

## OVERVIEW OF RIVER CULTURAL TOURISM

<sup>1</sup>Thi Si Bel,<sup>2</sup>Nguyen Thi Be Ba,<sup>3</sup>Nguyen Mai Quoc Viet

<sup>1</sup>ORCID NO: 0009-0004-8038-2025,<sup>2</sup>ORCID NO: 0000-0001-6608-2609

<sup>1</sup>Student of the Department of History-Geography-Tourism  
School of Political Science, Social Sciences, and Humanities, Can Tho University  
Can Tho, Vietnam

<sup>2</sup>Chair of the Department of History-Geography-Tourism,  
School of Political Science, Social Sciences, and Humanities, Can Tho University  
Can Tho, Vietnam

<sup>3</sup>PhD Candidate, VNU University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi; MA, Can Tho University  
Can Tho, Vietnam

Author's email:

<sup>1</sup>Sibel30102004@gmail.com; <sup>2</sup>ntbba@ctu.edu.vn

\*Corresponding author: Sibel30102004@gmail.com

**Summary:** River cultural tourism is a type of natural tourism, closely linked to the environment, river life, customs, and habits of people living in river areas, especially in the Mekong Delta (MD). When traveling here, visitors can visit and experience typical tourism products such as floating markets, fruit gardens, traditional craft villages, and enjoy local river cuisine. This type of tourism helps bring a feeling of relaxation, closeness to nature, and at the same time contributes to the conservation of natural resources, unique river cultural resources, and contributes to long-term and sustainable development.

### 1. INTRODUCTION TO RIVER CULTURE

River culture is shaped by natural environmental resources, including a system of rivers, canals, and fresh fruit gardens, as well as fertile land replenished year-round by alluvium flowing from the rivers. This environment is complemented by a temperate climate throughout the year, along with the characteristics of a simple life for river residents. All of the above factors have contributed to creating a unique river culture, marked by a close relationship between people and the natural environment. Therefore, river culture has become a typical symbol, forming the lifestyle of the people in the Mekong Delta; this is also the cultural identity and the soul of the simple, peaceful "nine dragons" land. River culture is closely associated with the daily life of the people; people see rivers not simply as a source of water for daily life, but they consider rivers as a living space, a place for trade, exchange, and entertainment. Favored by nature, the Mekong Delta (MD) is fortunate to have diverse natural landscapes, rich flora and fauna ecosystems, and simple, close-knit lifestyles of the people. River tourism in the Mekong Delta (MD) is increasingly attracting a large number of domestic and foreign tourists. Coming here, visitors can experience interesting activities such as: visiting floating markets, garden tourism, exploring traditional craft villages, enjoying specialties of the river region, immersing themselves in traditional music and art spaces such as listening to Ho or Don Ca Tai Tu, participating in major festivals held annually such as the Southern Folk Cake Festival, the Ngo Ok Om Boc Boat Racing Festival of the Khmer ethnic group. All these interesting activities have created unique tourism products, bringing in a stable source of income, contributing to local economic development, and promoting the image of the friendly and hospitable South.

### 2. THEORETICAL BASIS

#### 2.1 Concept of River Cultural Tourism

The Mekong Delta (MD) is a lucky land chosen by nature to bestow extremely rich natural gifts, possessing a dense network of rivers, vast fruit gardens, extremely rich seafood, shrimp and fish, along with the simple, generous and hospitable people of the West with a life closely

connected to the river all year round, all of which have created an extremely unique river culture that other regions cannot match. Because of possessing a culture so unique that no other place can copy, the people of the West have known how to take advantage of the gifts that nature has bestowed, to introduce, spread, and promote to the world, by creating unique tourism products closely associated with the river culture over the centuries. River culture can be considered a special type of cultural tourism with a system of rivers, canals, floating markets, riverside tourism, etc. These are characteristics of the natural environment as well as terrain, geomorphology, combined with cultural factors that affect life, work, customs, beliefs, architecture, and community activities, etc. The purpose of this type of tourism is to bring visitors experiences, as well as see and analyze from historical factors and to cultural identity of riverside residents. Based on natural and cultural, and local factors, Professor Tran Ngoc Them described "river character" as a distinctive cultural trait of the people in this region that captures the essence of harmony with nature, balance, and simplicity in everyday life. The culture of the river includes a range of crafts villages on the rivers , such as completing boats, processing mattresses, processing coconuts, processing jute, traditional folk plays and festivals, floating markets, special traditional music, and renewed opera. River cultural tourism makes use of these values to create distinctive tourism products, and it can realize the return of cultural heritage and the generation of economic income for the local community.

To sum it up, the theoretical foundation of the river culture tourism lies in the integration of natural resources and the particular culture of river regions, thereby resulting in the formation of a unique and sustainable tourism product, and at the same time providing enrichment and an extension to the traditional Indonesian cultural forms.

## *2.2 Characteristics of River Cultural Tourism Products*

River cultural tourism products are increasingly developed and are continuously exploited and created by people, aiming at the living space of the Mekong Delta. In addition, the natural resource factor plays a very important role in the formation of tourism products. The Deputy Director of the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism - Pham Van Thuy said, "The dominant nature tourism resource that makes the values of the Mekong Delta different and unique from the other regions of the country is the river scene, which is Gardens built along the upper and lower sides of the Mekong River with 9 branches that flow into the sea and a thick canal system, bank, islet, desertion, garden, field and orchard in the riverside and island zone". We can see that the perfect combination of nature and humans has created extremely unique river cultural tourism products. Some outstanding features of river cultural tourism products are as follows:

- Closely connected with natural rivers: The Mekong Delta (MD) is a region with extremely diverse and rich natural resources, especially the river and canal system. From this condition, it has been favorable to create tourism products associated with natural elements, such as visiting fruit gardens, boating on the river, and visiting gardens.

- Trading and living on rivers: The lives of the majority of people are closely linked to rivers; people and nature are close all year round. The river environment is not only a place to live but also a decisive factor in the economy, culture, and society of local people. With tourism business activities or buying and selling, exchanging goods on floating markets, it shows that the intelligence and sensitivity of people in harmony with nature are one of the most characteristic factors that create unique features and distinct colors for cultural tourism products.

- Traditional lifestyle and typical beliefs: Due to the strong direct influence of natural factors, people in the river area have formed many habits, customs, and beliefs imbued with indigenous culture. From there, fishing villages and river festivals have been formed.

- Local cuisine: River dishes have a rustic, simple character with meals prepared using fresh products caught directly from nature. Creating dishes with unique features that attract tourists,

especially those associated with flood season ingredients such as sour soup, linh fish hotpot, fish noodles, etc., establishes a distinctive culinary foundation for tourism.

- Folk art: With a close connection to rivers, people here have developed a rich collection of folk art inspired by the river environment. The most notable is Don Ca Tai Tu—a music genre recognized by UNESCO (2013) as a representative intangible cultural heritage of humanity. Additionally, there are other music genres such as Ho Song Nuoc, Mai Nhi, Mai Day, and more, which are deeply linked to the spiritual life of the people in the river region and add to the diversity of tourism offerings.

### *2.3 Elements That Make Up River Cultural Tourism Products*

River cultural tourism products are formed and developed with the harmonious combination of many different factors. These factors are organized and coordinated smoothly to create unique and characteristic river cultural tourism products. Both maximizing natural resources and balancing with the work of protecting, preserving, and promoting traditional river culture.

- Natural tourism resources: Resources include a system of rivers, canals, a rich and diverse ecosystem of flora and fauna, and vast, lush green fruit gardens, all of which create an extremely favorable tourism environment.

- Cultural tourism resources: including long-standing cultural traditions associated with rivers (including floating markets), lifestyles, customs, beliefs, traditional festivals of riverside residents, folk music and art, typical cuisine of river areas, and traditional craft villages

- Tourist activities: Coming to river cultural tourism, visitors will be able to participate in unique activities such as visiting and shopping at the floating market, experiencing the craft village of making noodles on the river, enjoying seasonal fruits in the garden, participating in festivals and traditional cultural activities of local people, tasting specialties of the river region, watching folk art performances such as Don Ca Tai Tu, Ho Song Nuoc along with many other activities.

- Service infrastructure system: one of the important factors affecting the tourist experience, the service infrastructure here includes the wharf, the road traffic system connecting to river tourism destinations, accommodation facilities such as hotels, homestays, farmhouses connected to nature, food services such as coffee shop chains, restaurants, tourism support services such as tour guides, interpreters knowledgeable about river culture, security measures, order and environmental sanitation to ensure a clean and safe environment for tourists.

- The human factor, especially the local community, plays a key role in creating a tourist destination as well as attracting and retaining customers. The warmth, hospitality, and simple, genuine nature of the riverside people are the invisible soft resources that river tourism attracts. Local people participate in community tourism such as tour guiding, cooking, rowing, storytelling, performing music and art, making handicrafts, and selling local specialties.

### *2.4 Factors Affecting the Development of River Cultural Tourism Products*

Although tourism products are diverse and have many attractive spots, river cultural tourism has not really attracted a large number of tourists. The reason may be due to the inadequate development orientation, along with some other influencing factors such as:

- Tourism resources: this is the most important factor determining the formation and development of destinations. If the resources are diverse and attractive, they will attract a large number of tourists, creating the characteristics of the tourism product as natural. Other resources, such as natural resources (rivers, gardens, ...), cultural resources such as customs, traditional festivals, folk beliefs, and performing arts, also have a profound influence.

- Infrastructure and facilities for tourism: Easy and efficient road and waterway transportation systems connecting to destinations influence tourists' accessibility, support

services, accommodation, quality and variety of food, amenities, comfort, and safe river cruise boats. All these factors impact tourists' satisfaction and experience.

- Human resources and tourism development in the community: local people's participation in tourism plays a key role in developing products. Their personality, service attitude, skills, and qualifications influence the friendliness and professionalism of tourism products. The team of tour guides and interpreters also plays an important role because they are the ones who introduce and convey information at tourist destinations to tourists, affecting tourists' trust in tourism products.

- Market factors and tourism demand: Currently, tourism demand among travelers is rising, along with the increasing popularity of tourism products. Travelers prefer authentic experiences close to nature combined with indigenous culture, so river tourism products are continually being innovated to satisfy their needs and preferences.

- Impact of climate and environment: although abundant environmental resources bring many advantages, they also face many difficulties due to climate change, causing landslides, saline intrusion, floods, unusual droughts, poor community awareness in environmental protection, causing water pollution problems, littering on rivers, and seriously affecting the activities and experiences of tourists.

- Local policies, planning, and management: participate in managing tourism activities in the area, encourage people to participate in community tourism, and at the same time preserve heritage and develop unique tourism products. Implement regulations on buying and selling activities to avoid soliciting and fragmentation that causes negative feelings towards tourists, control social order and safety to protect and create trust and prestige with tourists.

- Communication and promotion activities: Effective promotion strategies, building brands of river culture products, help attract tourists and enhance the value of destinations, applying digital technology directly affects the level of recognition at destinations, and attracts tourists.

River culture is a profound feature in the lives of Vietnamese people, formed from the long-standing relationship between people and the environment of rivers, canals, and deltas. With geographical features of a dense river network and wet rice agriculture, Vietnamese people have quickly adapted, exploited, and created a culture imbued with "river character".

River culture is clearly expressed in material life (stilt house architecture, boats, floating markets, seafood cuisine), spiritual life (belief in worshiping river gods, Ngo boat racing festival, images of rivers in folk songs, language, art), and in a harmonious, flexible community lifestyle, closely connected with nature.

Especially in the Mekong Delta (MD), river culture is considered one of the typical symbols, creating a unique cultural identity for the Southwest region. Here, floating markets such as Cai Rang, Phong Dien, or the Ngo boat racing festival of the Khmer people, traditional music such as Don Ca Tai Tu... are not only daily activities of the people but also become attractive cultural tourism products.

In today's modern context, river culture is facing many challenges, such as the impact of climate change, urbanization, environmental pollution, and the fact that cultural lifestyles are increasingly fading. In general, river culture is a valuable cultural resource that needs to be preserved and exploited reasonably to develop tourism sustainably, preserving the cultural identity of the nation.

In short, river culture not only reflects the history of residence, labor, and creation of the Vietnamese people, but is also a symbol of harmony between people and nature — a unique cultural heritage that needs to be respected, preserved, and promoted in the new era.

## **CONCLUSION**

River culture is one of the typical symbols of the cultural identity of the Mekong Delta (MD). This cultural feature was formed and developed through the process of human exploration,

adaptation, and close attachment to the natural environment, creating rich material and spiritual values such as floating market systems, traditional craft villages, festivals, or living habits on the river. In addition, developing river cultural tourism not only contributes to promoting the local economy.

#### **REFERENCES**

- Tran, N. T. (1996). *Foundations of Vietnamese culture*. Ho Chi Minh City University of Science. Master. Nguyen Vuong & Associate Professor. Dr. Nguyen Van Manh. (2021). *Assessment of sustainable tourism development in the Mekong Delta*. Industry and Trade Magazine, No. 6.
- VietnamPlus. (2025, February). *To make river tourism always an attractive "specialty" of the Mekong Delta*. VietnamPlus.<https://www.vietnamplus.vn/de-du-lich-song-nuoc-luon-la-dac-san-hap-dan-cua-dong-bang-song-cuu-long-post1005414.vnp>
- VietnamPlus. (2021, March 23). *"Mekong Delta: Strongly developing unique tourism products in the river region"*. VietnamPlus.<https://www.vietnamplus.vn/dbscl-phat-trien-manh-cac-san-pham-du-lich-dac-thu-vung-song-nuoc-post700890.vnp>
- Architecture Magazine. (2021, December 1). *Cultural space of the Mekong Delta river*. Architecture Magazine. <https://www.tapchikientruc.com.vn/cuoc-thi/khong-gian-van-hoa-song-nuoc-dong-bang-song-cuu-long-giai-ba-loa-thanh-2021.html>