

Human character through folk verses: The case of Can Tho City, Vietnam

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Abstract: This study explores the expression of human character traits embedded in Vietnamese folk verses (*ca dao*), focusing on the specific case of Can Tho City in the Mekong Delta. The purpose of the research is to identify and analyze the moral, emotional, and behavioral values reflected through local oral traditions, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of regional cultural identity. Utilizing a qualitative content analysis approach, the study collected and examined a representative sample of folk verses related to Can Tho and its surrounding areas. Findings reveal recurring themes of resilience, sincerity, affection, and community spirit, which are closely tied to the socio-cultural context and natural landscape of Southern Vietnam. The study concludes that folk poetry not only serves as a means of artistic expression but also as a cultural mirror reflecting collective human values. Practically, these insights can support cultural education, heritage preservation, and tourism promotion by highlighting the richness of local identity through intangible cultural expressions.

Keywords: *Ca dao, Can Tho culture, Folk literature, Human character, Vietnam.*

1. Introduction

Ca dao, a traditional form of oral lyrical poetry, holds a significant place in Vietnamese cultural life. Beyond its aesthetic and expressive functions, *ca dao* encapsulates the worldviews and social ideals of ordinary people, while also preserving distinctive personality traits associated with specific regions. In the context of globalization and rapid social transformation, examining *ca dao* as a valuable source of cultural data has become increasingly urgent-particularly in areas with strong and unique cultural identities, such as Can Tho, the economic and cultural center of Vietnam's Mekong Delta.

This paper aims to explore the personality traits of people in the Can Tho region as reflected through *ca dao*, thereby contributing to the understanding of local cultural identity through the lens of folk literature. The study integrates qualitative content analysis with an interdisciplinary approach-drawing on literature, anthropology, and cultural studies-to examine how the people of Can Tho are portrayed through folk imagery and language. The ultimate goal is to contribute to the preservation of intangible heritage and to clarify the role of *ca dao* in shaping community identity in a modern context.

Can Tho is a centrally governed first-tier city with strategic importance, situated at the heart of the Mekong Delta. It serves as a vital hub for regional and international transportation, including roadways, waterways, and air routes. Can Tho is also a center of commerce and finance, marked by dynamic trade and service activities that drive the region's economy. Additionally, it is home to leading institutions for education, science and technology, and healthcare in the Mekong Delta. Geographically, Can Tho borders An Giang Province to the north, Vinh Long and Dong Thap to the east, Kien Giang to the west, and Hau Giang to the south. The city spans an area of 1,440.40 square kilometers-comprising 3.49% of the Delta's total area - with a population of approximately 1,282,300 and a population density of 891 people per square kilometer [1]. As a major economic and cultural center, Can Tho acts as a gateway connecting the southwestern region of Vietnam with other parts of the country and the wider world.

The people of Can Tho are known for their gentleness, sincerity, hospitality, and attentiveness—traits that leave a lasting impression on visitors. In this study, “personality” is understood as “the relatively stable psychological traits that characterize an individual's typical behavior and attitudes in given circumstances” [2]. Based on this definition, the paper considers the “personality of Can Tho people” in relation to such psychological traits. The primary sources used in this study include: (i) *Southern Vietnamese Folk Verses* [3]; (ii) *Collected Folk Literature of Can Tho* [2]; and (iii) *Folk Literature of the Mekong Delta* [4].

2. Literature Review

As a rich lyrical folk genre, *ca dao* reflects not only the spiritual life and emotional world of the Vietnamese people, but also distinct regional personality traits. In recent decades, interdisciplinary research has increasingly recognized *ca dao* as a meaningful cultural and linguistic medium for exploring anthropological, psychological, sociological, and cultural dimensions of Vietnamese identity.

Internationally, scholars such as Linda L. Bennett, Oscar Salemink, Philip Taylor, and Hue-Tam Ho Tai have approached *ca dao* from various angles—its role in maintaining collective memory, its reflections of social norms and gender values, and particularly, its embodiment of community personality. Notable works include *Voices from Vietnam: Folklore and the Female Voice* (Bennett) and *The Moral Universe of Vietnamese Folklore* (Cornell University research group), which examine *ca dao* as a vehicle for conveying moral systems, resilience, optimism, and familial affection—traits often associated with the Vietnamese character.

Taylor [5], an anthropologist at the Australian National University, in *Fragments of the Present: Searching for Modernity in Vietnam's South*, analyzed how Southern Vietnamese communities use *ca dao* and other forms of folk culture to express identity and respond to post-war societal changes. Taylor emphasized that *ca dao* is not only an emotional medium but also a tool for maintaining and reshaping cultural identity in the face of modernization and globalization.

In Taylor [6] further explored the role of folk beliefs and *ca dao* in expressing communal personality, particularly the flexibility and adaptability of Vietnamese people. He argued that such cultural practices reflect the creativity and resilience of local communities in preserving tradition while adapting to modern life.

Salemink [7] examined how the Vietnamese state employs folk culture, including *ca dao*, as a political tool to reinforce national identity and foster social cohesion. He highlighted the complex interplay among community, state, and market forces in shaping cultural identity through the “heritagization” of folklore.

In addition, researchers from Japan, South Korea, and Russia have conducted comparative studies between Vietnamese *ca dao* and East Asian folk songs, identifying unique Vietnamese personality traits such as gentleness in speech, emotional subtlety, and high adaptability to life circumstances. These studies confirm that *ca dao* serves not only as folk art but also as a medium through which the Vietnamese personality is both expressed and sustained across historical and social contexts. However, there remains a gap in research specifically analyzing the personality traits reflected in *ca dao* from a regionally focused or international comparative perspective. Synthesizing these existing works contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of *ca dao* in shaping and reflecting Vietnamese personality.

Within Vietnam, numerous studies have explored *ca dao* from genre-specific, linguistic, and socio-cultural angles [8, 9]. Some scholars have emphasized its function as a channel for expressing the thoughts and emotions of working-class people [10]. However, few have examined *ca dao* in relation to personality traits, especially within specific regional contexts such as Can Tho.

Studies on regional personality traits in Vietnamese culture [11] often highlight general characteristics such as collectivism, adaptability, and emotional sensitivity but rarely link these with folk

literature. Recent works have begun to treat *ca dao* as a “discourse heritage” capable of portraying local cultural identities [12].

Nguyen [13] analyzed *ca dao* and proverbs in the Southwestern region from a cultural studies perspective, identifying core values, lifestyles, and cognitive models of the local population. Lu [14] explored the frankness and directness in the communication style of Western Vietnamese people, linking it to environmental and historical factors, while also providing regional comparisons to highlight distinctiveness.

Other researchers have outlined traits such as intelligence, dynamism, compassion, chivalry, and elegance among Can Tho residents. Tran [15] provided a comprehensive account of cultural components that shape Vietnamese identity in this region. Hoai [16] emphasized that these traits are shaped by Can Tho’s unique geographical, historical, and social conditions. Similarly, Huynh [17] traced the evolution of these characteristics from historical to modern times, arguing they have been cultivated and preserved across generations.

People’s Council of Can Tho City [18] and People’s Committee of Can Tho City [19] reflect the city’s commitment to developing an urban identity characterized by intelligence, dynamism, compassion, chivalry, and elegance. These initiatives define specific criteria and actions to foster such values within the Can Tho community.

Nevertheless, there remains a lack of specialized, systematic research on *ca dao* in Can Tho as a lens through which to examine human personality in this ecologically and culturally rich riverine region. Addressing this gap is vital for articulating the distinctive regional identity of Can Tho in today’s rapidly changing context.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by three primary theoretical frameworks: (1) Regional cultural personality theory, (2) Intangible cultural heritage, and (3) Folkloric discourse analysis.

First, the theory of regional cultural personality [11, 20] suggests that individual behavior, thinking, and values are shaped within specific socio-cultural environments. In Vietnam, the personality traits of people living in riverine regions are often associated with openness, adaptability, and emotional sensitivity, reflecting their ecological surroundings and historical settlement patterns in the Southern region.

Second, the approach to intangible cultural heritage [21] positions *ca dao* not merely as a form of folk poetic expression, but also as a repository of local knowledge, ethical values, and social structures passed down through generations.

Third, from the perspective of folkloric discourse [22] *ca dao* can be understood as a form of collective discourse through which communities express their worldview, emotional patterns, and modes of thought. This form of discourse simultaneously contributes to the shaping of identity and cultural memory. The integration of these three frameworks enables the study to approach *ca dao* in Can Tho as a distinct linguistic-cultural phenomenon, through which it becomes possible to infer personality traits that are deeply rooted in the ecological and cultural context of the Mekong Delta.

4. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative content analysis approach to explore the personality traits reflected in *ca dao* (Vietnamese folk poetry) from the Can Tho region, Vietnam. The research data consists of over 100 *ca dao* verses that originate from or are widely circulated in the Can Tho area (at the time of data collection, Can Tho included parts of Hau Giang and Soc Trang provinces). These verses were collected from folk literature anthologies, local cultural archives, and semi-structured interviews with elderly residents in districts such as Ninh Kieu, Binh Thuy, Cai Rang, Phong Dien, O Mon, Thoi Lai, Co Do, and Thot Not.

The selection criteria focused on *ca dao* that explicitly or implicitly portray human images, cultural values, emotions, and social behaviors. The verses were coded thematically based on traits such as hospitality, affection and loyalty, diligence, flexibility, and community cohesion. The analysis was conducted through identifying recurring symbols, imagery, and motifs, in conjunction with theoretical frameworks drawn from cultural anthropology and regional identity studies.

This methodology enables the identification of region-specific personality traits and situates them within the broader socio-historical and cultural context of Can Tho. It also allows for an interpretation of *ca dao* not only as a cultural artifact but as a meaningful medium through which local identity and traditional values are expressed and preserved.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Results

5.1.1. The Can Tho People: Honest and Simple

When people think of Can Tho, they not only recall the vast rice fields, the alluvial rivers, and the lush orchards filled with fruit, but also the kind-hearted, helpful, and tolerant people who inhabit this fertile and prosperous land. In the minds of folk authors, the name “Can Tho” evokes an impression of a bountiful region where the land is fertile and the people are generous and genuine.

Can Tho is not only known for its natural abundance but also for its admirable people-youthful, vibrant, and kind-hearted men and women:

- “*Can Tho, a land of handsome men and beautiful women,
Rach Gia, where monkeys cry and birds sing.*”

Here, the folk authors do not intend to compare Can Tho and Rach Gia in a competitive sense. Instead, this pairing of images is a literary device used in *ca dao* to highlight the unique characteristics of a place. In this case, it emphasizes the elegance, youthfulness, and dynamic nature of Can Tho’s people.

The following verse illustrates the charm and grace of Can Tho women:

- “*Which rooster is as good as the one from Cao Lanh?
Which girl is as charming as the girl from Can Tho?
What’s the use of waiting for tomorrow?
The vibrant drifting of Phong My, the elegant Hoa An.*”

The phrase “nao...bang” (“none better than...”) emphasizes uniqueness, suggesting that the beauty and charm of Can Tho women contribute to the region’s overall cultural identity. Moreover, *ca dao* does not only celebrate physical beauty but also praises women’s industriousness, skill, and resourcefulness:

- “*People wear shoes, sandals on their feet,
But I toil all day, my body covered in dirt.*”

Their hard work is acknowledged as a reflection of a modest and sincere way of life. Even in hardship, the spirit of mutual support and collective resilience is evident:

- “*When the rice is dry and the water’s low,
Let’s invite each other to scoop water, for the sky’s still far away.*”

Despite difficult circumstances, people remain united and compassionate. They set aside individualism to live harmoniously within the community. Even while facing the burdens of life, women of Can Tho hold their own in social interactions, exuding a quiet confidence that captivates many:

- “*Which rooster is as good as the one from Cao Lanh,
Which girl is as charming as the girl from Soc Trang.
Step onto the bus, head wrapped in a scarf,
Talking and laughing gracefully, many boys must fall for her.*”

Can Tho is also famous for its golden rice fields and hard-working farmers whose lives are inseparable from the land:

- *“At dawn, the rooster crows,
Shoulders carry the plow, hands lead the buffalo.
Step by step down the deep field,
Eyes half-closed, chasing the buffalo to the meadow.”*

Even in the face of laborious work, their hearts remain at ease. Their outlook on life is simple and content:

- *“Even if clothes are torn and worn, Through dew and sun, the heart remains at ease.”*

The image of the Can Tho farmer is portrayed as sincere and cheerful. Their agricultural labor demands diligence and sacrifice, and thus their contributions deserve to be honored:

- *“Whoever carries a bowl of rice full,
Remember the labor, morning and evening, in the fields for you.”*
- *“If you want to be full, you must work hard,
One grain of rice is worth nine drops of sweat.”*

In essence, the Can Tho farmer embodies simplicity and industriousness. These individuals not only provide for their families but also contribute to the prosperity of the region. Their connection to the land and their tireless work reflect the admirable spirit of Southern Vietnamese peasants, as celebrated in *ca dao*. They rightfully deserve the fruits of their labor:

- *“When the sugarcane grows tall, my eyes are glad,
For I’ve spent many years tending to it with care.”*

As a region of “riverine civilization,” the simplicity of Can Tho’s people is also seen in those who work on the water:

- *“My house’s work is fishing by the river,
When still, the shrimp and fish are abundant inside and outside.
White fish, even snakehead fish,
And there are plenty of flatfish and scads as well.”*

Although their livelihoods involve hardship, the daily life of these river-based families is portrayed as warm and joyful. Under their humble roofs, laughter is always present. Through such verses, we see the Can Tho people as vivid and delicate individuals. Despite their challenges, they remain optimistic, cheerful, and full of life—an authentic representation of the Southern Vietnamese spirit in everyday life.

5.1.2. The Hospitality of Can Tho People

The people of Can Tho are known for their openness and generous hospitality. Whether encountering acquaintances or strangers, they greet others warmly and courteously. As a Southern Vietnamese saying goes, *“When guests come to the house, if there’s no chicken, then serve duck.”* This reflects the heartfelt enthusiasm with which locals welcome visitors. In such instances, all members of the household take joy in preparing a thoughtful meal—often made from homegrown ingredients, reflecting the philosophy of “from the garden, for the guest.” Can Tho residents express their hospitality in a humble yet sincere and respectful manner.

- *“Catch a snakehead fish and roast it on the fire,
Prepare a platter of white wine to treat a guest from afar.”*

A simple meal of grilled snakehead fish and a few cups of rice wine becomes a profound gesture of hospitality. Though modest, it carries the deep sincerity of the host who welcomes guests from afar with heartfelt warmth and generosity.

People in Can Tho deeply value emotional bonds, considering them a treasured spiritual asset. Like many in Southern Vietnam, they often express a compelling desire for guests to stay longer, conveyed through verses that make it difficult to refuse:

- *“Come here, stay here,
Only leave when the son-in-law’s tree bears fruit.”*

This invitation is more than just words—it exemplifies the warm, ethical lifestyle of the Can Tho people, who prioritize relationships and emotional connection over material gain or social status. They maintain close, friendly ties with those around them and always extend a sincere welcome to visitors. Their joy, enthusiasm, and warmth are vividly felt by all who come to their land:

- *“Can Tho has beautiful landscapes and charming people,
Captivating the hearts of travelers, evoking love for the land and water.”*

Ultimately, exploring the character of Can Tho people reveals a deep reservoir of warmth, affection, and pride in human connection. These values have contributed to Can Tho's appeal as a new and vibrant settlement, attracting migrants from across Vietnam. In doing so, the region has become a space of cultural diversity and exchange, enriching the humanistic values that define the people of Can Tho today.

5.1.3. The Generosity and Openheartedness of Can Tho People

Blessed with natural abundance, Can Tho enjoys favorable conditions for agricultural and aquacultural development. Fertile rice fields, lush fruit orchards, and thriving fisheries characterize the region. These geographic and environmental advantages have shaped the Can Tho people's generous and openhearted disposition.

- *“The river is deep, the water flows and wears down the stone,
Wealth may be consumed, but loyalty remains engraved in the bones.”*

Even when life requires hard work to earn a living, Can Tho people remain true to their conscience. For them, emotional bonds and loyalty are the true measure of a person's worth.

- *“Love for someone, valuing righteousness more than gold,
The virtue of kindness is cherished, while wealth is seen as ordinary.”*

Such verses express a worldview in which kindness and righteousness are held in higher regard than wealth or social status. In Can Tho, interpersonal relationships are deeply rooted in the values of benevolence and mutual respect, forming the foundation for lasting connections. The people value genuine talent and personal integrity over superficial achievements.

At times, however, this openhandedness may be perceived as wastefulness or extravagance. The following folk verse humorously critiques the difficulty of satisfying societal expectations:

- *“Live in a way that pleases others,
Live generously, and people will smile; live stingily, and people will complain.”*

This highlights the social tension that may arise from one's generosity—too generous, and one might be mocked for being excessive; too frugal, and one may be criticized for being stingy. Nevertheless, generosity remains a hallmark of Southern Vietnamese character in general, and of Can Tho people in particular. This trait contributes significantly to building close-knit communities where mutual support and openness are vital for settling and thriving in new environments.

5.1.4. Can Tho People Value Righteousness over Wealth

Can Tho people place great importance on emotional bonds and moral obligations, encompassing marital fidelity, familial ties, neighborly relations, comradeship, and national solidarity. They are known for their boldness in action and their strong sense of loyalty. Valuing righteousness is a deeply rooted cultural trait of Southern Vietnamese people in general, and of those in Can Tho in particular. They are individuals of integrity, willing to risk their own well-being to help others or to act in accordance with what they believe to be morally and ethically right:

- *“Braving the thorns and danger,
Shouldering a friend to help them escape.”*

These lines reflect the resilient and sacrificial spirit developed by pioneers who once migrated to the South in search of survival, often facing life-threatening challenges. Their survival depended on

solidarity and mutual aid. This gave rise to a deep appreciation for loyal companionship and brotherhood-hallmarks of the emotional life in the Mekong Delta and in Can Tho:

- *“Righteousness is the eternal lord,
Wealth is but a fleeting guest.”*

Can Tho people are known for their clarity in values and actions-they live simply, love openly, and reject deceit, immorality, and corruption. For them, righteousness is paramount, while material wealth is seen as transient and secondary:

- *“Wealth is like dust,
Righteousness worth a thousand gold pieces.”*

Each folk verse offers distilled life lessons drawn from lived experiences. However, not everyone lives by these ideals:

- *“The string breaks, and the wood sinks,
Why seek those who lack virtue and loyalty?”*

People who live selfishly and without compassion are not deserving of others’ affection. Greed for wealth and fame leads only to rivalry and bitterness, eroding peace of mind. When such individuals fall on hard times, they often find themselves abandoned:

- *“When rich, they helped no one,
In hardship, no one helps them in return.”*

Through these verses, folk poetry offers a vivid portrayal of real-life attitudes and values. The “righteous over rich” character of Can Tho people contributes to building a compassionate, chivalrous, and morally grounded society-one that cherishes and preserves the noble traditions of the Vietnamese people.

5.2. Discussion

Folk poetry is not only the heartfelt voice of common people but also a “mirror” reflecting the soul, character, and way of life unique to each region. Within the scope of this study on Can Tho folk poetry-originating from a cultural and economic hub of the Mekong Delta-it is possible to discern distinctive personality traits of the local people. When compared to other regions such as Northern and Central Vietnam, these differences become more pronounced, highlighting how natural environment and socio-historical context shape regional identities.

5.2.1. In Comparison with the North-Reserved, Disciplined, and Ethical

People from Northern Vietnam, as reflected in folk poetry, are often portrayed as reserved, contemplative, and deeply respectful of moral codes and social decorum:

- *“Better hunger than dishonor.”; “A father’s labor is as great as Mount Thai Son.”*

Such characteristics are heavily influenced by Confucian traditions, where social propriety and honor are highly valued. In contrast, Can Tho folk expressions convey a more liberal, open-hearted, and spontaneous character:

- *“Can Tho, with white rice and clear waters,
Who visits never wants to leave.”*

Unlike the highly codified and formal tone often seen in Northern folk songs, those from the Southwest-and particularly Can Tho-are plain, instinctive, and emotionally accessible. They reflect a way of life centered on sincerity and human connection, relatively unconfined by rigid social protocols.

5.2.2. In Comparison with the Central Region-Resilient and Hardworking Amid Hardship

Central Vietnam, often described as a harsh land of “stones for dogs, pebbles for chickens,” has shaped a people known for their resilience and industriousness. Folk poetry from this region reflects hardship and the enduring spirit of its people:

- “Whoever returns to dreamy Hue,
Bring back a bowl of sweet Huong River water.”

Despite their deep emotional ties, people from the Central region are typically reserved and modest in expression. Meanwhile, the people of Can Tho-benefiting from fertile land and a more abundant natural environment-tend to exhibit an optimistic, humorous outlook on life. Even amidst the challenges of a riverine lifestyle, their expressions remain cheerful and light-hearted:

- “If you go to Binh Thuy and stop by Can Tho,
Ask if her mother’s still waiting this year or more.”

Such witty, charming, and at times playful language reflects the flexibility, cheerfulness, and tactfulness in social interaction-key traits of the river people. These characteristics not only distinguish the Can Tho personality from that of other regions but also highlight the unique cultural identity shaped by the Southwestern way of life.

Comparison Table: Personality Traits in Folk Poetry.

A comparative look at the personality traits of people in Can Tho versus other regions of Vietnam through folk poetry.

Table 1.

Comparison of personality traits of people in can Tho and other regions of Vietnam through folk poetry.

Criteria	Can Tho (Mekong Delta)	Northern Vietnam	Central Vietnam
Key Personality Traits	Open-minded, humorous, emotional	Calm, reserved, values formality	Resilient, hardworking, enduring
Emotional Expression	Direct, witty, cheerful	Subtle, deep, metaphorical	Reserved, quiet, profound
Social Relationships	Friendly, hospitable, open	Structured, formal, respect-based	Tight-knit, bonded through hardship
Environmental Influence	Fertile rivers → adaptive and free-spirited	Stable plains → orderly and disciplined	Harsh climate → frugal and enduring
Language in Folk Poetry	Simple, humorous, close to daily life	Standardized, philosophical, moralistic	Plain, emotional, often melancholic

5.2.3. Convergence Yet Retaining a Distinct Identity

Can Tho can be considered a meeting point for multiple migration flows from the North and Central regions to the South during the 17th and 18th centuries. However, it is the open-hearted, freedom-loving, and emotionally-driven nature of its people-encapsulated in their folk poetry-that has created a unique identity for Can Tho. The people here are characterized by openness, hospitality, kindness, a zest for life, and harmony with the natural environment, especially the riverine surroundings. The difference in character between Can Tho and other regions is not a division but rather a vivid demonstration of the cultural diversity within the unity of Vietnamese culture. Through folk poetry, we not only see the people of Can Tho but also witness the core of the national spirit reflected in each region.

6. Conclusion

Through the survey and research based on folk poetry data, particularly Southern folk poetry and Can Tho folk poetry, we have identified the following key points. The research topic, “*The Human Character Through Folk Poetry: The Case of Can Tho, Vietnam*,” helps us gain a deeper understanding of the beauty in the character of the people here. Among the character traits discussed, we observe both the general characteristics of Southern people as well as the distinct traits specific to the people of Can Tho.

In addition to the prominent and admirable traits that should be promoted, there remain some aspects of character that, in our opinion, are less favorable or positive and need to be changed or adjusted. A more comprehensive and in-depth survey of the character of the people of Can Tho across other genres of literature and art (such as poetry, modern music, vong co...) or in the daily life of Can Tho's inhabitants is necessary to fully capture the unique characteristics of Can Tho's people.

Determining the distinctive characteristics of the people of Can Tho will have significant implications for the city's development strategy in general, and for the development of its people in particular, as it engages in cultural exchange and integration with other regions across the country.

Transparency:

The author confirms that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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