

Between geopolitics and cultural imagination: the Con Dao archipelago

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Located 230 km south of the Vietnamese mainland, the Con Dao archipelago is a small yet highly significant site within the cultural imaginary of Vietnam. Historically, the archipelago was widely acknowledged as a strategic site in the middle of the South China Seas. It was visited by Marco Polo in 1294 and occupied briefly by the British East India company in 1702 (Hayward & Tran, 2014). At multiple points, it functioned as a prison including, most notably, under French colonial occupation during which time it became notorious for its harsh treatment of both political and common-law prisoners. During the American War, the island operated as a camp for political prisoners. Key political figures such as Vietnam's second president, Ton Duc Thang, spent long periods imprisoned on the island. Today the main island of Con Son possesses multiple sites dedicated to the memorialisation of those imprisoned on the island and the brutality of the French colonial prison system is reimagined as a site of political education and struggle.

Unlike the larger island of Phu Quoc located on the border with Cambodia, Con Dao does not currently possess the status of a special economic zone. Development of an international tourism sector remains limited yet is also perceived as key to the archipelago's future economic sustainability. Until very recently, access to the main island, Con Son, was limited to flights from Ho Chi Minh City and slow ferries from Soc Trang and Vung Tau. In February 2019 a new high-speed ferry was launched reducing the journey from Vung Tau to 3½ hours. The impact of this increased access is likely to be significant not only in bringing an increased number of visitors to the island but in shifting the type of visitor. At present the majority of visitors to the island come from the North of Vietnam. Groups of visitors are often comprised of multiple generations of both genders. With the exception of one or two luxury resorts aimed at international, high-end tourism, the majority of accommodation offered on the island consists of small, family-run guesthouses.

Con Dao is also a hotspot for biodiversity conservation in Vietnam (Ringer, 2002). The isolation of the place helps to maintain its appearance as 'untouched'. Most of Con Son island is managed by Con Dao national park, the second largest marine park in the country, with a total area of about 6,000 ha on land and 14,000 ha at sea (Con Dao National Park, 2019). This is home to 1,077 plant species and 160 mammal species, representing both the endemic forest and marine ecosystems in Vietnam (Con Dao National Park, 2019). Con Dao's high biodiversity has high implications for Vietnam's marine conservation because it has recently been recognized by IUCN as an Important Marine Mammal Area-IMMA (MMPATF, 2019). The park is conducting a project to conserve endangered green turtles (*Chelonia mydas*) by protecting their 17 laying-egg fields. It is also the only area of Vietnam where there is a population of dugong (*Dugong dugon*) (Con Dao National Park, 2019). Famous for its heritage and biodiversity, Con Dao can be considered as an archipelago of contrasts. Notorious prisons and cemeteries juxtapose with green forests and marine ecosystems. Visitors are offered tours to both 'dark' places and 'green' places, and tourism companies are struggling to find the right messages for both dark

tourism and ecotourism. On another level, the island's economic development appears at odds with heritage memorialization and conservation (Hayward & Tran, 2014).

This special section seeks to capture the complex identity of the Con Dao archipelago at a moment when this identity is about to undergo significant transformation. In focusing on a single archipelago, the aim is to foster interdisciplinary approaches to a small and highly contested space. Our intention is to explore the ways in which the archipelago challenges easy binaries often applied to the prison island turned holiday resort. While Con Dao has been described as Southeast Asia's 'Devil's Island' (Schneider, 2015) due to its use as French colonial prison, the presentation of the site eschews the usual forms of representation and narratives associated with dark tourism found elsewhere. The specific forms of memorial tourism which exceed a straightforward nationalist agenda render straightforward dichotomies of hell-paradise, prison-resort obsolete in this context. Historically, Con Dao has inspired a range of memoirs including those of former prisoners as well as colonial travel writers. More recent scholarly literature on Con Dao has focused on its role within a wider colonial history (Zinoman, 2001) or the tension between conservation and development (Hayward & Tran, 2014). The complexity of the space thus requires further unpacking via a range of disciplinary frameworks which might include but are by no means limited to anthropology, sociology, history, geography, politics, visual and literary cultural studies. We also invite articles which situate Con Dao within comparative perspectives both geographically, considering other islands and archipelagos located off the coast of Vietnam and Southeast Asia, and historically, exploring its role within wider networks of colonial occupation such as France's use of islands within its system of transportation and deportation. At the same time, articles should consider the significance of engaging critically with the complex space of Con Dao for the wider context of island studies, drawing, where appropriate, on its existing literature and conceptual frameworks.

This special section will be published in November 2020 in *Island Studies Journal* 15(2), but individual papers will be published online ahead of print as and when they complete the peer review and editorial process. *Island Studies Journal* (ISJ) is a web-based, freely downloadable, open access, peer reviewed, electronic journal that publishes papers advancing and critiquing the study of issues affecting or involving islands. It is listed and abstracted in Scopus and Web of Science (Social Science Citations Index).

For further information, or if you are interested in submitting a paper, contact guest editor Sophie Fuggle (sophie.fuggle@ntu.ac.uk). Manuscripts should preferably be between 5,000–8,000 words and must be written in excellent English (prepared in accordance with the ISJ submission guidelines: http://islandstudies.ca/guidelines_instructions.html).

Submissions should reach Sophie Fuggle by 30 November 2019 at the latest to be considered for this special section (please use the title 'Special Section on the Con Dao Archipelago' as the e-mail subject).

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