RACH CAT FORT AND TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN CAN DUOC DISTRICT, LONG AN PROVINCE, VIETNAM

Ha Trieu Huy
University of Social sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to investigate the fact of Rach Cat Fort, which is deemed the largest fort of the French in Indochina for the duration of the colony, as well as propose some specific suggestions for the tourism development benefited from Rach Cat Fort. The author employed quantitative and typical qualitative design methods, including observation, interview, data collection, textual analysis, and thematic analysis over the course of fieldtrip and fact-findings in order to clarify historical values of Rach Cat Fort and the factual situation in preservation and tourism potentials. The results unveil that Rach Cat Fort is undergoing a serious deterioration due to a lack of conservation and the poor exploitation of tourism. Meanwhile, this site has been long militarized, so tourism potentials do not have a chance to be exploited by the local authority. Thereby, the author proposes some key suggestions to get this historical site well-preserved and be in the development trajectory of local tourism.

ĐỒN RẠCH CÁT VÀ PHÁT TRIỂN DU LỊCH Ở HUYỆN CẦN ĐƯỚC, TỈNH LONG AN, VIỆT NAM

Hà Triệu Huy
Trường Đại học Khoa học xã hội và Nhân văn Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh

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TỪ KHÓA

Đồn Rạch Cát
Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long
Phát triển du lịch
Tỉnh Long An
Di sản lịch sử

TÓM TẮT

Bài viết này nhằm tìm hiểu thực tế về đồn Rạch Cát, nơi được coi là pháo đài lớn nhất của người Pháp ở Đông Dương trong suốt thời kỳ thuộc địa cũng như đề xuất một số giải pháp cụ thể cho việc phát triển du lịch từ lợi ích của Đồn Rạch Cát. Tác giả đã sử dụng các phương pháp định lượng và định tính, bao gồm quan sát, phỏng vấn, thu thập dữ liệu, phân tích văn bản và phân tích chuyên sâu trong quá trình khảo sát thực tế và tìm hiểu thực tế để làm rõ các giá trị lịch sử của Đồn Rạch Cát và thực trạng bảo tồn và tiềm năng du lịch. Kết quả cho thấy Đồn Rạch Cát đang xuống cấp nghiêm trọng do không được bảo tồn và khai thác du lịch kém. Trong khi đó, địa điểm này đã được quân sự hóa từ lâu nên tiềm năng du lịch không có cơ hội được chính quyền địa phương khai thác. Qua đó, tác giả đề xuất một số gợi ý chính để di tích lịch sử này được bảo tồn tốt và nằm trong quỹ đạo phát triển của du lịch địa phương.

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Email: hatrieuhuy97@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Rach Cat Fort, located in Long Huu island, is an existing military architectural monument in Can Duoc district, Long An province, Vietnam. Historically, Rach Cat Fortress is approachable via topography and geological references. Long An Department of Culture and Information closely worked with Long An museum to investigate Rach Cat Fortress in 1983 and released a manual about the history and architecture of Rach Cat Fortress. This book is valuable in the context of the insufficient source of references regarding this historical site, and it can be seen as source material for this research paper [1]. Meanwhile, Topography of Long An published in 1989 may be considered a reliable source to understand natural factors and historical factors of Long Huu island, so that the French constructed the colossal fortress in Indochina in this region in the early 20th century [2]. Executive Board of Long Huu ward published the book entitled "Traditional history of Long Huu ward, Can Duoc District, Long An Province" providing a brief history of Rach Cat Fort and the French's scheme in Indochina [3].

Unfortunately, Rach Cat Fort is experiencing a modicum of scholarly attention. Luu Van Quyet et al, along with an article entitled "Rach Cat Fort-The Largest French-built Strategic Fort In Vietnam In Early 20th Century" is probably the newest publication related to this topic. In this paper, these authors generalize a comprehensive history of Rach Cat Fort and its function for the French. However, this paper superficially mentioned practical solutions to preserve Rach Cat Fort and touristic potentials in the upcoming development of Long An province [4]. Besides, Pham Thi Hong Cuc et al provided a general overview regarding touristic potentials of the East Mekong Delta in an article named "Tourism groups development net in the east of Mekong Delta" in the Journal of Ethnic Minorities Research. Authors stated that Long An is one of the provinces, which can be seen as a place of biodiversity and special features of Southern Vietnam and it is making rooms for touristic development with sustainable values [5]. Meanwhile, Nguyen Quyet Thang, in the Journal of Economy and Development, proposed six solutions for sustainable development of the Mekong Delta for tourism. The author reveals that policies and zoning are some of the most important factors to boost the potential of Mekong Delta tourism effectively, while environmental protection also plays a central role in the long-run development of local tourism. As a result, this article suggests the author find some optimal solutions to exploit the potentials of a specific place in the Mekong Delta for its touristic potential [6]. Nguyen Thi Thanh Loan in "Orientations for tourism products exploitation in Long An province until 2030" accentuated key factors to help boost Long An's tourism as well as its weaknesses to improve the quality of food products and specialties. The solutions were proposed to encourage to launch a comprehensive policy for the long-term development of local products to satisfy the visitors' demand when choosing Long An for their destinations [7]. Meanwhile, Pham Xuan Hau and Truong Thi Thanh Tuyen is the author of "Assessing the potentials for eco-tourism development in Lang Sen Ramsar Site Long An", which can be viewed as a suggestion for eco-tourism promotion in Long An. These authors evaluated pros and cons of Ramsar Lang Sen in natural scenes, biodiversity, and multi-aspect investigations to take some recommendation to apply this paradigm for other tourism destinations of Long An [8].

Overall, this paper is a desk-research article which inherits the previous results of those researchers. However, the author only stay focused on Rach Cat Fort which experiences a modicum of scholarly attention with the purpose of suggesting a potential destination for Long An tourism and appeal to solutions to preserve this historical site.

2. Research methods

This research paper employs a qualitative and quantitative design to fulfill research objectives. Quantitative methods are helpful to collect statistical data derived from the Long An Department of Culture, Sport, and Tourism. The figure contributes to clarifying the role of tourism and historical destinations toward the development of Long An tourism. Meanwhile, qualitative

design, specifically, observations are applied to record the reality of the Rach Cat Fortress and all living activities around this historical site. Likewise, the author used the data collection method to earn vast primary and secondary texts and documents of Can Duoc Department of Culture and Information and Long An Museum to enrich the value of research. The approach of a semi-structured interview expert is one of the most important tools in this paper to discuss further plans of locals in order to conserve the fortress and develop it for tourism. Last but not least, textual analysis contributed to examining the reality of policies as well as a great deal of information, while thematic analysis goes hand in hand with that method so as to identify academic terms and theoretical explanation with the aim of identifying potential values of Rach Cat shape upcoming policies for it throughout the paper.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1. Natural conditions

Rach Cat Fort, located in Long Huu ward, Can Duoc district, Long An province, is covered by water, including three major rivers and 12 provincial rivers, bringing a great deal of alluvium for an advantage of agriculture. Long Huu island has a plain terrain along the Northwest - Southeast axis, enclosed by Vam Co river, Rach Cat river, and Nuoc Man canal [3, p. 12]. Long Huu land lies in the lower land of Can Duoc district. The land is often flooded with alum. Meanwhile, the weather has two seasons, including the dry season and the pluvious season. Thereby, the climate of Long Huu is a sub-equatorial tropical monsoon.

Figure 1. *Long Huu island viewed from Kinh Nuoc Man bridge (Source: Author, 15 March 2020)*

Figure 1 illustrates an panorama of Long Huu island viewed from Kinh Nuoc Man bridge. Besides, Long Huu ward has the 23rd provincial road going along Phuoc Dong war to Kinh Nuoc Man ferry, which is near Rach Cat Fort. This condition facilitates economic and social exchanges between Long Huu and other districts of Long An. However, the complexity of the river web can be viewed as a disadvantage of Long Huu because it is usually stuffed by mud and swamp. Hence it can be argued that natural conditions play a key role in promoting touristic development of Long Huu ward and Rach Cat Fort. Compared to popular tourist destinations, Rach Cat Fort, along with other historical sites of Long Huu ward, are likely to create vital conditions for economies. Particularly, it creates local employments in services like accomodation, transport and entertainment. As a result, Long An authority is able to exploit the advantage of Rach Cat location to link this site with other historical destinations through an establishment of waterway traffic, which represents the Mekong Delta's tourism.

3.2. Humanistic conditions

Obviously, humanistic conditions of a place include objects, phenomenon created by humans throughout their existence in a specific place. The production of this source is tradition, culture, folk customs, historical sites. Long Huu ward has a vast number of destinations, which illustrate the spiritual life and historical aspect of this local.

- *Tan Chanh communal yard*: this place is known as an honored place of Minh Mang Emperor. This place retains some ancient text of the Nguyen dynasty. It is a spiritual address for people to pay a visit every occasion of festivals [9].

- *Phuoc Lam pagoda*: This place was established circa 1880 by a doctor and landlord person named Bui Van Minh to pray to Buddha and function in a Minh family court [2, p. 288]. This place is considered to be a representative of Southerners' pagoda architecture and Southern Vietnam Buddhism. This site has been recognized as a national historical site since 2001.

- *Tong Thanh pagoda*: This destination is attached to Nguyen Dinh Chieu over the course of the resistance in Southern land toward the French. When attacking Tay Duong fort of the French, various patriotists of Long An province successfully assassinated some French generals and demolished Catholicism-propagated house. Nguyen Dinh Chieu created a verse named Eulogy of Can Giuoc patriotists to express his honor toward their mytardom [10]. Nowadays, this site is very famous for the local history and has become a destination for Buddhists and visitors.

- *One-hundred-pillarhouse*: This is an ancient house, which represents Hue-based architecture and built 100 years ago. This house owns 68 key pillars and 120 small pillars to solidly make the house structure. This place was recognized national historical place in 1997 [11].

- *Rach Kien intersection*: This place is deemed to be a well-known historical site for the duration of the Vietnam War. This place was a base of the American forces and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. Communists established an American-resisting belt and made a continued effort to destroy this base. Nowadays, this place retains field airstrips, barrack, and army clubs of the former base [12].

There is no denying that the district possesses a wide range of historical sites, and those places are potential heritages, which are expected to establish a routine of tourism for Long An tourism promotion. On the other hand, historical sites play a significant role in promoting local tourism. Obviously, all cities and places in the world undergo a long-term historical development, and the history presumably leaves some historical sites. Once those sites are neglected, the authority is likely to lose a significant income that can be generated from heritages.

3.3. Facts of Rach Cat Fort and its preservation

Rach Cat Fort is a long-standing heritage. The French selected Long Huu island for the new fortress because of the fact that this site is covered by a web of rivers and canals while it is located in a place that is close proximity with Saigon. Hence, the Fort was expected to shield Saigon from a pretty near distance [3, p. 12]. Besides, historical papers divulge that Long Huu island was a simple shipyard, and rudder boats were created to serve for war under the reign of Nguyen Anh Lord [13, p. 88]. In 1902, the French inspected Long Huu island for their plan, and they were aware of this strategic territory, so there was a fort to be built there. After being completed, the Fort was enclosed by a circumference of 11,988 m; there is a wharf with a 50 m long rail for trolleys to transport goods from the train to the station [1, p. 3].

Historically, Long An authority issues a handful of preservation policies concerning Rach Cat Fort, yet most of them have been not effective in comprehensively and extensively conserving this historical site. The Fort has not experienced a tremendous revamp to serve for preservation and tourism exploitation.

Figure 2. *The relic of the old wharf (Source: Author, Feb. 28, 2019)*

Figure 2 illustrates severe destruction of the wharf while the observation tower has only retained the structure and the housing or military fort has not been intact.

Figure 3. *Armament container in the basement (Source: Author, Mar. 15, 2019)*

Figure 4. *The remaining floating basement under the armament container (Source: Author, Mar. 15. 2019)*

Meanwhile, figure 3 and figure 4 unveil that the basement of Rach Cat is suffering severe waterlogging. The site's backyard is undergoing the cavitation of Rach Cat river so that this site is unapproachable. It is implied that it is vital to have some timely solutions issued to hamper the destruction of Rach Cat Fort and promote tourism.

In 1992, People Committee of Long An validated a decision to protect Rach Cat Fort along with ecotourism-historical sites combination [14]. It was not until 2016, the Long An Department of Culture, Sport and Tourism invested in building a five-hectare ecological zone of Rach Cat. As estimated, Long An officials were looking forward to the success of Rach Cat zoning.

"Rach Cat fort has strengths of terrain. The scene is appropriate to exploit the land and promote the historical values of the destination. Rach Cat fort has been erected for 100 years, and it is deemed to be the earliest and most durable Fort in Indochina. After 1975, there were roughly ten movies that filmed Rach Cat Fort; it implies that Rach Cat fort has its own large extent. This project needs investing relied on directive and regulations. (Author's interview, Mar. 15. 2019)"

However, this historical site faces a lot of impediments to be exploited due to the occupation of Long An military forces in this site for a very long time. The author debriefed one more carde of the Long An Department of Culture, Sport, and Tourism to clarify the obstruction of Rach Cat Fort for tourism:

"On 22 August 1992, Long An authority issued a policy regarding Rach Cat protection. This site is expected to become a tourist trap owing to its link with eco-forest and other historical sites. To translate the policy into reality, the Provincial People's Committee went hand in hand with the Provincial Military Command, and the People's Committee's Advisory Committee implemented investment policy and restoration for Rach Cat Fort. On 29 March 2017, the Provincial Military Command, in collaboration with the Provincial People's Committee, issued a dispatch requesting Military Zone 7 of approving Rach Cat Fort to be turned into a historical relic for tourism services during peacetime(Author's interview, Mar. 15. 2019)."

In the view of historical place preservation, Long An Museum has taken the responsibility of managing Rach Cat Fort to serve for tourism service since a survey of Rach Cat in 1983. The museum, in combination with the Long An Department of Culture and Information compiled a profile of Rach Cat Fort, which shed light on its history and current fact. This is a brief document to raise awareness of the history and functions of Rach Cat fort. The author interviewed staff of Long An museum in order to inspect future plans of the museum toward Rach Cat Fort.

"It is very challenging to turn Rach Cat Fort into a tourism destination. First, Long An tourism just only entered the first stage of development. There are several tourist places experiencing a lack of investment and promotion, so the result got fruitless. Meanwhile, Rach Cat Fort is under the management of the Provincial Military Command. This is why the process of tourism

exploitation for this place has been still at a standstill. The museum has to perform the duty of contacting the provincial department of Culture and Information on the occasion of daily visits. Besides, the restriction of places which bans tourists from camera and video makes potential tourists unpleasant during their trip (Author's interview, Mar. 15. 2019)."

The content of the interview unveils that Long An authority is making a continued effort to socialize Rach Cat Fort and closely working with Provincial Military Command to function Rach Cat Fort as a usual tourist destination. It is indicated that making Rach Cat Fort become a tourism destination is unfeasible at this time. Besides, Long An has not issued any solid policies, which are expected to socialize Rach Cat Fort to be turned into one of the destinations in Can Duoc district, Long An. While the funding of preservation is ample, the management of military force in this place can be seen as the key disadvantage to function Rach Cat Fort for tourism and preservation.

3.4. Measures of tourism development for Rach Cat Fort

First and foremost, it is suggested that Rach Cat Fort be socialized for tourism. Socializing tourism can be seen to be a solution to make a restricted heritage that is under the management of an organization or a military force turn into a public site for all visitors. The function of that heritage no longer belongs to political and defending reasons. In the case study of Rach Cat Fort, factually, the management of military force in Rach Cat Fort may be limited to allow a part of Rach Cat to be preserved and serve for tourism. This is a kind of cultural tourism.

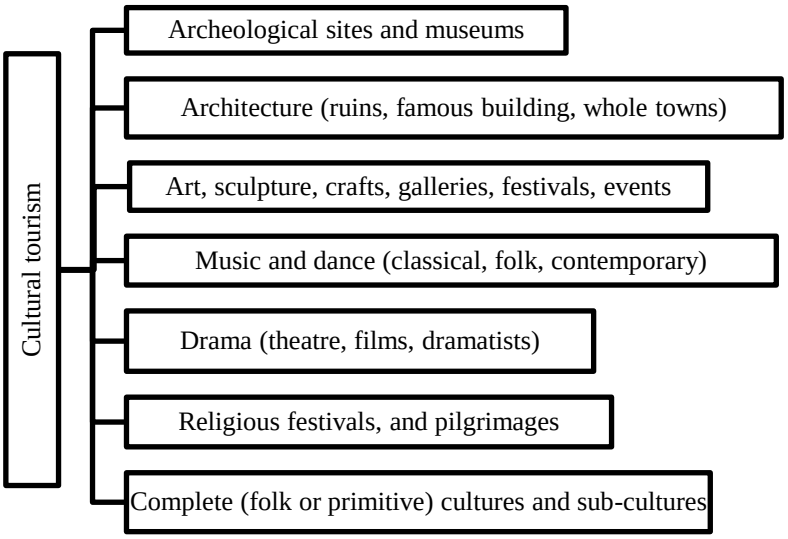

Figure 5. *Elements of cultural tourism [15, p. 22]*

Figure 5 argues that cultural tourism is constituted by eight elements. This concept put stress on the role of archeological sites and museums as well as architecture are leading elements to promote the development of cultural tourism. As a result, this concept is applicable to the tourism potentials of Rach Cat Fort. It is recommended that Rach Cat can function as a complex of ecotourism once the authority of Long An province completes administrative procedure with Military Command of Long An Province with the aim of socializing the site.

Besides, Long An Museum, in collaboration with the Department of Culture and Information, People's Committee of Can Duoc district, Long An province; Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Long An province, and Military Command of Long An province implement a massive revamp for Rach Cat Fort. According to Sevdalina Neykova, it is crucial to understand all sufferings of heritage throughout its presences and count the elements of nature, including weathering, flooding, climate changes, and other factors, in an attempt to grasp the history of heritages [16, pp. 19-21]. Because of being a historical site, the Long An Museum needs to

shoulder its responsibility to conduct a regular checkup. All deteriorated categories need to be immediately preserved and renewed. Next, experts are expected to weigh the degree of deterioration of Rach Cat Fort and take photographs, which is instrumental in assessing the fact of heritage as well as collecting archaeological materials for preservation in need.

Additionally, Rach Cat Fort should be located in a tourism route planning, which is attached to the development of professional villages in Long An province. A tourism route planning is a scheduled plan for tourists who have an ambitiousness to discover all tourist attractions in a specific place. The linkage of attractions contributes to shaping a complete tourism route to help tourists discover several places at a time. Although promoting local tourism, numerous travelers are still showing their neglect toward Long An tourism. Long An authority should appeal to the investment of private travel agencies to make a breakthrough for Rach Cat Fort preservation and stimulate the development of tourism. The authority should closely work with the Department of Culture, Sport, and Tourism to make a collective effort in preserving Rach Cat Fort and having this place be on the tourism route of Long An visits. Likewise, it is crucial to combine with professional tourism with the intention of promoting Long An's food specialties to tourists [17]. Asserting Rach Cat and other historical sites' centrality in local tourism is prophesied to offer the fastest growing economy of Long An province in the future.

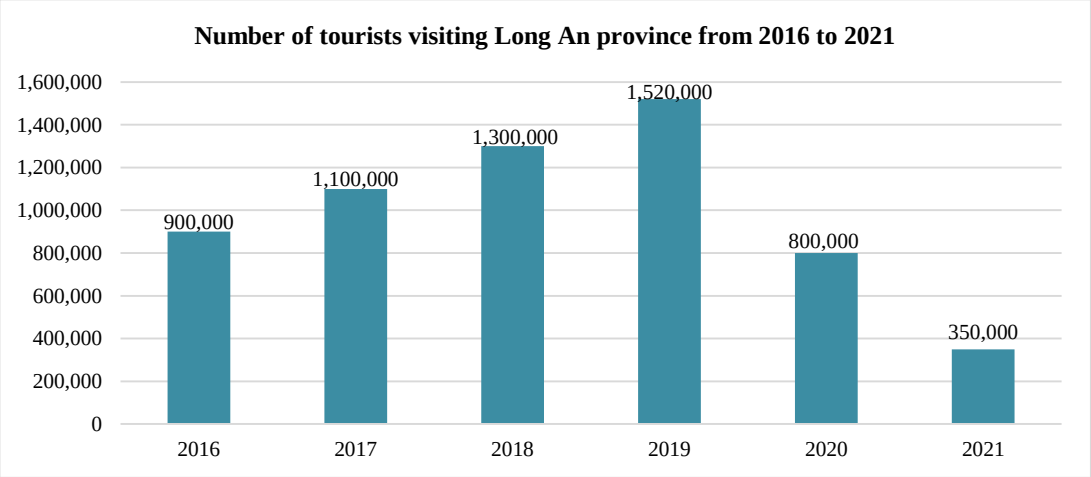

Figure 6. *Number of tourists visiting Long An province from 2016 to 2021 (Author's collection, Mar. 15. 2022)*

Figure 6 unveils that there is volatility regarding Long An province's tourism. While the number of tourists showed an element of an increase due to the encouragement of Long An authority, this number experienced a considerable decrease owing to negative influences of the COVID-19 pandemic from the end of 2019 and plummeted to roughly 350,000 tourists in 2021. Nowadays, Long An province intends to resume local tourism with the purpose of economic improvement, so it is crucial to recover Rach Cat tourism functions and build tourism promo as well as attractive tourism route planning including Rach Cat fort as soon as possible in order to make room of local tourism recovery subsequent to the pandemic.

Last but not least, sustainable tourism is absolutely crucial to the future development of Rach Cat Fort and Long An's tourism. Theoretically, it is understandable that ecotourism is one type of tourism contingent on the role of nature and indigenous culture attached to environmental education in an attempt to conserve nature through activities of local communities. It performs people's duty toward the environment and conservancies. This method is expected to diffuse the beauty of nature and cultural values along with conservation promotion and stimulate positive socioeconomic aspects of the locals. Rach Cat Fort is located near the Vam Co River, close to a

diverse ecosystem. The ecotourism in concert with humanistic tourism is likely to bring a great advantage of increasing tourism revenue for Long An province.

4. Conclusions

To sum up, this paper examined the fact of Rach Cat Fort, which is considered the largest Fort of former Indochina in the past, and its values are exploitable for tourism development of Long An province. The findings derived from fieldwork divulge that Rach Cat Fort has a great number of potentials to be preserved and served for tourism. However, the long-term management of military force in this place is hampering the development of tourism potential, and the deterioration of Rach Cat Fort is a growing concern for maintaining a historical heritage. Thereby, this study intends to propose some key recommendations to benefit from this site. First, it is necessary to socialize Rach Cat Fort to facilitate the upcoming investment and mechanism of tourism. Second, the functional offices should make a joint effort to evaluate the values of Rach Cat Fort with the intention of issuing appropriate policies for preservation and tourism. Third, Rach Cat Fort should show its presence in tourism route planning linked to the promotion of professional villages. Last, Rach Cat Fort should be attached to a plan of sustainable development in combination with the exisiting ecosystem and natural conditions around it. Further research should be implemented to shed light on other aspects of Rach Cat Fort to shape a long-term scheme of its conservation.

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