermicelli noodles, hot black coffee, porridge... cooked right on small boats, served in the middle of the river. Language, voice, and advertising also become part of the soul of the floating market. Intimate greetings and sincere invitations not only show the way of communication of Westerners, but also reflect the peaceful, hospitable, and respectful marriage mentality.

##### *4.3 Spiritual And Community Values*

The floating market is an expression of community spirit, of the relationship "harmony of the country-harmony of the people". People rely on each other, share difficulties, and support in times of trouble. The floating market space is therefore not only a place for trade but also a place to connect, exchange stories, and preserve human love. It is in this flow that the "generous - respectful - harmonious" cultural identity of the Western people is maintained and spread through many generations.

#### **5. CHANGES IN THE MARKET IN THE MODERN CONTEXT**

The rapid development of urbanization, transportation, and information technology has fundamentally changed the space and function of the market.

##### *5.1 Change in Economic Function*

Previously, the floating market was the largest hub for agricultural products in the region. Road space for existing commercial systems, modern, and road development. Goods no longer circulate mainly through waterways but move to highways and warehouses. Commercial boats are becoming fewer and fewer, replaced by tourist boats and boats serving food and drinks for tourists. However, this specialization also opens up a new direction: the baby market becomes

a "special tourist highlight", contributing to promoting the image of the West to international friends.

### *5.2 Changes in the Lives of Residents of the Lake*

Along with the urbanization process, many traditional boat-trading households have switched to other professions such as tourism services, small businesses on shore, or working as hired labor in the city. There are still many difficulties for children in the lake to go to school, receive medical care, and provide household support, and the "on-river" channel is gradually narrowing. However, in the minds of many people, the boat is still the "first home" - a symbol of memory and roots.

### *5.3 Environmental Pressures and the Commercialization of Tourism*

Uncontrolled development of tourism can distort the cultural nature of the floating markets. Some boats "act" business scenes to serve customers, losing the naturalness and authenticity. In addition, water pollution, plastic waste, and noise from cruise ships are also affecting the landscape and ecosystem of the Hau River. These changes require a sustainable approach, both ensuring tourism development and preserving the unique cultural soul of the floating market.

## **6. COMMUNITY ROLE AND AWARDS FRANCE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

### *6.1 The Central Role of Local Communities*

The commercial lake community is the soul of the connecting market. No one understands the market, the water, and the tourists better than themselves. Therefore, they must be placed at the center of all conservation and development policies. When the community participates in organizing, managing, monitoring, and directly benefiting, heritage will have more sustainable vitality.

The "community tourism on the river" model can be an effective direction: people provide dining services, sightseeing, storytelling, guiding experiences... while creating livelihoods and preserving traditional occupations.

### *6.2. Sustainable Development Solutions*

To preserve and promote the value of connecting markets, Cai Rang in particular and the Western floating market system in general need to synchronously implement many groups of solutions:

- Dynamic conservation and adaptation: Maintaining real commercial activities of the market, encouraging trade in local agricultural products, in parallel with controlled tourism development.
- Develop green tourism: Use environmentally friendly cruise ships, reduce plastic waste, and increase tourist education on river protection awareness.
- Infrastructure investment and dock management: Plan berths and moving channels appropriately, ensuring waterway traffic safety.
- Applying digital technology: Building a digital map of "Cai Rang Floating Market", QR codes for specialty products, and promoting via online platforms.
- Heritage education and communication: Organize experiential learning activities and floating market cultural festivals, helping the younger generation understand and be proud of their homeland's heritage.

### *6.3 Linking Government - Business - Community*

The coordination between the three parties is the key to success. The government needs to have clear policy mechanisms, businesses need to commit to social responsibility in tourism exploitation, and the community must be trained and supported to actively participate. Only

when the three parties act together for common benefits can the connected market truly become a model of living heritage - harmonious development between economy, culture, and environment.

## CONCLUSION

The floating market in the Mekong Delta is the crystallization of an entire river civilization, clearly reflecting the cultural identity of the residents of the lower Mekong region. Among them, Cai Rang market is the most typical image - both a traditional commercial center and a national intangible cultural heritage of great historical, social, and tourist value.

Facing the wave of modernization, floating markets are facing the risk of disappearing in both scale and nature. However, if there is a conservation strategy in the right direction - community-based, focusing on education, technology application, and sustainable development - the market can continue to "live" and continue to be a typical cultural space of the region, the Southwest. Not only does preserving the floating market protect a traditional form of trade, but it also preserves the memory, identity, and the soul of the Vietnamese people who live in the fields by vast rivers.

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