



Historical and Cultural-Artistic Values of Khmer Pagoda Architecture in Southern Vietnam: A Case Study of Doi Pagoda (Can Tho City, Vietnam)

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Abstract

This study examines the historical and cultural-artistic values of Khmer pagoda architecture in Southern Vietnam through a case study of Doi Pagoda (currently in Can Tho City, formerly in Soc Trang Province). Established in 1569, the pagoda is closely associated with the formation and long-term development of the Khmer community and reflects the continuity of ancient cultural traditions as well as the evolution of Theravada Buddhism in the region. Despite undergoing multiple phases of restoration, Doi Pagoda has preserved its spatial organization, religious functions, and distinctive symbolic system.

Architecturally, the pagoda exemplifies key characteristics of Khmer pagodas in Southern Vietnam, including a spatial layout integrated with the natural environment, a centrally positioned main hall, and a well-organized system of auxiliary structures. Its decorative art features a rich array of symbolic motifs such as Naga, Krud, and Kinnari, together with mural paintings and reliefs that enhance aesthetic expression while conveying religious meanings. The architectural space also functions as a setting for traditional festivals, demonstrating the close relationship between built environment and community cultural practices.

From a cultural-artistic perspective, Doi Pagoda represents an integrated system in which architecture, sculpture, painting, and folk beliefs coexist and interact. These elements reflect the worldview and philosophical orientation of the Khmer people while also illustrating processes of cultural interaction among Kinh, Khmer, and Hoa communities. In the contemporary context, the pagoda continues to serve as a religious, cultural, and tourism center, although it faces increasing challenges related to conservation under the pressures of urbanization and tourism development.

This study contributes to the literature by providing an integrated analysis of architecture, cultural practice, and community life, thereby framing Doi Pagoda as a form of living heritage and offering a scientific basis for the conservation and promotion of Khmer cultural heritage in Southern Vietnam.

Keywords: Doi Pagoda, Khmer pagoda architecture, cultural heritage, Theravada Buddhism, living heritage

1. Introduction

Within the cultural space of the Khmer community in Southern Vietnam, the pagoda occupies a central position in religious, social, and cultural life. It functions not only as a site for the practice of Theravada Buddhism but also as an important cultural institution where educational activities, festivals, artistic expressions, and communal interactions take place. In the traditional phum soc structure, the pagoda shapes spiritual life, contributes to the organization of social order, maintains moral values, and facilitates the transmission of cultural knowledge across generations. Therefore, Khmer pagoda architecture should not be

understood merely as a physical construction but as a material manifestation of the cultural value system and worldview of the community.

Among the system of Khmer pagodas in Southern Vietnam, Doi Pagoda represents a typical example with a long historical development and distinctive cultural characteristics. The pagoda not only clearly reflects the features of traditional Khmer architecture but is also closely associated with the natural ecological environment and the local community's way of life. The presence of a large bat colony within the pagoda grounds constitutes a unique ecological phenomenon, rarely found in other Khmer pagodas, and contributes to both the popular name and the distinctive identity of the site.

Doi Pagoda was established in 1569 by Thach Ut and has undergone multiple phases of restoration and transformation to achieve its present appearance. Throughout its existence, the pagoda has functioned not only as a religious center but also as a place for preserving and developing the cultural and artistic values of the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam. Architectural elements, sculpture, painting, and decorative motifs within the pagoda demonstrate refined craftsmanship while reflecting the aesthetic concepts and religious thinking of the community. In particular, the integration of architectural form, ethnic cultural elements, and the natural landscape has created a distinctive cultural space in which human life, religious belief, and the ecological environment coexist in a harmonious relationship.

Since 1999, Doi Pagoda has been recognized as a national historical and cultural monument and has gradually become an important destination for cultural and spiritual tourism in Southern Vietnam. The development of tourism has contributed to promoting the image of the site and supporting the local economy. However, it has also posed challenges for conservation, especially in maintaining architectural authenticity and the stability of the ecological system. In this context, research on Doi Pagoda is not only academically significant but also practically meaningful for heritage preservation and promotion.

Although Doi Pagoda has been mentioned in several studies on Khmer culture in Southern Vietnam, these works have mainly approached the subject from isolated perspectives such as history, religion, or visual arts. There remains a lack of comprehensive studies that systematically analyze the interrelationship between architecture, culture, and community life. This research gap highlights the need for interdisciplinary approaches to clarify the role of the pagoda as an integrated cultural space.

Based on this context, the present study focuses on analyzing the historical and cultural artistic values of Khmer pagoda architecture in Southern Vietnam through the case study of Doi Pagoda. The research aims to clarify the process of formation and development of the pagoda, examine its architectural characteristics and artistic symbolic system, and identify its role in the cultural and social life of the Khmer community. Accordingly, the study contributes to providing a scientific basis for the conservation and promotion of cultural heritage in the contemporary context, while offering reference materials for further research on Khmer architecture and culture in Southern Vietnam.

This study contributes by framing Khmer pagoda architecture as a form of living heritage integrating space, ritual, and community practice.

2. Literature Review And Research Methodology

2.1. Literature Review

Research on Doi Pagoda and the system of Khmer pagodas in Southern Vietnam has been addressed in numerous studies across the fields of history, culture, and religion. One of the foundational sources is *Soc Trang Provincial Monograph*, compiled under the direction of the Soc Trang Provincial Party Committee and the People's Committee. This work provides comprehensive information on natural conditions, historical development, socio economic context, and local cultural characteristics. In the section on beliefs and religion, Doi Pagoda is described through its distinctive features, particularly the presence of a large bat colony and its biological patterns associated with the sacred space of the pagoda. These observations not only explain the origin of the pagoda's name but also reflect the community's perception of sacredness in religious life. The study also affirms the historical and cultural significance of the pagoda through its recognition as a national heritage site (Soc Trang Provincial Party Committee, 2012).

In addition, the study by Duong Thi Ngoc Minh on the role of Khmer pagodas in Southern Vietnam clarifies the multifunctional nature of pagodas in community life. According to the author, pagodas function not only as religious centers but also as hubs of cultural, educational, and artistic activities for the Khmer people. In the case of Doi Pagoda, the presence of folk belief elements, such as local shrines within the pagoda grounds, demonstrates the interaction between Buddhism and indigenous beliefs. The study emphasizes that the central role of the pagoda is maintained even as new cultural elements emerge (Duong Thi Ngoc Minh, 2015)^[3].

Furthermore, Nguyen Manh Cuong's work on Khmer Buddhism in Southern Vietnam provides a comprehensive overview of the formation, characteristics, and role of Buddhism in community life. The author highlights the pagoda as a central institution in preserving cultural identity and transmitting moral values. The study also discusses the transformations and challenges faced by Khmer Buddhism in the modern context, thereby suggesting the need for more in depth research on specific religious institutions (Nguyen Manh Cuong, 2008)^[11].

Another significant contribution is found in *Theravada Buddhism in Southern Vietnam*, a collection of papers from a national scientific conference. This work focuses on the development of Theravada Buddhism, the architectural characteristics of Khmer pagodas, and the role of religious structures in cultural life. Within this context, Doi Pagoda is identified as a representative example of Khmer pagodas with notable architectural and artistic values. The studies also highlight processes of cultural interaction and adaptation within the pagoda space, expressed through architecture, ritual practices, and community activities (Vietnam Buddhist Academy, 2021).

Overall, existing studies have provided important insights into the historical, cultural, and architectural aspects of Doi Pagoda, as well as the broader system of Khmer pagodas in Southern Vietnam. However, these studies tend to approach the subject from separate perspectives and have not comprehensively analyzed the interrelationship between historical values, cultural artistic expressions, and architectural characteristics of Doi Pagoda as an integrated whole. In addition, the issue of utilizing religious

architectural heritage in connection with cultural preservation and development remains insufficiently addressed.

From these research gaps, further investigation of Doi Pagoda through an integrated approach that combines historical, cultural, and architectural analysis is necessary. Such an approach not only clarifies the values of the site but also provides a scientific foundation for heritage conservation and promotion in the contemporary context.

2.2. Research Methodology

This study primarily employs two fundamental methods of historical research, namely the historical method and the logical method. The historical method is used to reconstruct the formation and development of Khmer Theravada Buddhism in Southern Vietnam, particularly the establishment and transformation of Doi Pagoda from the sixteenth century to the present. Based on this foundation, the logical method is applied to analyze and systematize events and phenomena in order to clarify the nature, characteristics, and historical as well as cultural values of the research subject.

In addition, the study utilizes fieldwork methodology to collect empirical data. This process involves direct surveys at Doi Pagoda, observation of architectural spaces and religious activities, and interviews with monks and local residents. Data obtained from fieldwork supplement and verify information from secondary sources, while also providing a clear reflection of the current architectural condition and the role of the pagoda in the cultural and religious life of the community.

Furthermore, the research adopts an interdisciplinary approach to ensure a comprehensive analysis of the subject. Historical analysis is used to clarify the developmental trajectory of Doi Pagoda. Ethnography is applied to examine the cultural life, customs, and beliefs of the Khmer community. Religious studies contribute to identifying the characteristics of Khmer Theravada Buddhist practices. Cultural studies are employed to interpret both tangible and intangible cultural values. At the same time, architectural analysis supports the examination of spatial organization, form, and stylistic features of Khmer pagodas.

The integration of these methods allows Doi Pagoda to be approached as a unified entity encompassing historical, cultural, and architectural dimensions. As a result, the study goes beyond descriptive analysis and aims to provide a deeper understanding of the values and roles of the pagoda in the contemporary social context.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Overview of Doi Pagoda within the System of Khmer Pagodas in Southern Vietnam

3.1.1. Geographical Location and Cultural Context

The Soc Trang region in particular and Southern Vietnam in general constitute a long established settlement space associated with the formation and development of ancient civilizations in the lower Mekong basin. From the early centuries of the Common Era, this area was part of the Funan Kingdom, a coastal polity that developed on the foundation of Oc Eo culture and maintained extensive trade relations with India and China. Archaeological evidence indicates that Funan inhabitants established an economy based on wet rice agriculture combined with trade and handicrafts, while being profoundly influenced by Indian culture through religion and

artistic expression (Huynh Thanh Quang, 2011) ^[5].

After the seventh century, when Funan declined and was absorbed by Chenla, the Southern region became part of Lower Chenla. During this period, early Khmer communities continued to maintain dispersed settlement patterns organized into phum soc units along elevated land ridges and riverbanks, while developing belief systems closely associated with agriculture and the natural environment. This historical process laid the foundation for the formation of Khmer cultural space in Southern Vietnam, in which the pagoda assumed a central role in both spiritual life and social organization (Phan Huy Le, 2011; Vo Van Sen, 2010) ^[13].

Doi Pagoda, also known as Ma Toc Pagoda or Seray Techo Mahatup Pagoda, is located at 73B Le Hong Phong Street, Ward 3, Soc Trang City, formerly in Soc Trang Province and currently under Phu Loi Ward, Can Tho City. This area is home to a large Khmer population and is situated near an urban center, providing favorable conditions for mobility, cultural exchange, and the development of spiritual tourism (Vietnam National Administration of Tourism, n.d.; Lam Phuong & Mai Van Nhan, 2009).

In terms of spatial characteristics, the pagoda complex covers approximately four hectares. It is bordered by residential areas to the east and west, agricultural land to the south, and Mai Thanh The Road connecting to Le Hong Phong Street to the north. The site is characterized by abundant greenery and an open landscape, consistent with the Theravada Buddhist conception of a tranquil and sacred environment (Lam Phuong & Mai Van Nhan, 2009, p. 158) ^[7]. This location enables Doi Pagoda to function not only as a place of religious practice but also as a space for preserving collective memory and reflecting the close relationship between Khmer pagodas and the social life of the phum soc community.

The name of the pagoda also reflects layers of historical and cultural meaning. According to historical sources, the pagoda was founded in 1569 by Thach Ut. The name Mahatup is believed to derive from Mahatop, meaning "great army," and has later been interpreted as "great battle," "fortification," or "battle line." The Vietnamese pronunciation transformed this into "Ma Toc," giving rise to the alternative name Ma Toc Pagoda. However, in popular usage, the name "Doi Pagoda" has become more widespread due to the long standing presence of a large bat colony within the pagoda grounds, which has created a distinctive identity for the site (Lam Phuong & Mai Van Nhan, 2009; Research Project on Khmer Visual Arts in Soc Trang, n.d.) ^[7].

From a cultural perspective, Doi Pagoda is a representative example within the system of Khmer pagodas in Southern Vietnam. It functions not only as a center of Theravada Buddhist practice but also as a venue for cultural, educational, and festive activities of the Khmer community. Its presence within a densely Khmer populated area highlights the important role of the pagoda as a cultural institution in maintaining ethnic identity, preserving artistic traditions, and strengthening community cohesion. At present, owing to its advantageous location and distinctive architectural value, Doi Pagoda has become a well known destination within cultural tourism routes in Southern Vietnam.

3.1.2. Historical Formation and Development

Doi Pagoda, officially named Wathserâytecho Mahatup and also known as Ma Toc Pagoda, is a Khmer Buddhist temple

whose name reflects processes of linguistic and cultural adaptation.

Through processes of cultural interaction, the Kinh and Hoa communities adapted the pronunciation of “Mahatup” into “Ma Toc,” which explains the alternative name of the pagoda. In popular usage, the name Doi Pagoda has become widespread due to the large number of bats naturally inhabiting the pagoda grounds. The term “Mahatup” has been interpreted in various ways, including “great battle,” “grand army,” or “fortification,” reflecting layers of historical meaning and local legend. According to an interview with Deputy Abbot Lam Tu Linh in 2025, “Maha” means large and “tup” means to block or contain, implying “the preservation of great blessings.” This interpretation reflects a Buddhist perception of the site as a place where merit and communal well being converge (Lam Phuong & Mai Van Nhan, 2009, pp. 158–159; Lam Tu Linh, personal communication, 2025)^[7].

Doi Pagoda was originally established in 1569 by Thach Ut and has existed for more than four centuries. Its establishment is closely associated with the long-term settlement of the Khmer community in the Soc Trang region, reflecting the need for a central space for religious practice, cultural expression, and communal life. In its early stages, the pagoda was constructed using simple materials such as bamboo and thatch, which were suitable for the economic conditions of the time. It was later rebuilt using wood, lime, sand mixed with molasses according to traditional construction techniques. In subsequent periods, alongside broader socio economic development, the pagoda continued to be renovated with more durable materials such as brick, tile, cement, and steel (Lam Phuong & Mai Van Nhan, 2009, p. 159; Lam Tu Linh, personal communication, 2025)^[7].

Throughout its history, Doi Pagoda has undergone multiple restorations to adapt to changing natural, historical, and religious conditions. A major renovation in 1960, particularly in the main hall, marked a significant development in both scale and architectural appearance. Over more than four centuries, the pagoda has had nineteen successive abbots, demonstrating continuity in religious leadership and institutional management. During periods of war, certain structures of the pagoda were damaged by bombing but were later restored, allowing the pagoda to continue its function as a center of Khmer Theravada Buddhist practice (Lam Phuong & Mai Van Nhan, 2009, p. 159)^[7].

In addition to its architectural history, Doi Pagoda is closely associated with transformations in ecological space and folk beliefs. In the past, the pagoda occupied approximately eight mau of land, characterized by a rich natural ecosystem with diverse flora and fauna. Over time, due to changes in land use and environmental conditions, the area has been reduced to more than four mau. Nevertheless, the pagoda has retained its green landscape and long established bat population, which constitutes a distinctive feature of the site. In local belief, the presence of bats is considered a symbol of good fortune and merit, highlighting the interaction between Khmer Theravada Buddhism, community beliefs, and the local ecological environment (Tran Binh, 1993; Lam Tu Linh, personal communication, 2025).

Beyond its religious function, Doi Pagoda serves as a cultural and educational center for the Khmer community in the region. It provides educational activities for children during the summer and functions as a venue for traditional festivals

such as Chol Chnam Thmay, Sene Dolta, Ok Om Bok, and the Kathina robe offering ceremony. Within the pagoda grounds, elements of folk belief such as the shrines dedicated to Ba Den and Ong Ta further demonstrate the integration of Theravada Buddhism with indigenous spiritual practices in the cultural life of the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam. In the 1990s, the pagoda was also associated with the practice of raising “five clawed pigs,” a phenomenon regarded by local residents as rare and sacred. This practice has since been discontinued due to heritage management regulations (Lam Tu Linh, personal communication, 2025).

On February 12, 1999, the Ministry of Culture and Information issued Decision No. 05/1999/QĐ BVHTT recognizing Doi Pagoda as a national artistic heritage site. This recognition affirms the historical, cultural, and architectural significance of the pagoda within the system of Vietnamese cultural heritage. Since then, Doi Pagoda has continued to function both as a Theravada Buddhist institution of the Khmer community and as a prominent cultural and spiritual destination in Soc Trang, contributing to the preservation and promotion of Khmer cultural identity in the contemporary context (Lam Phuong & Mai Van Nhan, 2009, p. 171)^[7].

Thus, the long historical trajectory from the Funan to Chenla periods, together with the process of multi ethnic coexistence, has established the distinctive cultural foundation of the Soc Trang region. Within this context, the Khmer pagoda system emerged as a central institution that both reflects patterns of settlement and sustains the cultural identity of the community.

3.2. Architectural Characteristics of Khmer Pagodas through the Case of Doi Pagoda

3.2.1. Overall Layout and Architectural Space

In traditional Khmer society, the pagoda serves as a central institution not only in religious life but also in cultural, educational, and social activities within the phum soc community. This central role directly influences the spatial organization principles of Khmer pagoda architecture. The construction of a pagoda traditionally follows established conventions, beginning with the selection of a site that is elevated, well ventilated, spacious, and typically located at the center of the residential area (Nguyen Manh Cuong, 2008). The main hall is positioned first, followed by the arrangement of other structures according to functional requirements.

At Doi Pagoda, the overall layout clearly reflects the characteristics of Khmer pagoda architecture in Southern Vietnam, featuring an open spatial structure closely integrated with the natural environment. The main gate is oriented toward the northwest, creating a directional axis leading into the sacred space. From the entrance, a system of courtyards, internal pathways, and architectural structures is harmoniously distributed within the spacious grounds. These include the main hall, sala, monks’ residences, funerary stupas, and auxiliary buildings. The entire space is shaded by ancient trees, forming a tranquil landscape and simultaneously providing a natural habitat for the distinctive bat colony. The architectural features of Doi Pagoda, including its main hall, decorative motifs, and interior spatial organization, reflect the typical characteristics of Khmer pagoda architecture in Southern Vietnam (see Figure 1).



Fig 1: Doi Pagoda architecture and decorative elements. (a) Main hall exterior; (b) Decorative Kinnari motif; (c) Interior columns and altar. Source: Author's fieldwork (2025).

This spatial organization not only accommodates religious practices but also supports community activities such as festivals, gatherings, and education. The integration of architectural space with the natural landscape reflects the Khmer cultural perception of harmony between humans and the environment. Contemporary research further suggests that cultural heritage should be understood not merely as a physical entity but as a social process in which the community plays a central role in creating meaning and sustaining heritage values. This perspective is particularly evident in religious spaces such as Khmer pagodas, where architecture is closely associated with communal cultural practices (Croitoru *et al.*, 2025) ^[1].

3.2.2. Main Hall and Auxiliary Structures

The main hall represents the central structure and most clearly embodies the architectural characteristics of Khmer pagodas. At Doi Pagoda, the main hall was originally constructed in 1569 using wood and thatched roofing made from nipa palm leaves, and it has undergone multiple phases of restoration. Notably, in 1960, the structure was rebuilt using reinforced concrete and tiled roofing, marking a transition to more durable materials. Subsequent renovations, most recently in 2008, incorporated traditional Khmer architectural elements, contributing to the present architectural appearance (Lam Phuong & Mai Van Nhan, 2009) ^[7].

In terms of structure, the main hall has a rectangular plan oriented along the east–west axis, with the principal entrance facing east. The roof consists of multiple layered tiers, creating a tall and imposing form. The corners of the roof are decorated with Naga serpent motifs, while a pointed spire rises at the apex, symbolizing protection and sacredness. The columns surrounding the main hall are adorned with figures of Kemnar celestial maidens, enhancing both symbolic meaning and aesthetic value.

The interior space houses a gilded statue of Sakyamuni Buddha along with numerous smaller Buddha images. The altar is elaborately decorated with intricate patterns that combine traditional Khmer motifs with influences from Vietnamese decorative art. The ceiling is painted with scenes depicting the life of the Buddha, creating an environment that is both solemn and visually dynamic.

Adjacent to the main hall, the system of auxiliary structures includes the sala, monks' residences, guest houses, and

funerary stupas. These are arranged in a coherent manner to support both religious and communal functions. The sala serves as a venue for meetings, ceremonies, and community activities. The distribution of funerary stupas around the main hall reflects spiritual beliefs and the connection between the living and the deceased within the community. In addition, elements of folk belief such as the shrine dedicated to Ba Den are present within the pagoda grounds, illustrating the interaction between Buddhism and indigenous spiritual practices.

3.2.3. Decorative Art and Symbolism

The decorative art of Doi Pagoda strongly reflects the characteristics of Khmer visual culture in Southern Vietnam, expressed through a rich system of motifs, reliefs, and symbolic elements. Architectural components such as the gate, roof, columns, and walls are intricately carved with images of Naga serpents, Krud mythical birds, Kinnari celestial beings, and stylized floral patterns. The dominant colors are gold and red, symbolizing sacredness and solemnity.

Notably, the Khmer dragon motif is represented with distinctive features. The dragon's body is elongated and undulating, inspired by marine creatures, and it lacks legs, distinguishing it from dragons in Vietnamese and Chinese art. Decorative details such as the Kay No bird at the junction between the roof and columns symbolize protective power and the support of the cosmos. The figure of the Kemnar celestial maiden, often depicted with hands joined in reverence, reinforces the sacred character of the worship space. As described in *Historical and Cultural Relics of Soc Trang Province*, the Khmer dragon is characterized by a slender, horned head and a body modeled after the Poon Co fish, with blade like elements along its back arranged longitudinally (Soc Trang Department of Education and Training, 2009, p. 167).

Inside the main hall and the sala, mural paintings illustrate the life of the Buddha and various Buddhist narratives, contributing to both the transmission of religious teachings and the enhancement of aesthetic value. The presence of bat motifs in decorative elements is particularly noteworthy, as it reflects not only the ecological characteristics of the site but also symbolizes good fortune in local belief.

The decorative art of Doi Pagoda demonstrates the high level of craftsmanship achieved by Khmer artisans through a

system of protective symbols imbued with philosophical meaning. The dragon motif, characterized by its legless, undulating form, and the Kemnar figures with hands joined in reverence, not only serve aesthetic purposes but also express a worldview centered on divine protection of the sacred space. Combined with mural representations of the Buddha's life, these elements create a visual environment that functions as a form of moral and philosophical education for the community.

Overall, the decorative art of Doi Pagoda reflects a harmonious integration of religious symbolism, artistic expression, and folk cultural elements. It stands as a representative example of Khmer artistic achievement in Southern Vietnam while also illustrating the processes of cultural interaction among different communities in the region.

3.3. Cultural and Artistic Values of Doi Pagoda Architecture

3.3.1. Aesthetic Value and Visual Arts

Doi Pagoda represents a typical example reflecting the aesthetic and visual artistic values of Khmer pagoda architecture in Southern Vietnam. These values are expressed through the harmonious integration of architectural layout, sculpture, painting, color schemes, and natural landscape. The main hall occupies the central position within the entire complex, featuring a rectangular plan, a multi tiered roof system, and vertically oriented lines that create a sense of grandeur, solemnity, and symbolic significance. Structural elements such as the roof, columns, roof finials, and decorative details demonstrate the refined craftsmanship of Khmer artisans while reflecting an aesthetic orientation toward balance, vibrancy, and sacredness (Thich Nhat Tu, 2020, pp. 305–306)^[17].

Recent approaches to the concept of “everyday heritage” emphasize that aesthetic value is not confined to monumental architectural elements but is also present in the daily experiences of individuals interacting with space. These aspects contribute to emotional attachment and the perception of heritage in everyday life (Ireland *et al.*, 2025)^[18].

The decorative art of Doi Pagoda is particularly notable for its system of motifs, reliefs, and sacred statues. Patterns such as lotus flowers, palm leaves, birds, floral elements, and spiral designs are intricately rendered on columns, roofs, altars, and decorative panels. These motifs not only create vivid visual effects but also convey meanings associated with purity and harmony with nature. The dominant use of gold and red enhances the brilliance and solemnity characteristic of Khmer visual culture in Southern Vietnam.

Within the main hall, the statue of Sakyamuni Buddha occupies the central position, surrounded by subsidiary statues and a system of mural paintings depicting the life of the Buddha from birth to Nirvana. These elements not only enrich the aesthetic value of the space but also transform the pagoda into a visual medium for conveying Buddhist teachings and moral values (Nguyen Khac Canh, 2011, pp. 87–89; Duong Thi Ngoc Minh, 2015, pp. 89–90)^[10, 3].

The artistic value of Doi Pagoda is further expressed through preserved artifacts such as Buddha statues, gilded wooden decorative panels, intricately carved cabinets, and Khmer Buddhist manuscripts written on palm leaves. These objects serve as both evidence of religious life and valuable sources reflecting craftsmanship, aesthetic standards, and the

capacity for cultural knowledge preservation within the Khmer community. As such, Doi Pagoda can be understood as a repository of artistic heritage where architecture, sculpture, and painting coexist within an integrated system.

3.3.2. Religious Symbols and Khmer Worldview

Within the architecture of Doi Pagoda, the system of religious symbols plays a crucial role in expressing the worldview and philosophy of life of the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam. Symbolic figures such as the Naga serpent, the Krud mythical bird, the Kinnari celestial being, and the Chăn guardian are not merely decorative but carry meanings related to protection, purification, and moral guidance. The Naga often appears at roof edges and finials, symbolizing divine protection over the sacred space. The Krud represents power and sacred authority, while the Kinnari embodies beauty, grace, and artistic refinement within Khmer culture. The figure of the Chăn, traditionally associated with evil in Khmer epics, is transformed within the pagoda context into a protective entity that safeguards peace under the influence of Buddhist teachings (Nguyen Trong Nhan, 2012, pp. 105–107).

The interior spatial arrangement of the main hall reflects a cosmological order based on Khmer Theravada Buddhist thought. The central placement of the Buddha statue signifies the supreme role of the Buddha in spiritual life. Surrounding mural paintings, statues, and decorative motifs collectively convey teachings on compassion, karma, and the path to enlightenment. In this sense, the pagoda functions not only as a site for ritual practice but also as a medium for expressing religious worldview through visual language.

In addition to Buddhist symbolism, Doi Pagoda also demonstrates cultural interaction within the Southern Vietnamese context. Certain decorative motifs on altars and interior furnishings show influences from Vietnamese temple art, while the image of bats is associated with notions of good fortune in folk belief. The long standing presence of the bat colony within the pagoda grounds transforms the natural landscape into a distinctive cultural symbol, reflecting a worldview based on harmony between humans, nature, and the spiritual realm. Thus, the value of Doi Pagoda lies not only in its physical architecture but also in its capacity to connect religion, art, ecology, and community identity.

In this context, heritage should be understood not merely as a system of religious symbols but also as a form of social memory and collective experience. Sacred spaces such as pagodas function as sites for preserving and reinterpreting collective memory, thereby reinforcing cultural identity (Wilson *et al.*, 2024)^[23].

3.3.3. The Role of Festivals in Architectural Space

In the cultural life of the Khmer community in Southern Vietnam, the pagoda serves as a central space for organizing religious rituals, traditional festivals, and communal activities. In the case of Doi Pagoda, architecture functions not only as a setting for worship but also as an environment that facilitates collective cultural practices. The main hall, courtyard, sala, funerary stupas, and green landscape all participate in the process of festival activities, transforming architectural space into a dynamic environment closely connected to the spiritual life of the community.

Major festivals such as Chol Chnam Thmay, Sene Dolta, and Ok Om Bok clearly demonstrate the integrative role of the

pagoda in community life. During Chol Chnam Thmay, participants bring offerings to the pagoda, circumambulate the main hall to welcome the new year, offer food to monks, construct sand mounds, and perform rituals such as bathing the Buddha and monks. These practices directly utilize various architectural spaces, particularly the main hall, courtyard, and funerary stupa areas. In this way, architecture serves not merely as a backdrop but as an active component in ritual performance, shaping religious behavior and reinforcing sacred order within the community (Hoang Thi Quyen, 2015) ^[4].

During the Sene Dolta festival, the pagoda becomes a site where community members express remembrance of their ancestors through rituals of offering, chanting, and merit making. In the Ok Om Bok festival, the pagoda grounds serve as a gathering space for lunar worship, offerings of flattened rice, and prayers for favorable weather and agricultural prosperity. These practices highlight the close relationship between Buddhist beliefs, agrarian traditions, and the

architectural space of Khmer pagodas.

In addition to traditional festivals, Doi Pagoda also hosts various Buddhist ceremonies such as doctrinal teachings, Vesak celebrations, the rain retreat, the end of the retreat, and consecration rituals. These events maintain the annual rhythm of religious life and reinforce the role of the pagoda as a center for moral education and cultural transmission. During such occasions, chanting, offerings, artistic performances, and communal activities are organized within the pagoda grounds, creating an integration of ritual, art, and social life.

Studies on heritage emphasize that local festivals can be understood as forms of “practiced heritage,” where cultural values are reproduced and transmitted through communal participation (Croitoru *et al.*, 2025) ^[1]. The architectural space of Doi Pagoda therefore not only serves religious functions but also accommodates ritual practices and community activities, as illustrated in Figure 2.



Fig 2: Ritual practices and worship space at Doi Pagoda: (a) Devotees performing rituals in the main hall; (b) Interior altar space and worship activities. Source: Author’s fieldwork (2025).

Thus, festivals highlight the cultural and artistic values of Doi Pagoda’s architecture by transforming physical space into a lived cultural environment. The pagoda preserves its religious function while expanding into a space for interaction, sharing, and cultural regeneration. The close relationship between architecture and festival practices enables Doi Pagoda to function as an integrated cultural institution where traditional values are continuously practiced and sustained in contemporary life.

3.4. Historical Values of Doi Pagoda

3.4.1. Role in the Formation of the Khmer Community

Doi Pagoda, established around 1569, serves as an important historical testament to the early and stable presence of the

Khmer community in the Soc Trang region. Its establishment is closely associated with the long-term settlement process of the Khmer people in Southern Vietnam and reflects the need for a central space for religious practice, cultural expression, and communal life within the phum soc structure (Soc Trang Department of Education and Training, 2009, p. 159).

The formation of the Khmer community in Soc Trang is linked to successive migration waves following the decline of the Funan Kingdom. From approximately the tenth to the sixteenth century, alongside the retreat of the sea and the emergence of elevated land ridges, Khmer populations gradually moved into the delta to cultivate land and establish settlements. These communities were typically organized into phum soc units based on kinship and religious ties, with

the pagoda functioning as the central institution regulating both social and spiritual life (Nguyen Khac Canh, 2000) ^[9]. By the seventeenth century, in the context of the weakening of Chenla and the expansion of Vietnamese settlement toward the south, the demographic structure of the region became increasingly diverse, with the coexistence of Khmer, Kinh, and Hoa populations. Despite this diversity, the Khmer community maintained its distinct identity through the system of pagodas, traditional festivals, and language. Within this context, Khmer pagodas, including Doi Pagoda, functioned not only as religious institutions but also as cultural establishments that preserved and transmitted community identity across generations.

Doi Pagoda can be understood as a form of “everyday heritage,” where cultural value is not limited to physical structures but is also embedded in the daily experiences of people interacting with the space. The pagoda serves as a site for education, including the teaching of the Khmer language and Buddhist scriptures to children during the summer, thereby creating a natural mechanism for intergenerational transmission of cultural values. Sacred spaces such as pagodas also function as repositories of collective memory, contributing to the reinforcement of cultural identity within the community.

From a broader historical perspective, Doi Pagoda is not an isolated structure but the result of a long process of cultural continuity rooted in the heritage of Funan and Chenla. This region was historically influenced by Indian cultural and religious currents, within which Theravada Buddhism gradually became dominant in the spiritual life of the Khmer people (Thich Nhat Tu, 2020, p. 300) ^[17]. The pagoda thus emerged as a concentrated expression of religious ideology and as a key institution for maintaining community identity. The sustainability of culture depends significantly on the transmission of knowledge and practices across generations, and when this process is disrupted, cultural values are at risk of decline or transformation (Murin *et al.*, 2025) ^[6].

The historical role of the pagoda is also evident in its function as a center of social cohesion. In Khmer life, the pagoda is not only a place of worship but also a venue for festivals, life cycle rituals, moral education, and cultural transmission. From birth through adulthood to death, individuals maintain a continuous relationship with the pagoda through religious and communal practices (Danh Lung, 2020, pp. 51–65) ^[2]. Therefore, Doi Pagoda serves as a repository of collective memory and plays a crucial role in shaping and reinforcing the identity of the Khmer community over generations.

3.4.2. Historical Imprints and Transformation over Time

The historical value of Doi Pagoda is clearly reflected in its continuous process of existence and transformation. Initially constructed using natural materials such as wood and nipa palm leaves, the pagoda reflected the technical capabilities, economic conditions, and ecological environment of the local community. Over time, it underwent multiple restorations using more durable materials such as hardwood, tiles, and reinforced concrete. Major renovation phases in the eighteenth century, in 1960, and in 2008 illustrate not only advancements in construction techniques but also the socio-economic development of the Khmer community across different historical periods (Soc Trang Department of Education and Training, 2009, p. 159).

Despite these changes, the core elements of the pagoda,

including its spatial structure, religious functions, and symbolic system, have been preserved. This continuity demonstrates that Doi Pagoda is not a static monument but a dynamic historical entity capable of adapting to new conditions while maintaining its Khmer cultural identity. During periods of war and social upheaval, the pagoda continued to function as a site for religious practice, a place of spiritual refuge, and a cultural anchor for the community (Soc Trang Newspaper, 2025).

In addition to architectural features, the historical imprint of the pagoda is preserved through traditional festivals such as Chol Chnam Thmay, Ok Om Bok, and Sene Dolta. These festivals, repeated annually, contribute to the reconstruction of collective memory and affirm the continuity of Khmer cultural traditions (Hoang Thi Quyen, 2015, p. 68) ^[4]. Thus, Doi Pagoda is not only a witness to the past but also a space where history is continuously practiced, transmitted, and renewed within contemporary life.

4. Discussion

4.1. The Role of Khmer Pagoda Architecture in Cultural Preservation

The results of this study indicate that Khmer pagoda architecture, as exemplified by Doi Pagoda, functions as an integrated cultural institution that occupies a central position in preserving and transmitting the cultural values of the Khmer community in Southern Vietnam. The pagoda is not only a space for the practice of Theravada Buddhism but also a venue for festivals, education, artistic activities, and community interaction. Within the traditional phum soc structure, the pagoda serves as a focal point for organizing spiritual life, where moral norms, knowledge systems, and cultural practices are formed, maintained, and disseminated across generations.

Through its architectural system, including the main hall, sala, funerary stupas, and green landscape, Doi Pagoda creates a comprehensive cultural space in which cultural practices are continuously sustained. The main hall functions as the sacred center where major religious rituals are performed, while the sala provides a communal space for meetings, teaching, and cultural exchange. The system of stupas and the surrounding landscape not only hold spiritual significance but also contribute to connecting the community with its ancestors and the natural environment. This spatial organization reflects a worldview characterized by harmony between humans, belief systems, and nature within Khmer culture in Southern Vietnam.

In addition to its tangible values, pagoda architecture also provides an effective environment for preserving intangible cultural heritage. Traditional festivals such as Chol Chnam Thmay, Sene Dolta, and Ok Om Bok, along with life cycle rituals, chanting practices, and the teaching of the Khmer language, are all conducted within the pagoda space. These activities form a natural mechanism of cultural transmission, enabling values to be continuously reproduced and sustained within community life. As a result, Doi Pagoda not only preserves the cultural heritage of the past but also contributes to the continuity and development of Khmer culture in the contemporary context.

However, in the current context, the cultural preservation role of Doi Pagoda faces significant challenges. The expansion of tourism, pressures of urbanization, and increasing human activities have affected both the architectural space and the

ecological environment of the pagoda. Issues such as environmental pollution, noise, unregulated commercial activities, and the decline in the bat population have negatively impacted the landscape and the overall heritage value. These challenges demonstrate that preserving the pagoda requires not only the protection of its architectural structures but also the safeguarding of the entire cultural and ecological environment associated with the site.

In this context, the conservation of Khmer pagoda architecture requires a comprehensive approach that integrates the preservation of both tangible and intangible values, as well as the protection of cultural and ecological systems. The role of the local community is essential, as community members are both creators and practitioners of cultural traditions. Enhancing awareness and strengthening the responsibility of both residents and visitors in protecting the heritage site are necessary conditions for ensuring sustainability. At the same time, effective conservation strategies require close collaboration among the pagoda authorities, government agencies, and scholars.

Recent studies have emphasized that heritage conservation is a complex process shaped by the interaction between expert knowledge and community knowledge. The integration of these two forms of knowledge is a critical condition for achieving effective and sustainable conservation outcomes (Maalouf & Napolitano, 2025) [8]. The case of Doi Pagoda clearly demonstrates that only when architectural preservation is combined with the maintenance of cultural practices and ecological balance can heritage continue to exist as a “living cultural space” in contemporary society.

Thus, Khmer pagoda architecture should be understood not only as a physical manifestation of culture but also as a foundational framework for the preservation and regeneration of cultural values within the community. The case of Doi Pagoda illustrates that heritage conservation must be approached as a dynamic process in which architecture, people, and the environment interact to sustain and develop the cultural identity of the Khmer community in Southern Vietnam under modern conditions.

4.2. Cultural Interaction among Kinh, Khmer, and Hoa Communities

Doi Pagoda represents a typical cultural space that clearly reflects the processes of interaction and acculturation among the Kinh, Khmer, and Hoa communities in Southern Vietnam. This interaction is not incidental but the result of long-term coexistence, during which different groups have engaged in economic exchange, shared belief systems, and cultural practices. Through this process, a diverse cultural structure has emerged while preserving the distinct characteristics of each community.

From the perspective of architecture and visual arts, Doi Pagoda bears the distinctive features of Khmer pagoda architecture in Southern Vietnam, including multi tiered roofs, symbolic motifs such as Naga, Krud, and Kinnari, and a characteristic spatial layout. At the same time, certain elements influenced by Vietnamese architectural art can be identified, particularly in interior decorative details such as altars, ornamental door frames, and floral motifs. These elements do not alter the fundamental structure but contribute to enriching the artistic appearance of the pagoda, illustrating a process of selective cultural adaptation and integration.

Cultural interaction is also evident in religious life and

symbolic perception. While Theravada Buddhism remains the dominant religious framework, elements of local folk beliefs coexist and complement it. The worship of indigenous deities such as Ong Ta and the presence of Ba Den shrine within the pagoda grounds demonstrate the integration of Buddhist and local spiritual practices. In addition, the influence of Hoa culture is reflected in the interpretation of bats as symbols of good fortune and prosperity. From a natural ecological phenomenon, the bat colony has been culturally reinterpreted as a spiritual symbol, contributing to the distinctive identity of Doi Pagoda.

This process of cultural interaction is closely associated with festivals and communal activities organized within the pagoda space. Traditional Khmer festivals such as Chol Chnam Thmay, Sene Dolta, and Ok Om Bok attract not only Khmer participants but also the involvement of Kinh and Hoa residents in the region. Through these activities, Doi Pagoda becomes a site of cultural exchange and social interaction, strengthening interethnic relationships and fostering community cohesion in local life.

From a broader historical and social perspective, the cultural interaction observed at Doi Pagoda reflects the characteristics of Southern Vietnam as an open cultural space where multiple traditions coexist and interact. This process of acculturation operates in a flexible and selective manner, allowing the Khmer community to incorporate external elements while maintaining its core cultural structure. This is evident in the way architectural forms, belief systems, and cultural practices are adapted to new contexts while preserving traditional identity.

Thus, Doi Pagoda is not merely a religious structure but also a vivid illustration of cultural interaction in Southern Vietnam. The harmonious integration of Kinh, Khmer, and Hoa elements has created a diverse cultural landscape while demonstrating the openness and adaptive capacity of the Khmer community within a multicultural environment. This characteristic constitutes an essential foundation for the distinctive value of Doi Pagoda within the broader system of Vietnamese cultural heritage.

4.3. The Significance of Doi Pagoda in the Contemporary Context

In the contemporary context, Doi Pagoda continues to affirm its role as an integrated cultural institution that performs religious functions while actively participating in cultural, educational, and tourism activities. As a nationally recognized heritage site, the pagoda has become an important destination for cultural and spiritual tourism, contributing to local economic development and the promotion of Khmer cultural identity in Southern Vietnam. However, the growth of tourism has also introduced significant challenges for conservation, particularly in relation to landscape preservation and the ecological system of the bat population. Under these conditions, the architectural preservation of the pagoda must extend beyond physical protection to include the maintenance of the integrity of its cultural and ecological space. This requires a comprehensive conservation approach that integrates professional expertise with active community participation. Viewing Doi Pagoda as a “living cultural space” highlights the importance of everyday cultural practices in sustaining and regenerating heritage values.

In practice, although certain positive outcomes have been achieved in the conservation and promotion of Doi Pagoda,

limitations remain in management and utilization. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen coordination among governmental authorities, the pagoda administration, and the local community in order to develop long-term conservation strategies. Restoration activities should adhere to principles that prioritize the preservation of original elements while applying appropriate technical measures to mitigate environmental impacts on architectural materials. At the same time, spatial planning should emphasize the protection of landscape and ecological systems, particularly the habitat of the bat colony, which constitutes a distinctive feature of the site.

In addition to conservation, the promotion of heritage values should be closely linked to educational and cultural tourism activities. Developing scientifically grounded interpretive content, training guides with in depth knowledge of Khmer culture, and organizing educational programs for younger generations are essential measures. Furthermore, investment in research, digital documentation, and heritage communication is necessary to enhance public awareness and expand access to cultural heritage.

Thus, in the contemporary context, Doi Pagoda is not only a historical monument but also a dynamic cultural space where traditional values are preserved, adapted, and continuously developed. The preservation of Doi Pagoda therefore extends beyond the protection of architectural structures to encompass the maintenance of a balanced relationship among tangible heritage, intangible cultural practices, and the ecological environment, achieved through interdisciplinary collaboration and active community participation.

5. Conclusion

Doi Pagoda represents a typical architectural work that fully reflects the historical and cultural artistic values of Khmer pagoda architecture in Southern Vietnam. From a historical perspective, the pagoda is closely associated with the long-term formation and development of the Khmer community in the Soc Trang region, while also reflecting the cultural continuity inherited from ancient civilizations such as Funan and Chenla. Despite undergoing multiple periods of transformation, the pagoda has continuously been restored and adapted to new conditions while preserving its core elements in terms of spatial organization, religious functions, and symbolic systems. This continuity demonstrates the resilience and sustainability of Khmer cultural traditions.

From a cultural and artistic perspective, Doi Pagoda represents the synthesis of multiple art forms, including architecture, sculpture, and painting, within a unified system. Architectural features such as multi tiered roofs, decorative sculptures, relief patterns, and mural paintings not only possess aesthetic value but also convey religious meanings and philosophical concepts rooted in Khmer Theravada Buddhism. At the same time, the pagoda functions as a dynamic cultural space where festivals, rituals, and communal activities are regularly organized, contributing to the preservation and transmission of cultural identity across generations.

In addition, Doi Pagoda clearly reflects the characteristic cultural interaction of Southern Vietnam. The integration of Khmer elements with influences from Kinh and Hoa cultures has created a diverse cultural landscape while maintaining a distinct identity. In particular, the presence of the bat colony and the surrounding ecological environment has transformed

the pagoda into a unique cultural space in which architecture, belief systems, and nature are closely intertwined.

In the contemporary context, Doi Pagoda continues to function not only as a religious institution but also as a cultural heritage site with significant tourism and educational value. However, in the face of urbanization and increasing tourism activities, conservation efforts must be implemented in a comprehensive manner, encompassing architecture, landscape, and ecological systems. This requires close coordination among governmental authorities, the pagoda administration, and the local community in order to achieve a balance between preservation and the promotion of heritage values.

Overall, Doi Pagoda should be understood not only as an architectural monument but also as a living cultural space where historical, artistic, and spiritual values of the Khmer community in Southern Vietnam are preserved, accumulated, and disseminated. The study and conservation of Doi Pagoda therefore hold significance not only at the local level but also contribute to enriching the broader corpus of Vietnamese cultural heritage in the context of contemporary integration.

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