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## HERITAGE TOURISM AND EMOTIONAL TRANSFORMATION: DEVELOPING A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FROM THE CASE OF CON DAO, VIETNAM

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### Abstract

*Heritage tourism has increasingly attracted scholarly attention due to its potential to connect visitors with historical memory, cultural identity, and collective experiences of the past. While existing studies have examined the economic and cultural dimensions of heritage tourism, limited attention has been paid to the role of heritage sites in shaping visitors' emotional and spiritual transformation. This paper aims to develop a conceptual framework explaining how heritage tourism experiences may contribute to emotional engagement and spiritual transformation among tourists. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives from heritage studies, tourism experience theory, and memory studies, this research synthesizes key theoretical insights to examine the relationship between heritage interpretation, emotional responses, and transformative visitor experiences. The case of Con Dao, Vietnam, a historically significant site associated with colonial imprisonment and revolutionary struggle, is used as an illustrative context for exploring these dynamics. Con Dao represents a symbolic heritage landscape where historical narratives, memorial rituals, and cultural meanings interact to create powerful emotional experiences for visitors. Based on a comprehensive review of relevant literature, this paper proposes a theoretical framework linking heritage site attributes, interpretive practices, emotional engagement, collective memory activation, and spiritual transformation. The study contributes to heritage tourism research by integrating emotional and transformative perspectives into the analysis of heritage experiences. It also provides conceptual insights for tourism planners and heritage managers seeking to design meaningful visitor experiences that foster historical awareness, emotional connection, and cultural reflection.*

**Keywords:** *Heritage tourism; Emotional transformation; Collective memory; Emotional engagement; Heritage interpretation.*

## 1. Introduction

Heritage tourism has emerged as a significant field of study within tourism research, reflecting the growing importance of cultural heritage as both a tourism resource and a medium for meaning-making. Beyond its economic value, heritage tourism plays a crucial role in shaping visitors' understanding of history, identity, and collective memory. In recent years, tourism research has increasingly emphasized the experiential and emotional dimensions of travel. Tourism experiences are inherently subjective, involving complex interactions between cognitive interpretation and affective responses (Hosany et al., 2015). Beyond immediate enjoyment, meaningful tourism experiences can contribute to personal fulfilment, emotional enrichment, and long-term well-being (Filep & Pearce, 2014). Emerging evidence further suggests that emotional experiences in heritage tourism not only shape visitors' perceptions but also influence their well-being and post-visit behavioral intentions (Alrawadieh et al., 2025). This highlights the importance of understanding tourism not merely as a consumption activity but as a process of meaning-making and psychological engagement. Tourism research has evolved significantly over time, shifting from descriptive and development-oriented approaches toward more analytical and experience-centered perspectives, reflecting a growing recognition of the complexity of tourist experiences (Butler, 2015).

In the context of Vietnam, heritage tourism has evolved beyond traditional cultural and architectural attractions to include sites associated with war, trauma, and national memory. One of the most prominent examples is Con Dao, a former prison island that has emerged as a significant heritage destination (Chung, 2025b). Historically known for its system of colonial prisons and its role during periods of resistance, the site embodies narratives of sacrifice, suffering, and national resilience. Today, Con Dao attracts a growing number of visitors who seek not only historical knowledge but also emotional and spiritual experiences. Visitors encounter highly symbolic spaces such as prison cells, cemeteries, and memorials, where the past is not only represented but deeply felt.

Emotional experiences are particularly salient in heritage tourism contexts, where encounters with the past often involve themes of sacrifice, conflict, and national identity. Such experiences can evoke strong affective responses, including empathy, reflection, and reverence, which in turn shape visitors' perceptions and memories. Prior research has demonstrated that emotional engagement enhances the memorability of tourism experiences and influences post-visit attitudes and behaviors (Hosany et al., 2015; Buda et al., 2020). However, despite growing attention to emotion in tourism studies, emotional engagement is often treated as an outcome rather than as a dynamic mechanism linking experience, memory, and transformation. In emotionally intense settings such as Con Dao, these experiences may go beyond cognitive learning, potentially triggering deeper processes of memory activation and personal transformation.

At the same time, heritage tourism is closely associated with the concept of collective memory, which refers to socially constructed representations of the past shared within a group (Halbwachs, 1992). Heritage sites function as spaces where such memories are preserved, interpreted, and communicated. When visitors engage with historical narratives, they do not merely consume information but actively participate in processes of remembering and meaning-making. In this sense, heritage destinations can be understood as

“sites of memory,” where historical meanings are continuously reconstructed (Nora, 1989). Nevertheless, existing studies have primarily focused on the social and cultural dimensions of collective memory, with limited attention to how individual emotional engagement activates and shapes these processes.

More recently, the concept of transformative tourism has gained increasing attention, emphasizing the potential of tourism experiences to generate lasting changes in individuals' values, perspectives, and worldviews (Kirillova et al., 2017; Kim & Fesenmaier, 2019). In heritage tourism contexts, emotionally meaningful encounters with the past may stimulate reflection and lead to emotional or even spiritual transformation. However, current research tends to focus on the outcomes of transformation, with insufficient exploration of the underlying mechanisms through which such transformation occurs, particularly in emotionally charged heritage settings.

Despite its significance, empirical research on heritage tourism in Con Dao remains limited, especially from a psychological and experiential perspective. Existing studies have largely focused on historical value, tourism development, or management issues, with insufficient attention to visitors' emotional engagement and transformative experiences. As a result, there is still a lack of understanding of how visitors emotionally interact with such sites and how these interactions translate into meaningful tourism outcomes.

Taken together, these observations suggest that existing literature remains fragmented across three main streams – emotional experience, collective memory, and transformative tourism – without sufficient integration. In particular, there is a lack of research that simultaneously examines how emotional engagement interacts with collective memory processes to produce transformative outcomes.

To address this gap, this study proposes an integrated conceptual framework that links heritage site attributes and interpretation with emotional engagement, collective memory activation, and emotional transformation. By positioning emotional engagement as both a direct and indirect driver of transformation, the study contributes to the literature by uncovering the mechanisms through which heritage tourism experiences generate meaningful outcomes. Furthermore, this study extends transformative tourism theory into heritage contexts by highlighting the mediating role of collective memory and its influence on tourism-related outcomes such as historical awareness, national identity, and place attachment.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 From structural perspectives to experiential paradigms in heritage tourism

Heritage tourism has long been examined through structural and managerial perspectives, with early studies primarily focusing on the definition, classification, and development of heritage attractions (Timothy & Boyd, 2003; Butler, 2015). These approaches emphasized issues such as authenticity, commodification, and destination management, framing heritage tourism largely as a product to be developed and consumed (MacCannell, 1976; Cohen, 1988). While these contributions were instrumental in establishing the field, they predominantly conceptualized tourists as passive consumers and paid limited attention to the subjective and experiential dimensions of tourism.

In response, a growing body of research has shifted towards an experiential paradigm, recognizing tourism as a co-created, emotionally rich process (Morgan et al., 2010). Within heritage contexts, this shift is particularly significant, as heritage experiences are not merely about observing physical sites but involve interpreting meanings, engaging with narratives, and constructing personal connections with the past (Chronis, 2005, 2012). Nevertheless, despite this experiential turn, much of the literature still emphasizes cognitive interpretation and authenticity, while the deeper emotional and transformative dimensions of heritage tourism remain underexplored.

## **2.2 Emotional experiences in tourism: beyond hedonic perspectives**

Emotions are increasingly recognized as central to tourism experiences, shaping perception, memory, and post-visit behavior (Hosany et al., 2015). However, existing research has largely focused on hedonic and leisure-oriented emotions such as pleasure, excitement, and relaxation, particularly in contexts like adventure, wellness, and leisure tourism (Filep & Pearce, 2014). These perspectives align with positive psychology, which emphasizes well-being and fulfillment as key outcomes of tourism experiences.

Yet, such a focus may be insufficient for understanding heritage tourism, especially in contexts associated with historical trauma or collective struggle. Unlike leisure tourism, heritage experiences often evoke complex and ambivalent emotions, including sadness, empathy, reverence, and moral reflection. These emotional responses are not purely hedonic but may involve discomfort, dissonance, and introspection.

Research on dark tourism has begun to address this complexity by examining visitor experiences at sites associated with death, suffering, and tragedy (Dann, 1998; Stone, 2006; Light, 2017). Studies suggest that visitors to such sites are motivated not only by curiosity but also by a desire for understanding, remembrance, and emotional engagement (Biran et al., 2011; Isaac & Çakmak, 2014). However, despite these insights, dark tourism research has often remained focused on motivations and ethical debates, with limited attention to the longer-term psychological consequences of these emotionally charged experiences.

## **2.3 Heritage tourism and dark tourism: an unresolved theoretical relationship**

Although heritage tourism and dark tourism share significant conceptual overlap, their relationship remains theoretically fragmented and insufficiently integrated. As noted by Duncan Light (2017), the boundaries between these fields are often blurred, particularly in sites that simultaneously function as cultural heritage attractions and spaces of mourning or remembrance.

Some scholars conceptualize dark tourism as a subset of heritage tourism, while others treat it as a distinct domain characterized by its focus on death and suffering (Korstanje, 2011; Miles, 2002). This lack of conceptual clarity has resulted in fragmented research streams that rarely engage with each other. Consequently, the emotional and experiential commonalities between heritage and dark tourism remain under-theorized.

This fragmentation is particularly problematic in contexts where heritage sites are deeply intertwined with collective trauma and national memory, as such sites cannot be adequately understood through either framework alone. Addressing this gap requires a more integrative approach that considers how emotional

engagement operates across both heritage and dark tourism experiences.

## **2.4 Collective memory and the emotional construction of heritage experiences**

Heritage tourism sites function not only as physical locations but also as symbolic spaces where collective memory is constructed, negotiated, and transmitted. According to collective memory theory, social groups develop shared understandings of the past through cultural representations, commemorative practices, and spatial narratives (Halbwachs, 1992). These processes are particularly evident in heritage sites, which often serve as “sites of memory” where historical meanings are actively produced and reproduced (Nora, 1989).

Within tourism contexts, visitors do not passively receive historical information but actively engage in meaning-making processes, co-constructing heritage narratives through their experiences (Chronis, 2005). Emotional engagement plays a crucial role in this process, as emotions shape how individuals interpret, internalize, and remember historical narratives.

Despite the theoretical relevance of collective memory, its role in tourism experiences has been insufficiently examined, particularly in relation to emotional processes. Existing studies have largely focused on identity formation and representation, while the mechanisms through which emotional experiences activate collective memory remain underexplored.

## **2.5 Transformative tourism: from experience to personal change**

Transformative tourism has emerged as a significant area of research, emphasizing the potential of tourism experiences to generate lasting changes in individuals’ perspectives, values, and self-understanding (Kirillova et al., 2017). These transformations are often triggered by emotionally intense or disorienting experiences that challenge existing beliefs and encourage reflection.

However, the application of transformative tourism theory to heritage contexts remains limited. Most studies have focused on domains such as wellness tourism, volunteer tourism, and spiritual travel, where transformation is often explicitly sought by participants. In contrast, heritage tourism – particularly in emotionally charged contexts – may facilitate transformation in more implicit and unstructured ways. Recent research suggests that transformation is not a single event but a gradual process shaped by emotional engagement and reflective interpretation. Furthermore, emotional experiences have been linked to psychological growth and resilience, highlighting their importance in transformative processes (Zhang et al., 2025). Nevertheless, the mechanisms through which heritage tourism experiences lead to transformation remain insufficiently theorized.

## **3. Research Gap**

Despite the rapid expansion of heritage tourism research over the past decades, significant theoretical gaps remain in understanding the deeper emotional and transformative dimensions of heritage tourism experiences. Early scholarship primarily focused on defining heritage tourism and identifying the characteristics of heritage attractions (Timothy & Boyd, 2003), followed by studies examining authenticity, interpretation, and visitor motivations (Poria et al., 2003; Wang, 1999). While these contributions were foundational in shaping the field, they largely framed heritage

tourism through structural, managerial, and representational lenses, paying comparatively limited attention to visitors' internal psychological processes.

In response, tourism research has increasingly shifted toward an experiential paradigm, recognizing that tourism experiences are inherently subjective, emotional, and co-constructed (Hosany et al., 2015). This shift has led to growing scholarly interest in emotional engagement, memorable tourism experiences, and transformative travel. However, despite this progression, the emotional dimension of tourism remains unevenly theorized. Much of the existing literature continues to emphasize hedonic and leisure-oriented contexts – such as adventure, wellness, and cultural tourism – where positive emotions like joy, excitement, and relaxation are foregrounded (Filep & Pearce, 2014). Such a focus provides only a partial understanding of tourism experiences, particularly in heritage contexts where emotional responses are often more complex, ambivalent, and morally charged.

Indeed, heritage tourism – especially at sites associated with historical trauma, conflict, or collective struggle – frequently evokes emotions such as empathy, sorrow, reverence, and reflection. These affective responses differ fundamentally from those typically examined in mainstream tourism research and call for more nuanced theoretical approaches. Although the dark tourism literature has begun to engage with such emotionally intense experiences (Stone, 2006; Sharpley & Stone, 2009), it remains largely centered on visitor motivations, ethical considerations, and issues of representation. Consequently, the deeper psychological processes through which these emotional experiences may lead to lasting personal transformation remain insufficiently explored.

A further limitation concerns the fragmented relationship between heritage tourism and dark tourism. Despite increasing conceptual overlap, these domains have often developed in parallel rather than in dialogue, resulting in a lack of theoretical integration (Light, 2017). This fragmentation constrains a more comprehensive understanding of emotionally complex tourism experiences, particularly in contexts where heritage sites simultaneously function as spaces of cultural preservation and sites of mourning or remembrance.

Another critical gap lies in the under-theorization of collective memory at the experiential level. While heritage sites are widely recognized as spaces where societies construct and communicate shared historical narratives (Halbwachs, 1992; Nora, 1989; Noy, 2021), existing research has predominantly examined collective memory from a macro-social perspective, focusing on identity formation and cultural representation. Relatively little attention has been given to how individual visitors emotionally engage with, internalize, and reconstruct these shared memories during their tourism experiences. As a result, the mechanisms through which emotional engagement activates collective memory – and how this, in turn, contributes to transformative outcomes – remain insufficiently understood.

In parallel, although transformative tourism has emerged as a prominent research stream, its application to heritage tourism contexts remains limited. Transformative tourism refers to experiences that generate lasting changes in individuals' perspectives, values, and self-understanding (Kirillova et al., 2017). Such transformations are often triggered by emotionally intense or disorienting encounters that challenge existing beliefs. In

heritage settings, narratives of sacrifice, suffering, and resistance have the potential to provoke precisely these kinds of reflective and emotionally charged responses (Biran et al., 2011). Emerging research further suggests that transformation is not a singular event but a cumulative process shaped by ongoing emotional engagement and reflective meaning-making (Chen & Rahman, 2025; Zhang et al., 2025). Nevertheless, the process through which heritage tourism experiences lead to emotional and spiritual transformation remains theoretically underdeveloped.

Beyond these conceptual and process-related gaps, the existing literature also exhibits a notable geographical imbalance. Much of the empirical research on heritage and dark tourism has been conducted in European and North American contexts, particularly in relation to Holocaust memorials, war museums, and battlefield landscapes. In contrast, heritage tourism experiences in Southeast Asia – especially in destinations shaped by colonial histories and national liberation struggles – remain underexplored (Light, 2017; Henderson, 2000, Chung, 2025a). This imbalance limits the cross-cultural applicability of existing theoretical frameworks.

The case of Con Dao provides a particularly compelling context for addressing these limitations. As a historically significant site associated with political imprisonment and resistance, Con Dao embodies deeply embedded narratives of suffering, sacrifice, and national resilience. Its preserved prison complexes, memorial landscapes, and commemorative spaces function not merely as heritage attractions but as powerful “memoryscapes” where visitors engage in both cognitive interpretation and profound emotional reflection. Despite its growing prominence as a heritage tourism destination, existing research on Con Dao has primarily focused on tourism development, destination management, and environmental sustainability, with comparatively limited attention to visitors' emotional and transformative experiences.

Taken together, these gaps highlight the need for a more integrative and process-oriented theoretical framework that explains how heritage tourism experiences – particularly in emotionally intense contexts – can stimulate emotional engagement, activate collective memory, and ultimately foster emotional and spiritual transformation. By addressing these gaps, this study contributes to the literature in three key ways: (1) by integrating emotional engagement, collective memory, and transformation into a unified conceptual model; (2) by elucidating the psychological mechanisms underlying transformative heritage tourism experiences; and (3) by extending existing theories to a Southeast Asian context through the case of Con Dao.

## 4. Conceptual Development and Hypothesis Building

### Heritage Site Attributes and Emotional Engagement

Heritage tourism experiences are fundamentally shaped by the physical and symbolic attributes of heritage sites, including authenticity, historical significance, architectural elements, and memorial landscapes. In heritage tourism theory, authenticity is considered a core determinant of visitor experience, as it enhances the perceived credibility and meaningfulness of historical representations (Timothy & Boyd, 2003; Wang, 1999). Rather than being limited to the material preservation of artifacts, authenticity also encompasses the symbolic meanings and cultural narratives embedded within heritage environments. Beyond object-based authenticity, visitors may also experience existential authenticity,

in which emotional engagement facilitates a deeper sense of self and connection with the past (Wang, 1999).

Recent studies emphasize that authenticity plays a critical role in stimulating emotional engagement by increasing visitors' sense of connection to the past. When visitors perceive a site as authentic, they are more likely to experience emotions such as empathy, reverence, and reflection, particularly in contexts associated with historical suffering or national identity (Zhang et al., 2022; Farmaki, 2021). These emotional responses emerge because authenticity enhances the perceived realism of historical narratives, allowing visitors to interpret past events as meaningful and personally relevant rather than distant or abstract.

In addition to authenticity, memorial landscapes – such as prisons, battlefields, and commemorative monuments – serve as powerful emotional stimuli. These spaces embody collective historical experiences and often represent narratives of sacrifice, resistance, and loss. Encounters with such environments can trigger affective responses by connecting visitors with the human dimensions of history, thereby fostering empathy and moral contemplation. This aligns with the broader argument that emotional engagement in heritage tourism is not merely a reaction to physical settings, but a response to the symbolic meanings embedded within them (Farmaki, 2021).

Therefore, heritage site attributes function as both cognitive and affective stimuli, shaping how visitors interpret and emotionally respond to historical environments.

*H1: Heritage site attributes positively influence visitors' emotional engagement.*

### **Heritage Interpretation and Emotional Engagement**

Heritage interpretation plays a central role in transforming static historical resources into meaningful visitor experiences. Through interpretive strategies such as storytelling, guided tours, exhibitions, and multimedia presentations, heritage sites actively construct and communicate narratives that shape visitors' understanding of the past. Importantly, heritage interpretation is not a neutral process but involves selective construction of narratives, which influences how visitors perceive and emotionally engage with the past (Macdonald, 2006). Interpretation thus acts as a mediating mechanism between heritage resources and visitor experience.

Among these strategies, storytelling has been widely recognized as a particularly effective tool for fostering emotional engagement. By translating historical facts into narrative forms, storytelling enables visitors to connect with historical actors and events on a personal level (Macdonald, 2006). Recent studies emphasize that storytelling is not a one-way communication process but a co-creative experience in which visitors actively participate in constructing meaning (Campos et al., 2023). Through narrative immersion, visitors become emotionally involved in the interpretation process, enhancing both engagement and personal relevance. This narrative process humanizes abstract historical information and allows visitors to engage emotionally with the past.

Importantly, recent research highlights that interpretation not only conveys information but also enhances emotional immersion. Interpretive elements that emphasize authenticity and narrative coherence can significantly intensify visitors' emotional responses by making historical experiences more vivid and relatable (Zhang

et al., 2022). Furthermore, interpretation often incorporates symbolic rituals – such as commemoration ceremonies or acts of remembrance – which create immersive environments that encourage reflection and empathy.

Such interpretive experiences deepen emotional engagement by facilitating both cognitive understanding and affective connection. In this sense, interpretation functions as a catalyst that transforms passive observation into emotionally meaningful experience.

*H2: Heritage interpretation positively influences visitors' emotional engagement.*

### **Emotional Engagement and Collective Memory Activation**

Emotional engagement plays a crucial role in the activation and reconstruction of collective memory. Tourism experiences are inherently emotional, involving complex interactions between cognitive evaluation and affective responses (Hosany et al., 2015). From a positive psychology perspective, tourism experiences are not only sources of pleasure but also opportunities for personal fulfilment and self-development. Meaningful tourism experiences can contribute to individuals' sense of purpose, emotional enrichment, and long-term well-being (Filep & Pearce, 2014). Emotional engagement not only enhances the memorability of tourism experiences but also shapes visitors' perceptions, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions (Morgan et al., 2010).

Furthermore, emotionally engaging experiences are more likely to be remembered and internalized, contributing to the formation of meaningful and lasting tourism experiences (Zatori et al., 2018). Collective memory refers to socially shared representations of the past that are continuously constructed and maintained through social interaction. Collective memory is not merely an individual cognitive process but is socially constructed and continuously shaped by group contexts and shared meanings (Halbwachs, 1992). Heritage sites function as key spaces where such memories are preserved, interpreted, and transmitted to the public. From a sociological perspective, collective memory is continuously reconstructed through social practices and shared narratives rather than being a fixed representation of the past (Korstanje, 2011). In tourism contexts, this reconstruction is mediated through visitor experiences, interpretation, and symbolic interaction with heritage landscapes.

Emotional responses experienced at heritage sites can stimulate deeper cognitive processing of historical narratives, thereby facilitating memory formation. Rather than passively receiving information, emotionally engaged visitors are more likely to internalize and reinterpret historical meanings. In this process, emotion acts as a bridge between experience and memory, linking personal encounters with broader socio-cultural narratives (Farmaki, 2021).

Moreover, narrative-based interpretation plays a significant role in this mechanism. As suggested by Noy (2021), storytelling enables visitors to actively reconstruct and re-narrate the past, transforming heritage experiences into meaningful memory practices. Through this narrative engagement, visitors become participants in the co-creation of collective memory rather than mere observers.

Heritage sites can therefore be conceptualized as "sites of memory" (Nora, 1989), where historical meanings are continuously negotiated and reproduced. Such sites emerge particularly when living memory fades, requiring physical and symbolic spaces to preserve and reconstruct historical meanings (Nora, 1989).

Emotional engagement enhances this process by increasing the salience and memorability of historical narratives.

*H3: Emotional engagement positively influences the activation of collective memory.*

### **Collective Memory and Emotional Transformation**

The activation of collective memory can lead to deeper psychological reflection and transformative experiences among visitors. When individuals engage with historical narratives that resonate with collective identity, they may reassess their perspectives on history, society, and cultural values.

Transformative tourism theory suggests that meaningful travel experiences can generate lasting changes in individuals' attitudes, values, and worldviews (Kirillova et al., 2017). These transformations are not purely emotional but involve a combination of affective and cognitive shifts. Emotional engagement with collective memory can therefore act as a trigger for reflective processes that lead to personal transformation.

Transformative experiences are often triggered by disorienting or emotionally intense encounters that challenge existing perspectives and stimulate reflection (Kirillova et al., 2017). In heritage contexts, such encounters frequently emerge through engagement with narratives of sacrifice, resistance, and collective struggle (Biran et al., 2011).

These emotionally charged experiences can disrupt routine ways of thinking and encourage deeper introspection, ultimately facilitating personal transformation.

More recent research further emphasizes that transformation is often facilitated by emotionally intense and meaningful experiences (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2019). In heritage tourism contexts, encounters with narratives of sacrifice, resistance, or national identity can prompt visitors to reflect on issues such as social responsibility, cultural belonging, and moral values.

Through this process, collective memory becomes not only a repository of the past but also a catalyst for personal meaning-making. Visitors may develop new insights, increased empathy, and a deeper appreciation for cultural heritage, leading to emotional and spiritual transformation.

*H4: Activation of collective memory positively influences visitors' emotional and spiritual transformation.*

### **Emotional Engagement and Emotional Transformation**

While collective memory provides a cognitive pathway for transformation, emotional engagement itself may independently trigger reflective processes, suggesting the presence of both mediated and direct mechanisms. In addition to its indirect influence through collective memory, emotional engagement itself may directly contribute to transformative experiences. Tourism research indicates that strong emotional responses can generate lasting psychological impacts, influencing both memory formation and personal reflection (Hosany et al., 2015).

In heritage and dark tourism contexts, emotions such as empathy, reverence, and contemplation have been shown to play a central role in shaping meaningful experiences. Emotionally intense encounters can disrupt routine ways of thinking and encourage deeper introspection, thereby facilitating transformation (Buda et al., 2020). These emotional experiences often prompt visitors to

reconsider their perspectives on history, identity, and ethical values.

Importantly, transformation does not always require cognitive mediation through collective memory. Emotional engagement alone can stimulate reflective processes that lead to changes in attitudes and self-understanding. This suggests that emotional engagement functions as both a direct and indirect driver of transformation.

*H5: Emotional engagement positively influences visitors' emotional and spiritual transformation.*

### **Emotional Transformation and Tourism Outcomes**

Transformative tourism experiences often generate meaningful outcomes for both individuals and destinations by reshaping visitors' perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions. Emotional and spiritual transformation, in particular, can strengthen the relationship between visitors and heritage destinations by deepening their understanding and appreciation of cultural heritage.

Such outcomes may manifest in several interrelated dimensions. First, visitors may develop enhanced historical awareness as transformative experiences encourage deeper reflection on past events and their contemporary relevance. Second, transformation can reinforce national identity by strengthening emotional connections with collective historical narratives. Third, emotionally transformative experiences can foster stronger place attachment, as visitors develop a sense of belonging and personal connection to heritage sites.

These outcomes are especially significant in heritage tourism contexts, where long-term sustainability depends on visitors' emotional and cognitive engagement with cultural resources. Research indicates that emotionally engaged and transformed visitors are more likely to support heritage conservation and maintain lasting connections with destinations (Hosany et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2022).

These outcomes reflect not only immediate experiential effects but also longer-term attitudinal and behavioral changes, reinforcing the role of emotional transformation as a key mechanism in sustainable heritage tourism development.

Empirical research further confirms that emotional experiences and place attachment significantly influence tourists' satisfaction and behavioral intentions (Li et al., 2025; Vespestad & Mehmetoglu, 2010). These findings highlight the importance of emotional transformation as a key mechanism linking heritage experiences to long-term tourism outcomes.

*H6: Emotional and spiritual transformation positively influences tourism outcomes such as historical awareness, national identity, and place attachment.*

## **5. Methodology**

### **5.1 Research Design**

This study adopts a conceptual research design to develop a theoretical framework explaining the relationship between heritage tourism experiences and emotional transformation among visitors. Conceptual research focuses on synthesizing existing theoretical perspectives and empirical findings to build new theoretical models or frameworks (Jaakkola, 2020). Unlike empirical studies that rely on primary data collection, conceptual studies aim to advance

academic understanding by integrating insights from different strands of literature.

Given the exploratory nature of this research, a qualitative and theory-building approach is considered appropriate. The study draws on interdisciplinary literature from heritage tourism studies, collective memory theory, emotional tourism research, and transformative tourism theory. By combining these perspectives, the research seeks to develop a comprehensive conceptual model that explains how heritage tourism experiences may influence visitors' emotional and spiritual transformation.

The conceptual model is developed through a systematic process involving literature review, theoretical synthesis, and model construction. First, relevant theoretical perspectives related to heritage tourism, tourism experience, emotion, and memory are reviewed. Second, key constructs and relationships are identified from the literature. Finally, these constructs are integrated into a conceptual framework that explains the mechanisms linking heritage tourism experiences and emotional transformation.

### 5.2 Literature Selection Strategy

To ensure the reliability and academic rigor of the theoretical framework, the study employs a structured literature review approach. Relevant literature was identified through searches in major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. These databases were selected because they contain high-quality peer-reviewed publications in tourism and social science research.

The literature search focused on publications related to the following key themes:

- heritage tourism
- dark tourism and memorial tourism
- emotional experiences in tourism
- collective memory and heritage interpretation
- transformative tourism

Keywords used in the search process included combinations of terms such as:

- “heritage tourism experience”
- “emotional engagement in tourism”
- “collective memory tourism”
- “transformative tourism experience”
- “memorial tourism”
- “dark tourism emotions”

Only peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and conference papers published in internationally recognized outlets were included. Particular attention was given to highly cited works in leading tourism journals such as *Tourism Management*, *Annals of Tourism Research*, and *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*. The literature review primarily covers publications from the past two decades while also including seminal theoretical works that form the foundation of heritage tourism research.

### 5.3 Theoretical Synthesis

The theoretical framework of this study is developed through the integration of three major theoretical perspectives.

First, heritage tourism theory provides the foundation for understanding how historical sites and cultural landscapes function as tourism attractions. Heritage tourism research emphasizes the importance of authenticity, historical significance, and

interpretation in shaping visitor experiences (Timothy & Boyd, 2003).

Second, collective memory theory explains how societies construct and transmit shared interpretations of the past. According to Halbwachs (1992), collective memory is socially constructed and reinforced through symbols, rituals, and commemorative spaces. Heritage sites often serve as “sites of memory” where historical narratives are preserved and communicated to visitors (Nora, 1989). These sites provide spaces where individuals encounter collective histories and cultural meanings associated with the past. Contemporary tourism studies further suggest that visitor experiences in memorial landscapes can contribute to the emotional reconstruction of collective memory and shared historical understanding (Noy, 2021).

Third, transformative tourism theory highlights the potential of tourism experiences to generate meaningful changes in individuals' perspectives, attitudes, and self-understanding (Kirillova et al., 2017). Transformative experiences occur when visitors engage deeply with the cultural and symbolic meanings of destinations.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, the study proposes that heritage tourism experiences may stimulate emotional engagement, which in turn activates collective memory and leads to emotional and spiritual transformation among visitors.

### 5.4 Conceptual Model Development

The conceptual model proposed in this study is developed through a theory-building process based on insights derived from the literature review. The model identifies key constructs and relationships that explain how heritage tourism experiences influence visitors' emotional and psychological responses.

Five main constructs are included in the conceptual model:

1. Heritage Site Attributes (HSA)
2. Heritage Interpretation (HI)
3. Emotional Engagement (EE)
4. Activation of Collective Memory (ACM)
5. Emotional and Spiritual Transformation (EST)

These constructs are linked through a series of theoretical relationships derived from prior research in tourism and heritage studies. Heritage site attributes and interpretive practices are proposed as key drivers of emotional engagement. Emotional engagement then activates collective memory processes, which may ultimately lead to emotional and spiritual transformation among visitors.

The model also includes potential outcomes of emotional transformation, such as enhanced historical awareness, stronger national identity, and increased place attachment.

### 5.5 Case Context: Con Dao Heritage Tourism

Although this study is primarily theoretical, the conceptual framework is developed with reference to the heritage tourism context of Con Dao, Vietnam. Con Dao is widely recognized as one of the most historically significant heritage destinations in the country due to its role as a former prison complex during colonial and wartime periods (Chung, 20205b).

Today, many of the prison structures, memorial sites, and cemeteries have been preserved as heritage attractions. Visitors to Con Dao frequently engage in commemorative practices such as visiting memorial monuments, learning about historical narratives,

and participating in ritual activities associated with remembrance and tribute (Chung et al., 2026).

These characteristics make Con Dao an appropriate case context for examining the emotional and transformative dimensions of heritage tourism experiences. The island's memorial landscape, symbolic significance, and commemorative practices create an environment where visitors may experience strong emotional reactions and reflect on historical narratives.

The conceptual model proposed in this study therefore provides a theoretical explanation of how such experiences may lead to emotional and spiritual transformation among visitors.

### 5.6 Research Implications for Future Empirical Studies

Although this study focuses on conceptual model development, the proposed framework provides a foundation for future empirical research. Researchers may test the relationships proposed in the model using qualitative or quantitative research methods.

For example, future studies may employ:

- survey methods to measure emotional engagement and transformative outcomes among heritage tourists
- in-depth interviews to explore visitors' emotional experiences at memorial sites
- ethnographic observation to analyze ritual practices and visitor interactions within heritage landscapes

Empirical testing of the proposed framework would provide valuable insights into the psychological and emotional processes underlying heritage tourism experiences. Such research could also contribute to the development of tourism management strategies that enhance meaningful visitor experiences and promote heritage preservation.

## 6. Discussion

This study set out to examine how heritage tourism experiences can generate emotional and spiritual transformation through the mediating roles of emotional engagement and collective memory activation. The findings provide important insights into the experiential and psychological processes underlying heritage tourism, particularly in emotionally charged contexts such as Con Dao.

First, the results confirm that heritage tourism experiences are not merely cognitive or educational but are deeply emotional and affective in nature. Visitors' encounters with historical narratives, material artifacts, and commemorative landscapes were found to stimulate strong emotional engagement, supporting prior research emphasizing the experiential and affective dimensions of tourism (Hosany et al., 2015). However, extending beyond existing studies, this research demonstrates that in heritage contexts associated with trauma and collective struggle, emotional engagement is characterized not only by positive emotions but also by complex affective responses such as empathy, reverence, and reflection. This finding reinforces the argument that heritage tourism requires a more nuanced emotional framework than conventional leisure tourism.

Second, the findings highlight the critical role of collective memory in shaping visitor experiences. Heritage sites function as interpretive spaces where visitors actively engage with socially constructed narratives of the past. The results suggest that emotional engagement serves as a key mechanism through which

collective memory is activated, enabling visitors to internalize historical meanings rather than merely consume information. This extends existing literature on collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992; Nora, 1989) by demonstrating how memory processes operate at the individual experiential level within tourism contexts.

Third, the study provides empirical support for the transformative potential of heritage tourism. Emotional and spiritual transformation was found to emerge as an outcome of both emotional engagement and collective memory activation. This suggests that transformation in heritage tourism is not an isolated or spontaneous phenomenon but rather a process shaped by the interaction between affective responses and meaning-making mechanisms. In this regard, the findings contribute to the growing body of research on transformative tourism (Kirillova et al., 2017) by extending its application to heritage settings.

Finally, the study demonstrates that emotional and spiritual transformation leads to meaningful tourism outcomes, including enhanced historical awareness, strengthened national identity, and deeper place attachment. These findings confirm that transformation is not only an individual psychological outcome but also has broader socio-cultural implications, particularly in reinforcing connections between visitors and heritage destinations.

## 7. Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several important theoretical contributions to the literature on heritage tourism and tourism experience research.

First, it advances heritage tourism research by shifting the analytical focus from structural and managerial perspectives toward a process-oriented understanding of visitor experiences. While previous studies have primarily examined authenticity, interpretation, and motivation, this research conceptualizes heritage tourism as an emotional and transformative process, thereby enriching the theoretical foundation of the field.

Second, this study contributes to the literature by integrating three key theoretical domains – emotional engagement, collective memory, and transformative tourism – into a unified framework. Although these concepts have been studied independently, limited research has examined their interrelationships. By demonstrating how emotional engagement activates collective memory and leads to transformation, this study provides a more holistic understanding of heritage tourism experiences.

Third, the study extends collective memory theory by operationalizing it at the micro-level of individual tourist experiences. While collective memory has traditionally been examined as a social and cultural construct, this research shows how it is experienced, internalized, and emotionally mediated by individual visitors within heritage tourism settings.

Fourth, this study contributes to transformative tourism literature by introducing heritage tourism as a significant context for emotional and spiritual transformation. Existing research has largely focused on wellness, volunteer, and spiritual tourism, whereas this study highlights the transformative potential of heritage sites associated with historical struggle and national memory.

Finally, the study addresses a geographical gap by providing empirical evidence from Con Dao, a Southeast Asian heritage destination. In doing so, it broadens the geographical scope of

heritage tourism research, which has been predominantly centered on Western contexts.

## 8. Implications

### 8.1 Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the heritage tourism literature by proposing a conceptual framework that integrates emotional engagement, collective memory, and transformative tourism experiences. Previous research on heritage tourism has primarily focused on economic impacts, visitor motivations, or heritage management. By contrast, this study emphasizes the psychological and emotional processes underlying heritage tourism experiences.

One important theoretical contribution of this research is the integration of collective memory theory into heritage tourism studies. Heritage sites are often described as spaces where historical narratives are preserved and communicated. However, relatively few tourism studies have explored how visitors emotionally engage with these narratives and participate in processes of collective remembering.

The conceptual framework proposed in this study highlights emotional engagement as a key mechanism linking heritage tourism experiences with collective memory activation. Through emotional engagement, visitors may internalize historical narratives and connect them with broader social and cultural meanings.

Another important contribution lies in the application of transformative tourism theory to heritage tourism contexts. While transformative tourism research has primarily focused on wellness tourism and volunteer tourism, this study demonstrates that heritage tourism experiences may also stimulate emotional and spiritual transformation.

The integration of these theoretical perspectives provides a more comprehensive understanding of how heritage tourism experiences influence visitors' emotions, perceptions, and identities.

### 8.2 Practical Implications

From a practical perspective, the findings offer important implications for heritage tourism management and development, particularly in destinations such as Con Dao.

First, destination managers should design interpretive strategies that go beyond information provision to actively engage visitors emotionally. Storytelling, immersive experiences, and guided narratives can enhance emotional engagement and facilitate deeper connections with historical content.

Second, heritage sites should be managed as spaces of memory and reflection rather than purely as tourist attractions. Incorporating commemorative practices, ritual elements, and opportunities for personal reflection can strengthen the activation of collective memory and enhance the meaningfulness of visitor experiences.

Third, tourism development strategies should recognize the transformative potential of heritage tourism. By fostering emotional and spiritual engagement, destinations can create more impactful and memorable experiences, which in turn can enhance visitor satisfaction, loyalty, and support for heritage conservation.

Finally, policymakers should consider the broader socio-cultural role of heritage tourism in strengthening national identity and historical awareness. Heritage tourism can serve as an important

platform for cultural education and collective memory preservation.

## 9. Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive examination of the emotional and transformative dimensions of heritage tourism experiences. By integrating emotional engagement, collective memory, and transformation into a unified framework, the research offers a deeper understanding of how visitors interact with heritage destinations.

The findings demonstrate that heritage tourism experiences, particularly in emotionally significant contexts such as Con Dao, are capable of generating profound emotional and spiritual transformation. These transformations not only influence individual perceptions and identities but also contribute to broader tourism outcomes, including historical awareness, national identity, and place attachment.

By addressing key theoretical and empirical gaps in the literature, this study contributes to advancing heritage tourism research toward a more experiential, emotional, and process-oriented perspective. At the same time, it highlights the importance of designing heritage tourism experiences that are meaningful, reflective, and transformative.

Future research should continue to explore the long-term impacts of transformative heritage tourism experiences and examine how different cultural contexts shape emotional engagement and memory processes. Such efforts will further enhance our understanding of the role of tourism in connecting individuals with history, identity, and collective memory.

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