

REFRAMING ROOTS TOURISM AS A SPATIALLY STRUCTURED HERITAGE LANDSCAPE: A MULTI-CRITERIA EVALUATION OF POSTCOLONIAL HERITAGE SPACES IN CON DAO, VIETNAM

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Abstract: In contemporary tourism research, roots tourism is increasingly recognized as more than a form of heritage visitation; however, its spatial organization within postcolonial heritage landscapes remains insufficiently examined. Existing studies have emphasized motivations, memory, identity, and heritage interpretation, while giving limited attention to the spatial configuration of heritage sites and their relationships within an integrated tourism system. This study conceptualizes roots tourism in Con Dao, Vietnam, as a spatially structured heritage landscape in which historical memory, commemorative practices, and visitor movement are organized across interconnected heritage spaces. Using an interpretive mixed-methods design, the research develops a multi-criteria evaluation framework to assess the functional and interpretive capacities of thirteen heritage sites. A three-round Delphi process involving 18 experts established the evaluation criteria, followed by the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) to determine the relative importance of the criteria. These expert assessments were combined with evaluations from 28 participants, including professional tour guides and organized tour visitors, using a five-point Likert scale. The findings reveal that interpretive and commemorative capacity is unevenly distributed, forming distinct functional clusters, including core interpretive nodes, transitional and commemorative spaces, and peripheral visitor engagement areas. The analysis further demonstrates that the value of individual heritage sites is shaped not only by their historical significance but also by their spatial relationships and interpretive connectivity within the broader heritage network. By highlighting these spatial dynamics, the study advances understanding of roots tourism as an integrated heritage tourism system and provides a practical framework for destination planning, heritage interpretation, and sustainable management in postcolonial contexts.

Keywords: roots tourism; heritage landscape, spatial differentiation, functional clustering, postcolonial heritage, multi-criteria evaluation, Con Dao, tourism geography

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INTRODUCTION

Over recent decades, tourism research has moved beyond conceptualizations of tourism as mere consumption and leisure toward perspectives that emphasize its social, cultural, and educational functions. Within this shift, heritage tourism has increasingly been understood as a spatially embedded practice of meaning-making and historical learning, mediated through interactions among people, memory, and place (Poria et al., 2003; Ahmad & Hertzog, 2016; Timothy, 2018). Heritage spaces are no longer viewed solely as repositories of the past; rather, they operate as active components of tourism landscapes, shaping how history is interpreted and experienced through embodied, affective, and spatial engagement (Harrison, 2012). From a tourism geography perspective, such spaces form interconnected spatial systems in which interpretation, accessibility, and visitor movement are organized across differentiated sites rather than occurring in isolation.

Research on memory tourism and dark tourism further illuminates tourism practices at sites associated with collective suffering, violence, and sacrifice. Encounters at such sites often activate moral reflection and emotional engagement that extend beyond the passive reception of historical narratives (Light, 2017; Dresler, 2023). Learning in these contexts unfolds through spatial encounter and regulated movement, situating visitors within ethically sensitive relationships with the past. From the perspective of collective memory theory, memory is not fixed but socially constructed through discourses and practices embedded in specific spatial settings (Olick & Robbins, 1998; Hirst & Echterhoff, 2012).

Heritage spaces such as prisons, detention camps, and memorials therefore emerge as contested arenas within tourism systems, where multiple narratives compete for interpretive authority (Macdonald, 2009; Zhang et al., 2018; Shreya et al., 2026). Yet, while these studies illuminate interpretive and ethical dynamics, fewer contributions systematically examine how such sites are spatially differentiated and functionally organized within broader destination structures.

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The organization of heritage spaces that embody traumatic histories presents significant ethical and managerial challenges. Scholars have warned that commercialization or aestheticization of tragic memory may undermine interpretive integrity and reduce commemorative sites to consumable attractions (Stone & Grebenar, 2022; Dresler, 2024).

These concerns underscore the need for systematic approaches to evaluating how heritage spaces are structured, sequenced, and managed within tourism landscapes, particularly in relation to visitor movement and spatial connectivity (Lew & McKercher, 2006). In this regard, spatial differentiation—understood as the uneven distribution of interpretive, commemorative, and functional capacities across sites—becomes central to understanding how heritage tourism operates as a landscape-level system rather than as a collection of discrete attractions. Con Dao represents a paradigmatic postcolonial heritage landscape in Vietnam. Its network of colonial prison complexes, martyrs' cemeteries, commemorative monuments, and religious sites forms a multilayered memoryscape in which revolutionary, traumatic, and sacred narratives intersect spatially (Clark, 2013; Chung, 2025).

Although roots tourism in Con Dao has been widely developed, existing studies have primarily focused on visitor perception or symbolic memory discourse. The differentiated functional roles of individual heritage spaces and their spatial organization within the broader tourism landscape remain insufficiently examined. Moreover, limited attention has been given to how these sites collectively structure visitor routes, regulate experiential intensity, and form hierarchical patterns within the destination's spatial configuration. The aim of this study is to evaluate how heritage spaces in Con Dao function as spatially differentiated components of a structured heritage landscape within a postcolonial tourism context. Specifically, the study seeks (1) to develop a multi-criteria analytical framework for assessing the interpretive, ethical, and spatial-functional dimensions of heritage spaces; (2) to determine the relative importance of these dimensions; and (3) to analyze how heritage spaces are structured into distinct functional clusters across the heritage landscape.

By addressing these objectives, the research conceptualizes roots tourism not merely as commemorative visitation but as a spatially structured heritage tourism system that can be systematically evaluated and strategically organized in sensitive postcolonial contexts. In doing so, the study contributes to tourism geography by foregrounding landscape-level organization and functional differentiation as key analytical dimensions in the study of roots tourism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Roots Tourism and the Shift toward Memory Education

In contemporary tourism research, roots tourism has moved beyond conventional heritage visitation to be understood as a spatially embedded practice associated with memory, identity, and historical interpretation. Rather than treating heritage as static objects of consumption, scholarship emphasizes spatial experience, movement, and interpretive mediation as mechanisms connecting visitors with the past (Poria et al., 2003; Ahmad & Hertzog, 2016; Timothy, 2018).

Heritage spaces thus function as nodes within broader tourism landscapes, shaping understanding through organization, accessibility, and design. From a tourism geography perspective, these nodes are relational rather than isolated, deriving significance through their position within destination-wide spatial configurations.

Recent syntheses of dark tourism and thanatourism research demonstrate a growing emphasis on authenticity, emotional engagement, and the governance of collective memory at sites of suffering (Hernández-Garrido et al., 2026). This shift highlights that meaning-making at traumatic or commemorative sites is shaped not only by historical content but also by interpretive framing and management practices. Accordingly, roots tourism in former prisons, memorials, and revolutionary landscapes must be approached as a structured encounter mediated by spatial sequencing and institutional regulation. Such mediation implies differentiated spatial roles among sites, rather than uniform interpretive functions across a destination.

Sites associated with violence or political struggle are typically experienced through curated routes and regulated access, influencing cognitive and emotional engagement (Biran et al., 2011; Light, 2017). Learning in such contexts unfolds through spatial choreography rather than isolated information transfer. Research on difficult heritage further shows that well-managed spatial organization can foster historical awareness and reflective engagement, whereas weak regulation risks commodification and spectacle (Dunkley et al., 2019; Farmaki, 2021; Stone & Grebenar, 2022). These findings suggest that the spatial structuring of visitor movement is not merely operational but constitutive of interpretive outcomes. These insights underscore the need to examine how heritage spaces are configured and connected within integrated tourism systems.

Within postcolonial destinations, roots tourism is shaped by the spatial politics of interpretation and identity formation. The organization and presentation of heritage spaces actively reproduce narratives of belonging and historical meaning (Clark, 2013; Winter, 2007; Shreya et al., 2026). Postcolonial heritage landscapes therefore represent spatially layered systems in which symbolic, political, and educational functions intersect across interconnected sites.

Heritage Spaces, Collective Memory, and Tourism Landscapes

Collective memory is socially constructed through practices embedded in specific spatial contexts (Olick & Robbins, 1998; Hirst & Echterhoff, 2012). In tourism settings, heritage spaces serve as arenas where memory is encountered through movement, spatial sequencing, and place-based narration. Spatial context thus becomes integral to the production and stabilization of collective memory within tourism environments.

Prisons, detention camps, and memorials often function as contested sites in tourism landscapes, where multiple narratives coexist and are mediated by layout, visitor circulation, and interpretive infrastructure (Macdonald, 2009; Waterton & Smith, 2010; Zhang et al., 2018). From a tourism geography perspective, individual sites derive meaning not only from intrinsic value but also from their connectivity within broader spatial systems (Lew & McKercher, 2006; McKercher & Lau, 2008; Till, 2012). Visitor understanding therefore emerges cumulatively across interconnected sites.

This cumulative process implies the existence of spatial differentiation, whereby certain sites act as interpretive anchors while others play supplementary or transitional roles within visitor itineraries.

Recent research highlights the relevance of route design and network analysis for structuring visitor mobility and accessibility. GIS-based modeling has been applied to optimize thematic routes and enhance spatial coherence within cultural tourism contexts (Akay, 2026). Although developed in urban settings, such approaches are pertinent to heritage landscapes characterized by dispersed yet interrelated sites. In postcolonial contexts, evaluating spatial connectivity becomes essential for understanding how memory is organized at the landscape scale. Even when formal GIS modeling is not employed, analytical attention to spatial clustering and route sequencing remains central to tourism geography.

Ethical Regulation and Interpretive Function of Heritage Spaces

Heritage sites associated with trauma operate within ethical boundaries shaped by historical significance and contemporary use. Spatial organization plays a critical role in regulating visitor behavior, emotional response, and interpretive engagement (Biran et al., 2011; Farmaki, 2021). Controlled circulation and interpretive zoning help preserve solemnity and prevent inappropriate consumption. Ethical regulation therefore manifests not only through discourse but through spatial arrangements that structure proximity, duration, and intensity of encounter. Studies of sacred landscapes further illustrate how ethical regulation is embedded in narratives, rituals, and local knowledge systems that guide visitor conduct (Setiyoningsih et al., 2026). Such moral frameworks operate alongside formal management mechanisms, reinforcing the ethical dimension of heritage interpretation. When spatial and interpretive regulation is weak, heritage sites risk becoming arenas of emotional spectacle rather than reflective engagement (Stone & Grebenar, 2022).

This risk is closely linked to spatial overexposure and insufficient differentiation among heritage functions. Interpretive capacity also depends on communication quality and experiential coherence. Research in museum contexts indicates that effective interpretive design—encompassing clarity, empathy, and narrative structure—enhances visitor engagement and reinforces educational outcomes (Chae, 2026). These findings suggest that interpretive capacity extends beyond informational provision to include experiential design. Within landscape-level analysis, interpretive capacity can therefore be understood as unevenly distributed across sites, contributing to differentiated functional roles.

From a planning perspective, heritage spaces function as managed territorial units within broader tourism systems. Their ethical and interpretive roles are intertwined with spatial capacity, visitor flow, and inter-site connectivity (Lew & McKercher, 2006). Evaluating heritage spaces therefore requires integrated frameworks combining ethical, interpretive, and spatial-functional dimensions. Such integration supports the analysis of heritage destinations as structured spatial systems rather than as isolated commemorative sites.

Research Gap and Analytical Framework

Although scholarship on memory tourism and dark heritage has expanded, much research remains focused on visitor emotions or single-site analysis. Less attention has been devoted to how multiple heritage spaces within one destination perform differentiated yet interconnected functions within a structured tourism landscape (Waterton & Watson, 2015; Light, 2017). In particular, limited empirical work has operationalized spatial differentiation and functional clustering as analytical categories within postcolonial heritage destinations.

Recent contributions emphasize authenticity governance (Hernández-Garrido et al., 2026), spatial route optimization (Akay, 2026), and ethical embedding in sacred landscapes (Setiyoningsih et al., 2026). However, systematic evaluation frameworks that integrate these dimensions within postcolonial heritage destinations remain limited.

In Con Dao, existing studies have examined the symbolic significance of individual sites but have rarely analyzed how these spaces collectively operate within an integrated heritage tourism system (Chung, 2025). Accordingly, this study conceptualizes heritage spaces as spatial units within a heritage tourism landscape and proposes an analytical framework evaluating their roles based on interpretive capacity, ethical regulation, spatial accessibility, and landscape connectivity. This framework provides the foundation for the multi-criteria evaluation approach presented in the following methodological sections. By doing so, the study advances a landscape-level perspective on roots tourism that aligns more explicitly with tourism geography while retaining sensitivity to memory and postcolonial contexts.

METHODS

Research Design

This study adopts an interpretive mixed-methods design that integrates qualitative expert knowledge with quantitative multi-criteria decision analysis to examine the functional and interpretive capacity of heritage spaces within the heritage tourism landscape of Con Dao. Mixed methods are employed to capture both the interpretive dimensions of heritage meaning and the need for systematic comparison across heterogeneous heritage sites (Ivankova & Wingo, 2018).

Rather than evaluating tourism performance in economic or satisfaction-based terms, the research focuses on the interpretive, ethical, and experiential functions of heritage spaces as components of a postcolonial tourism landscape. This approach aligns with critical tourism and heritage scholarship that conceptualizes heritage as a socially and politically embedded process shaped by power relations, interpretation, and spatial practice (Macdonald, 2009; Harrison, 2012).

The methodological design distinguishes between two knowledge sources: (1) a formal expert panel engaged in the Delphi–AHP process for criteria construction and weighting, and (2) a practitioner-based evaluation group composed of experienced tour operators and licensed local guides specializing in roots tourism in Con Dao. This distinction clarifies the analytical role of each dataset and addresses potential concerns regarding sample heterogeneity.

Study Area and Selection of Heritage Spaces

The empirical scope of the study includes 13 heritage spaces in Con Dao, selected to represent the principal layers of collective memory embedded within the island's tourism landscape. These include colonial prison complexes, formal commemorative sites, and locations associated with community-based and ritual practices (see Appendix).

Site selection was guided by two criteria: (1) historical and symbolic significance within the Con Dao heritage landscape, and (2) functional diversity in terms of visitor experience, spatial configuration, and interpretive form. Collectively, these sites constitute a multilayered heritage system that enables comparative analysis of differentiated functional roles within the broader tourism landscape (Waterton & Watson, 2015).

Expert Panel and Practitioner Knowledge Basis

The study draws on an expert panel comprising professionals in heritage management, tourism development, cultural interpretation, history, and experienced practitioners involved in guiding and organizing roots tourism activities. Experts were recruited through purposive sampling based on demonstrated professional experience and contextual familiarity with Con Dao. The experiential evaluation involved 28 practitioners who are not general tourists but specialized tour operators and licensed local guides with sustained professional engagement in Con Dao's roots tourism sector. Their inclusion reflects a practitioner-expert perspective grounded in repeated field-based interaction with heritage spaces rather than one-time visitor impressions. The relatively small size of this group ($n = 28$) reflects the limited population of professionals exclusively specialized in roots tourism within Con Dao. In methodological terms, the group constitutes a near-census of active operators in this niche segment rather than a convenience sample of general visitors. Accordingly, the findings represent professional interpretive consensus rather than statistically generalizable visitor perception.

Consistent with critical heritage and tourism approaches, expert knowledge is treated as situated and interpretive rather than as an objective measure of heritage value (Waterton & Smith, 2010; Harrison, 2012).

Development of Evaluation Criteria Using the Delphi Method

The Delphi method was employed to develop a structured set of criteria for assessing the interpretive and functional capacity of heritage spaces. Delphi is particularly suitable for complex tourism and heritage contexts where knowledge is distributed across expert groups and where no single indicator adequately captures spatial, ethical, and experiential dimensions (Hsu & Sandford, 2007). The process was conducted through three iterative rounds. In each round, experts reviewed proposed criteria, provided qualitative feedback, and reassessed their judgments in response to anonymized group input. Criteria were retained based on predefined agreement thresholds ($\geq 70\%$ convergence across rounds), ensuring conceptual clarity, stability, and relevance for heritage tourism analysis. Response stability between rounds was monitored to confirm convergence prior to finalization.

Weighting of Criteria through the Analytic Hierarchy Process

Following the establishment of the criteria set, the AHP was applied to determine the relative importance of each criterion group. AHP enables pairwise comparison within a hierarchical structure and is widely used in tourism and spatial planning to evaluate contexts characterized by multiple, incommensurable dimensions (Saaty, 2008).

Pairwise comparisons were conducted at the level of criteria groups rather than sub-criteria to preserve analytical coherence and avoid over-fragmentation in a context characterized by interpretive and ethical dimensions that are conceptually interrelated. Sub-criteria were treated as structurally embedded within their respective groups.

Consistency ratios (CR) were calculated to assess the reliability of expert judgments. All matrices achieved CR values below the accepted threshold of 0.10, indicating acceptable internal consistency (Saaty, 2008; Ishizaka & Labib, 2011).

Individual matrices were examined prior to aggregation to identify potential outliers, and no extreme inconsistencies were detected. Aggregation was performed using the geometric mean method in accordance with standard AHP procedures.

To examine robustness, a limited sensitivity check was conducted by introducing minor variations ($\pm 5\%$) in criteria-group weights. The relative ranking and clustering of heritage spaces remained stable, indicating that the differentiation patterns are not highly sensitive to marginal weight adjustments.

Evaluation Procedure, Reliability, and Data Analysis

The weighted criteria were applied to assess the 13 heritage spaces based on practitioner evaluations. Each practitioner evaluated the sites using a five-point Likert scale reflecting perceived interpretive clarity, ethical regulation, spatial accessibility, and experiential coherence.

Internal consistency of the practitioner-based evaluation instrument was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The overall scale achieved an alpha coefficient above 0.80, indicating satisfactory reliability for exploratory spatial-functional assessment.

Inter-rater agreement was examined by analyzing variability across evaluators. Variance levels remained within acceptable bounds, suggesting convergence among practitioners despite differences in professional roles.

Although Likert-scale data are ordinal in nature, scores were treated as interval approximations for the purpose of comparative aggregation, a common practice in multi-criteria tourism research when scale categories are equidistantly defined. Interpretive claims are therefore limited to relative differentiation rather than absolute measurement.

Composite scores were calculated by integrating criteria weights and practitioner evaluations. Based on score patterns, heritage spaces were subsequently grouped according to their dominant functional characteristics within the overall

heritage tourism system. This analytical step supports the identification of differentiated spatial roles and informs the conceptualization of structured visitor routes within an integrated heritage landscape.

Methodological Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, although the practitioner group represents a near-complete segment of roots tourism professionals in Con Dao, the sample size remains numerically limited and context-specific. The findings therefore reflect professional interpretive consensus rather than general visitor perception.

Second, the evaluation relies on structured expert judgment and practitioner assessment rather than direct measurement of visitor learning outcomes or behavioral change. Third, the AHP weighting procedure emphasizes relative importance at the criteria-group level and does not model dynamic spatial interactions between sites. Nevertheless, by integrating Delphi consensus-building, AHP consistency testing, practitioner-based evaluation, reliability assessment, and sensitivity checking within an interpretive mixed-methods framework, the study provides a transparent and replicable approach for evaluating the functional organization of heritage spaces within tourism landscapes. This methodological framework supports the analysis of roots tourism as a spatially structured form of heritage tourism in postcolonial contexts.

RESULTS

Criteria System for Evaluating Heritage Spaces within a Memory Landscape

The criteria system for evaluating heritage spaces in Con Dao was developed through a three-round Delphi process involving 18 experts from heritage management, tourism development, cultural interpretation, history and cultural studies, and professional practice related to roots tourism. The objective of the Delphi process was to establish a conceptually coherent and analytically robust criteria system capable of capturing the interpretive, ethical, and spatial-functional roles of heritage spaces within a sensitive postcolonial heritage tourism landscape such as Con Dao.

The initial pool comprised 26 candidate criteria synthesized from the literature on heritage tourism, difficult heritage, memory tourism, and heritage interpretation, complemented by contextual analysis of Con Dao and expert knowledge. In the first round, experts reviewed the relevance and conceptual fit of each criterion. Indicators primarily associated with general tourism performance—such as entertainment appeal, revenue generation, and current visitor volume—showed low consensus and high variance and were therefore excluded, as they were judged to shift the evaluation away from the interpretive and commemorative functions central to this study. In the second round, the refined list was further assessed for clarity, redundancy, and contextual sensitivity. Criteria related to large-scale group activities and experiential flexibility remained contested and were either removed or reformulated to emphasize contextual appropriateness and the specific requirements of sensitive heritage settings. The third round was conducted to confirm stability and consensus on the final system. All retained criteria met the predefined agreement thresholds for inclusion, indicating convergence across the expert panel. As a result, the final criteria system comprises 18 sub-criteria organized into six criteria groups, each representing a key dimension of heritage interpretation, ethical regulation, and spatial functionality.

This grouping structure supports evaluation of heritage spaces not merely as isolated physical sites but as interconnected spatial units within a broader heritage tourism landscape, where historical cognition, interpretive legibility, ethical limits, accessibility, conservation conditions, and route-based integration jointly shape visitor experience. The composition and functional dimensions of these six criteria groups are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Criteria Groups for Evaluating Heritage Spaces in Con Dao
(Source: Authors' compilation based on Delphi expert consultations and literature review)

Criteria Group	Functional Dimension	Sub-criteria
G1. Memory Value and Authenticity	Foundations for historical interpretation	(C1) Historical–memory value; (C2) Authenticity and integrity; (C3) Representativeness of collective memory
G2. Interpretive Capacity and Infrastructure	Capacity of spaces to support interpretation	(C4) Quality of interpretation; (C5) Interpretive resources and materials; (C6) Organization of visitor routes and experiential rhythm
G3. Commemorative Ethics and Solemnity	Ethical regulation of heritage use	(C7) Sacredness and solemnity; (C8) Risk of entertainmentization/commercialization; (C9) Appropriateness of collective activities
G4. Accessibility and Safety	Practical conditions of visitor use	(C10) Accessibility; (C11) Safety of movement and experience; (C12) Suitability for specific visitor groups
G5. Carrying Capacity and Conservation	Sustainability of heritage use	(C13) Carrying capacity; (C14) Risk of deterioration and vulnerability; (C15) Conservation and monitoring capacity
G6. Route Connectivity and Collaborative Governance	Spatial and managerial coherence	(C16) Connectivity with other heritage spaces; (C17) Integration into interpretive programs; (C18) Stakeholder coordination

From a structural perspective, the six criteria groups form an integrated analytical framework rather than a collection of independent indicators. Groups G1 and G2 constitute the interpretive foundation of the system, defining the cognitive and narrative basis of heritage engagement. Group G3 functions as a regulatory dimension, establishing ethical boundaries for the use of sensitive heritage spaces. Groups G4 and G5 represent operational and sustainability conditions that shape the feasibility of heritage use within tourism systems.

Finally, Group G6 introduces a landscape-level perspective, emphasizing that heritage interpretation is reinforced when sites operate within coordinated spatial and managerial networks. This configuration ensures that evaluation

extends beyond attractiveness or economic performance and instead reflects the structured interaction between interpretive meaning, ethical regulation, and spatial organization within the Con Dao heritage landscape.

Criteria Weights and Structural Priorities

Following the establishment of the evaluation criteria through the Delphi process, the AHP was applied to determine the relative importance of the six criteria groups. Weighting was conducted at the criteria-group level in order to clarify how experts prioritize interpretive, ethical, operational, and spatial dimensions when conceptualizing heritage spaces in Con Dao as components of a sensitive postcolonial heritage tourism landscape. All pairwise comparison matrices satisfied the accepted consistency thresholds, confirming the internal reliability of expert judgments. The hierarchical structure of the AHP model comprised two levels: (i) the overall objective of evaluating the functional and interpretive capacity of heritage spaces within the Con Dao heritage landscape, and (ii) the six criteria groups identified. Experts conducted pairwise comparisons using Saaty's standard scale, and consistency ratios were calculated to ensure methodological rigor. The resulting weights for the six criteria groups are presented in Table 2.

The resulting weights reveal a differentiated priority structure rather than a uniform valuation of heritage attributes (Table 2). The highest weight was assigned to G3 (Commemorative Ethics and Solemnity) at 0.22, followed by G2 (Interpretive Capacity and Infrastructure) at 0.20 and G1 (Memory Value and Authenticity) at 0.18. Together, these three groups account for 60% of the total weighting, indicating that experts conceptualize heritage spaces primarily through ethical and interpretive dimensions rather than through operational or logistical considerations.

Table 2. Weights of Criteria Groups for Evaluating Heritage Spaces
(Source: Authors' calculations based on AHP results from expert pairwise comparisons)

Criteria Group	Core Focus	Weight
G3	Commemorative ethics and solemnity	0.22
G2	Interpretive capacity and infrastructure	0.20
G1	Memory value and authenticity	0.18
G5	Carrying capacity and conservation	0.16
G4	Accessibility and safety	0.14
G6	Route connectivity and collaborative governance	0.10
Total		1.00

The prominence of G3 suggests that, in the context of Con Dao, ethical regulation is regarded as a foundational condition for heritage tourism development. Sites associated with traumatic and revolutionary histories are expected to operate within clearly defined moral boundaries, which function not as peripheral constraints but as central structuring principles of the heritage landscape. G2 and G1 form the interpretive core of the weighting structure. While memory value and authenticity (G1) provide the historical basis for interpretation, experts prioritized interpretive capacity and infrastructure (G2) slightly higher, indicating that historical significance alone is insufficient without coherent narrative organization, spatial legibility, and appropriate interpretive resources. This ordering underscores the functional interdependence between intrinsic heritage value and its communicative articulation within tourism settings.

Operational dimensions—G5 (0.16) and G4 (0.14)—occupy an intermediate tier. Although assigned lower weights than ethical and interpretive dimensions, these groups define the practical feasibility and long-term sustainability of heritage use. Their positioning reflects an understanding that operational conditions enable, but do not define, the interpretive legitimacy of heritage spaces. G6, with a weight of 0.10, received the lowest relative importance.

However, this lower weight should not be interpreted as marginal significance. Rather, it indicates that spatial connectivity functions as a systemic enabler whose impact emerges through the cumulative integration of sites rather than through the intrinsic attributes of individual spaces. In destinations such as Con Dao, where heritage interpretation is structured through thematic routes and clusters of interconnected sites, connectivity contributes to landscape coherence even if it is not perceived as the primary determinant of site-level performance. Overall, the AHP results demonstrate a three-tier priority structure within the Con Dao heritage landscape: (1) ethical and interpretive foundations (G3, G2, G1); (2) operational and conservation conditions (G5, G4); and (3) systemic connectivity (G6). This hierarchy of weights provides the structural basis for subsequent composite evaluation and spatial differentiation of heritage spaces across the landscape.

Composite Evaluation and Spatial Differentiation of Heritage Spaces

Based on the criteria system and criteria-group weights established in the preceding sections, a composite evaluation of the 13 heritage spaces in Con Dao was conducted to examine their differentiated functional roles within the overall heritage tourism landscape. The analysis integrates AHP-derived expert priorities with practitioner-based experiential assessments, thereby combining normative orientation and field-based interpretive performance. The composite scores and classification results for the 13 heritage spaces are presented in Table 3.

As shown in Table 3, the composite assessment results reveal substantial variation in functional and interpretive capacity across the 13 heritage spaces, indicating an uneven spatial distribution of heritage performance within the landscape. The detailed scoring structure and classification levels are presented in Table 3. With an overall mean composite score of 3.14 (CD), the Con Dao heritage landscape as a whole falls within the “moderate potential” classification. However, this aggregate value conceals pronounced internal differentiation. Because ethical and interpretive dimensions

(G3, G2, and G1) together account for 60% of the total weighting structure, sites that perform strongly in these highly weighted criteria groups gain structural advantage in the composite ranking. Conversely, sites with adequate operational conditions but weaker interpretive density tend to occupy intermediate or peripheral positions within the spatial hierarchy.

Table 3. Composite Assessment Results of Heritage Spaces in Con Dao (n = 28)

Site Code	G1 (0.18)	G2 (0.20)	G3 (0.22)	G4 (0.14)	G5 (0.16)	G6 (0.10)	Total Score	Classification
	B / W	B / W	B / W	B / W	B / W	B / W		
D1	4.70 / 0.85	4.60 / 0.92	4.80 / 1.06	4.40 / 0.62	4.50 / 0.72	4.30 / 0.43	4.59	Very high potential
D2	4.50 / 0.81	4.40 / 0.88	4.60 / 1.01	4.20 / 0.59	4.30 / 0.69	4.10 / 0.41	4.39	Very high potential
D3	4.20 / 0.76	4.00 / 0.80	4.10 / 0.90	3.70 / 0.52	3.80 / 0.61	3.60 / 0.36	3.94	High potential
D4	3.90 / 0.70	3.80 / 0.76	3.90 / 0.86	3.50 / 0.49	3.60 / 0.58	3.40 / 0.34	3.73	High potential
D5	3.80 / 0.68	3.70 / 0.74	3.80 / 0.84	3.40 / 0.48	3.50 / 0.56	3.30 / 0.33	3.63	High potential
D6	3.30 / 0.59	3.10 / 0.62	3.00 / 0.66	2.90 / 0.41	3.00 / 0.48	2.80 / 0.28	3.04	Moderate
D7	3.20 / 0.58	3.00 / 0.60	3.10 / 0.68	2.90 / 0.41	3.00 / 0.48	2.80 / 0.28	3.02	Moderate
D8	3.10 / 0.56	2.90 / 0.58	3.00 / 0.66	2.80 / 0.39	2.90 / 0.46	2.70 / 0.27	2.92	Moderate
D9	3.00 / 0.54	2.90 / 0.58	2.90 / 0.64	2.70 / 0.38	2.80 / 0.45	2.60 / 0.26	2.84	Moderate
D10	2.90 / 0.52	2.80 / 0.56	2.80 / 0.62	2.60 / 0.36	2.70 / 0.43	2.50 / 0.25	2.74	Moderate
D11	2.50 / 0.45	2.40 / 0.48	2.30 / 0.51	2.20 / 0.31	2.30 / 0.37	2.10 / 0.21	2.32	Low potential
D12	2.30 / 0.41	2.20 / 0.44	2.10 / 0.46	2.00 / 0.28	2.10 / 0.34	1.90 / 0.19	2.12	Low potential
D13	1.70 / 0.31	1.60 / 0.32	1.50 / 0.33	1.40 / 0.20	1.50 / 0.24	1.30 / 0.13	1.52	Very limited potential
CD	3.32 / 0.60	3.18 / 0.64	3.22 / 0.71	2.98 / 0.42	3.08 / 0.49	2.88 / 0.29	3.14	Moderate

Note: B / W denotes the pre-weighting score and the corresponding weighted score, respectively. Heritage spaces are coded as follows: D1 – Con Dao Prison System (Phu Hai, Phu Son, Phu Tuong, Phu Binh); D2 – Con Dao Museum; D3 – Hang Duong Cemetery; D4 – Pier 914; D5 – Memorial to Con Dao Political Prisoners; D6 – Hang Keo Cemetery; D7 – Island Governor’s Residence; D8 – Cow Shed (Trai Bo) Site; D9 – Former Communal Hall (Nha Cong Quan); D10 – An Son Temple and Cau Temple; D11 – So Co Site; D12 – So Lo Voi Site; D13 – Ma Thien Lanh Bridge Site; CD refers to the mean composite score across all heritage spaces

Core Interpretive Nodes

Two heritage spaces—the Con Dao Prison System (D1, 4.59) and the Con Dao Museum (D2, 4.39)—were classified as having very high potential. These sites achieved consistently strong performance across all six criteria groups, particularly in Commemorative Ethics and Solemnity (G3) and Interpretive Capacity and Infrastructure (G2), which carry the highest weights in the evaluation model.

Their composite dominance reflects structural centrality within the heritage landscape. The convergence of memory value (G1), interpretive clarity (G2), and ethical regulation (G3) produces a high degree of interpretive density, positioning these spaces as primary anchors for narrative orientation. In spatial terms, they function as core interpretive nodes from which thematic routes are structured and within which visitors acquire foundational historical frameworks.



Figure 1. Core Interpretive Nodes within the Con Dao Heritage Landscape, Vietnam (Source: Authors, 2026)

Secondary and Transitional Spaces

A second cluster of sites—classified as high potential—includes Hang Duong Cemetery (D3), Pier 914 (D4), and the Memorial to Con Dao Political Prisoners (D5), with composite scores ranging from 3.63 to 3.94. These spaces demonstrate strong symbolic and commemorative value but comparatively lower performance in operational (G4), conservation (G5), and connectivity (G6) dimensions. Functionally, these sites operate as secondary or transitional nodes within the heritage landscape. While they reinforce and deepen interpretive engagement initiated at the core nodes, their comparatively weaker infrastructural coherence reduces their systemic centrality. The group of sites classified as moderate potential (D6–D10) further illustrates transitional roles. These spaces contribute to thematic diversification and narrative layering but do not independently structure visitor understanding. Their role is primarily supportive within organized routes.



D3 – Hang Duong Cemetery



D4 – Pier 914



D5 – Memorial to Con Dao Political Prisoners



D6 – Hang Keo Cemetery



D7 – Island Governor's Residence



D8 – Cow Shed (Trai Bo) Site



D9 – Former Communal Hall



D10 – An Son Temple and Cau Temple

Figure 2. Secondary and Transitional Heritage Spaces within the Con Dao Heritage Landscape, Vietnam (Source: Authors, 2026)

Peripheral and Fragmented Memory Spaces

At the lower end of the spectrum, So Co Site (D11), So Lo Voi Site (D12), and Ma Thien Lanh Bridge Site (D13) were identified as having low to very limited potential. These sites exhibit constraints related to conservation status, accessibility, interpretive infrastructure, and limited integration into structured routes. Rather than functioning as active nodes within the interpretive system, these spaces currently operate as peripheral or fragmented memory sites. Their limited performance in highly weighted criteria groups reduces their structural centrality within the landscape.



D11 – So Co Site



D12 – So Lo Voi Site



D13 – Ma Thien Lanh Bridge Site

Figure 3. Peripheral and Fragmented Memory Spaces within the Con Dao Heritage Landscape, Vietnam (Source: Authors, 2026)

Spatial Hierarchy and Landscape Structuring Mechanism

While Table 3 distinguishes five statistical classification levels based on equal-interval scoring, the spatial hierarchy identified here reflects a functional interpretation of landscape roles. The analytical tiers therefore synthesize adjacent score categories into structurally meaningful clusters rather than strictly reproducing the numerical classification scheme.

Three interrelated tiers can thus be identified: (1) Core interpretive nodes (D1–D2), characterized by high interpretive density and strong ethical regulation; (2) Secondary and transitional spaces (D3–D10), which reinforce and extend narrative engagement across routes; (3) Peripheral or fragmented sites (D11–D13), with limited functional capacity under current conditions. This hierarchy emerges from the interaction between weighted criteria priorities and site-level performance patterns. Ethical and interpretive strength shapes centrality, while operational feasibility and route connectivity influence integration. The spatial distribution of these sites across Con Dao Island further illustrates the clustering and hierarchical relationships described above, as shown in Figure 1, 2, 3.

Figure 4 visually reinforces the differentiation between core nodes, secondary clusters, and peripheral sites, demonstrating that roots tourism in Con Dao operates as a spatially structured heritage system rather than a collection of isolated attractions.



Figure 4. Spatial Distribution of the 13 Surveyed Heritage Sites in Con Dao Island, Vietnam (Source: Authors, 2026)

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that roots tourism in Con Dao operates as a spatially differentiated and ethically structured heritage system rather than as a collection of historically significant sites. By integrating Delphi-based criteria construction, AHP weighting, and composite site evaluation, the study reveals how normative priorities translate into landscape-level hierarchy. The interaction between ethical centrality, interpretive capacity, and spatial organization produces a structured configuration in which heritage spaces assume differentiated but interdependent roles. This discussion situates the findings within debates on memory tourism, difficult heritage, postcolonial memory politics, and tourism geography, while clarifying their theoretical and applied implications. Importantly, the study moves beyond a dominant tendency in the literature to examine memory tourism through site-specific encounters and visitor emotions, by demonstrating how interpretive meaning and ethical regulation become structured across interconnected heritage spaces at the landscape scale.

Ethical Centrality as a Structuring Principle

The AHP results show that commemorative ethics (G3), interpretive capacity (G2), and memory value (G1) together account for 60% of the total weighting structure. This configuration indicates that heritage performance in Con Dao is defined primarily through moral legitimacy and interpretive coherence rather than through operational efficiency.

This finding is consistent with dark tourism scholarship emphasizing tensions between memorial significance and experiential consumption (Light, 2017). Research on moral emotions further demonstrates that engagement at sites of suffering unfolds through complex ethical registers rather than simple attraction mechanisms (Dresler, 2023). However, the present study extends this literature in two ways. First, rather than treating ethics as an external constraint on tourism development, the weighting structure indicates that ethical regulation functions as a primary determinant of heritage “capacity” and legitimacy. Second, while much dark tourism research remains centered on visitor affect and meaning-making within single sites, the Con Dao results show that ethical calibration shapes landscape-level centrality: sites become core nodes not only because they are historically significant but because they sustain ethical framing and interpretive coherence at a level that supports repeated, organized visitation.

Spatial Differentiation and Landscape-Level Interpretation

The composite results reveal a three-tier spatial hierarchy—core interpretive nodes, secondary/transitional spaces, and peripheral sites—emerging from the weighted interaction of ethical, interpretive, and operational criteria. This differentiation demonstrates that interpretive capacity is distributed across interconnected sites rather than embedded solely within individual attractions. This supports and empirically extends conceptualizations of heritage as a spatial process constituted through contemporary use and negotiation (Waterton & Watson, 2015). It also operationalizes Macdonald’s (2009) notion of difficult heritage by demonstrating how spatial configuration shapes interpretive authority and narrative coherence. In particular, the findings suggest that “difficult heritage” is not only negotiated through interpretive content but through spatial allocation of roles—where certain sites are positioned as interpretive anchors, others as commemorative intensifiers, and others as peripheral traces requiring conservation-oriented approaches.

In contrast to route-optimization approaches in tourism geography that prioritize accessibility and efficiency (Akay, 2026), the present framework shows that route design in sensitive postcolonial contexts must be guided primarily by ethical and interpretive priorities. Spatial connectivity therefore functions not merely as a logistical variable but as a

mechanism of narrative sequencing and moral framing. This distinction is important because it shifts the planning logic from efficiency-based mobility to ethically guided route choreography, which is more consistent with the commemorative demands of postcolonial prison and martyrdom landscapes.

Co-Production of Meaning Through Structured Mobility

The integration of practitioner-based experiential assessments reinforces the argument that heritage meaning is co-produced through spatial engagement. Visitor learning outcomes depend not only on interpretive content but on how experiences are structured and sequenced (Packer & Ballantyne, 2016). Recent research on memory-making in tourism similarly highlights visitors' active role in attaching personal meaning to collective narratives (Pfoser & Stach, 2024).

The findings suggest that structured mobility—regulated pacing, controlled transitions, and thematic progression—constitutes a central mechanism through which interpretive realization occurs. Core nodes provide narrative anchoring; transitional sites deepen contextualization; peripheral spaces contribute thematic layering. This spatial choreography transforms dispersed heritage sites into an integrated interpretive system. Compared with approaches that equate learning with informational provision, this emphasizes that interpretive effectiveness depends on route rhythm and spatial sequencing, especially where ethical boundaries constrain visitor behavior and modes of engagement.

Emotional Regulation and Responsible Experience Design

The high weight assigned to solemnity and ethical regulation aligns with critical heritage scholarship warning against the commodification of traumatic memory (Farmaki, 2021). Emotional engagement, when responsibly mediated, can function as a catalyst for reflective understanding (Dresler, 2023). However, unmanaged affect risks transforming memory sites into spectacles detached from historical context. The spatial differentiation observed in Con Dao illustrates how emotional calibration is achieved through movement regulation, interpretive framing, and site-specific pacing rather than through amplification of affect. Ethical governance is thus embedded within spatial organization, shaping visitor flow, congregation patterns, and narrative emphasis. This reinforces a key implication for dark-heritage management: affective intensity should be regulated through spatial practice, not simply curated through narrative content.

Postcolonial Memory Politics and Functional Allocation

Within postcolonial contexts, spatial organization of heritage sites is inherently political. Decisions regarding route prominence, infrastructural investment, and interpretive focus actively shape contemporary narratives of identity and belonging (Cant et al., 2025). The evaluation framework developed here enables functional differentiation across the heritage landscape. Core interpretive nodes may support intensive educational programming, while fragile or peripheral sites may require conservation-oriented strategies or mediated interpretation. Such differentiation reduces the risk of uniform development models that could oversimplify layered and contested memories and provides a defensible basis for allocating interpretive resources and managing visitation intensity according to ethical sensitivity.

Methodological and Disciplinary Contribution

Methodologically, the study demonstrates how abstract theoretical constructs—ethics, authenticity, interpretive capacity—can be operationalized within a spatial multi-criteria framework. Unlike conventional AHP applications in tourism that emphasize attractiveness or economic performance, the weighting structure developed here foregrounds moral and interpretive dimensions. This reorientation illustrates how decision-analysis tools can be aligned with critical heritage perspectives rather than managerial optimization alone. From a disciplinary standpoint, the findings contribute to tourism geography by empirically illustrating how landscape hierarchy emerges from weighted normative priorities. Centrality is not determined solely by intrinsic historical value but by cumulative performance across ethically and interpretively weighted dimensions, which in turn structure route logic and the spatial distribution of visitor experience.

Synthesis

Overall, the study corroborates key arguments in memory tourism and difficult heritage research while extending them through spatial operationalization. By demonstrating how ethical and interpretive priorities generate hierarchical differentiation across interconnected sites, the research reframes roots tourism as a landscape-level system structured through moral calibration and spatial sequencing.

This spatially informed perspective bridges conceptual heritage theory and applied tourism geography, providing a foundation for strategic planning and responsible management in postcolonial heritage destinations.

CONCLUSIONS

This study reconceptualizes roots tourism in Con Dao as a spatially structured heritage system situated within a postcolonial memory landscape, rather than as a collection of commemorative or historical attractions. By integrating a criteria-based evaluation framework, hierarchical weighting through the AHP, and practitioner-informed experiential assessment, the research demonstrates how ethical priorities and interpretive capacity translate into measurable spatial differentiation across interconnected heritage spaces. The findings confirm that interpretive and commemorative functions are unevenly distributed and organized into a structured hierarchy. Core interpretive nodes anchor historical understanding; secondary and transitional sites deepen and extend narrative engagement; peripheral spaces contribute contextual layering or require conservation-oriented approaches. This spatial differentiation indicates that effective roots tourism depends not on the isolated enhancement of individual sites, but on ethically sequenced route design and landscape-level coordination.

Academic Contributions

The study advances heritage and tourism research in three principal ways. First, it shifts analytical focus from site-based memory encounters toward landscape-level structuring, thereby extending debates on memory tourism and difficult heritage into the domain of spatial hierarchy and system organization. Unlike predominantly descriptive or visitor-emotion-focused studies of memory tourism, this research provides a structurally operational model for examining how ethical priorities generate differentiated spatial centrality across interconnected heritage sites. Second, the study operationalizes abstract constructs—ethics, authenticity, and interpretive coherence—within a transparent multi-criteria evaluation framework. By aligning critical heritage theory with decision-analytic tools, it demonstrates how normative principles can be translated into structured, comparable, and context-sensitive assessment models. Third, the concept of functional clustering is advanced as an empirical mechanism for understanding how multiple heritage spaces collectively operate within an integrated tourism landscape. Rather than treating sites as independent attractions, the framework reveals how inter-site relationships shape interpretive effectiveness and governance priorities. In doing so, the research contributes to tourism geography by illustrating how weighted normative priorities shape spatial hierarchy, route logic, and heritage centrality, offering a replicable analytical approach for other postcolonial or conflict-related heritage destinations.

Practical and Policy Implications

From a planning perspective, the framework provides a defensible basis for differentiated management strategies. Rather than applying uniform development or visitation models, heritage managers can align interpretive depth, visitation intensity, conservation priority, and infrastructural investment with the functional role of each heritage cluster. Such differentiation is particularly important in postcolonial contexts where ethical sensitivity constrains commercial expansion and experiential design. By foregrounding ethical calibration and spatial sequencing, the model supports the design of structured heritage routes that balance commemoration, education, and sustainability. It also offers a strategic basis for allocating interpretive resources and regulating visitor flows in ways consistent with the symbolic integrity of sensitive heritage spaces.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The experiential assessment relied on a relatively small and specialized participant group, and the findings therefore reflect context-specific professional insight rather than broad visitor generalization. In addition, while the study evaluates functional capacity and spatial organization, it does not directly measure long-term visitor learning outcomes, behavioral change, or governance dynamics.

Future research may expand participant diversity, conduct cross-destination comparative analysis, or apply sensitivity testing to alternative weighting structures. Further investigation into digital mediation, participatory governance models, and longitudinal patterns of visitor engagement would deepen understanding of how spatially structured heritage systems evolve over time and across different socio-political contexts.

Final Reflection

Overall, this study demonstrates that roots tourism, when conceptualized through an ethically grounded and spatially informed framework, operates as a structured heritage landscape in which centrality, integration, and marginality are analytically identifiable. The case of Con Dao shows that heritage spaces do not merely preserve historical traces; they actively organize visitor understanding through calibrated spatial relationships and normative prioritization.

By linking critical heritage theory with operational evaluation and route-based planning, the research provides both conceptual refinement and applied guidance for managing sensitive memory landscapes. In postcolonial contexts where tourism development intersects with collective trauma and identity formation, spatially differentiated and ethically calibrated approaches offer not only managerial direction but a principled foundation for responsible heritage governance.

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