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The Early Potential of Ex Camp Vietnam as an Instrument of Heritage Diplomacy by Re-reading Humanitarian Narratives in Indonesia-Vietnam Relations

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Abstract

This study examines the preliminary potential of Ex Camp Vietnam on Galang Island as an instrument of heritage diplomacy in Indonesia–Vietnam relations through the reinterpretation of humanitarian narratives. An exploratory qualitative design combined direct observation conducted on 14–15 April 2026, a structured narrative literature review, and document analysis. The literature search identified 86 articles, of which 47 were downloaded and 22 selected for further analysis. Field notes documented physical structures, spatial arrangements, photographs, inscriptions, and interpretive materials across four zones: arrival and shelter, community life, transnational spirituality, and memorialisation. Thematic analysis examined historical narratives, diplomatic potential, institutional constraints, and memory transformation. Findings indicate that the site prominently represents Indonesian humanitarian solidarity while providing limited contextual information about displacement, personal refugee experiences, and subsequent resettlement. Predominantly Indonesian-language displays, weathered structures, and limited evidence of sustained bilateral cooperation further constrain its immediate diplomatic application. The study proposes heritage diplomacy of refuge as a provisional concept linking refugee heritage, humanitarian memory, and prospective intercultural engagement. Suggested pathways include community participation, collaborative historical research, multilingual interpretation, and preliminary institutional consultation. The brief observation period and absence of stakeholder interviews limit the findings to an exploratory assessment requiring further empirical validation rather than demonstrated outcomes.

Keywords: *Ex Camp Vietnam, Galang Island, Heritage Diplomacy, Humanitarian Memory, Indonesia–Vietnam Relations.*

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INTRODUCTION

Sites associated with forced displacement occupy an unsettled position within contemporary heritage governance because they preserve traces of humanitarian assistance alongside experiences of insecurity, separation, and prolonged uncertainty. Across Southeast Asia, interpretations of humanitarian action have been shaped by competing narratives of protection, sovereignty, and regional responsibility (Spandler, 2022). Former refugee camps can retain tangible and intangible forms of cultural heritage whose significance extends beyond their original function as temporary facilities (Neikirk et al., 2024). Ex Camp Vietnam on Galang Island, Indonesia, represents a relevant historical site because its existence is associated with the reception of Vietnamese refugees and its subsequent development as a historical tourism destination (Irawan & Sidabutar, 2025). The transformation of such humanitarian spaces into tourism resources raises questions concerning whose experiences are preserved, how the host country's contribution is represented, and whether the complexity of displacement remains visible in public narratives. These questions acquire particular significance as Indonesia and Vietnam continue developing bilateral cooperation across political, economic, and sociocultural dimensions (Nguyen et al., 2025). Examining the diplomatic possibilities of Ex Camp Vietnam consequently requires an assessment of how its historical significance, humanitarian representations, and potential for cross-border engagement intersect within contemporary cultural heritage practices.

Contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualises heritage diplomacy as a relational process through which historical resources, cultural interpretations, and institutional interests become connected across national boundaries (Lähdesmäki & Čeginskas, 2022). This conceptual development shifts scholarly attention from the symbolic possession of cultural heritage toward the interactions and negotiations through which heritage acquires international significance. Practice-oriented investigations indicate that heritage becomes diplomatically meaningful through specific activities, institutional arrangements, and interpretive engagements rather than through historical importance alone (Todorović, 2022). Research addressing dialogic approaches to international cultural relations similarly emphasises collaborative interpretation and reciprocal participation as important characteristics of heritage-based diplomatic engagement (Čeginskas & Lähdesmäki, 2023). Studies of museum diplomacy further demonstrate that historical representations can become involved in contemporary interstate relationships, particularly where the past contains politically sensitive or contested memories (Riyanto et al., 2025). These scholarly developments collectively suggest that the diplomatic significance of historical sites depends not merely on their preservation but also on the capacity of institutions and communities to negotiate shared interpretations, acknowledge historical complexity, and establish meaningful forms of cultural interaction.

Despite these developments, existing scholarship has not sufficiently connected the humanitarian history of Ex Camp Vietnam with the analytical requirements of heritage diplomacy. Research specifically addressing the Vietnamese Village on Galang Island has principally examined the historical site's tourism potential, leaving its possible function in bilateral diplomatic engagement outside the central analytical focus (Irawan & Sidabutar, 2025). Studies of Indonesian public diplomacy in Vietnam have explored educational engagement, but they have not explicitly examined refugee-related historical sites as instruments for interpreting shared humanitarian experiences (Lusianti & Azizah, 2024). The conceptual literature on heritage diplomacy has also highlighted the need to examine how cultural heritage becomes embedded in international political relationships rather than assuming that historical significance automatically produces diplomatic value (Winter, 2023). Scholarship concerning refugee camps and intangible cultural heritage demonstrates the relevance of considering displaced communities' cultural experiences alongside the physical characteristics of humanitarian sites (Neikirk et al., 2024). These contributions provide important foundations for examining historical preservation, humanitarian memory, and cultural interaction, although their respective analytical concerns remain insufficiently integrated in relation to Galang Island. The resulting research gap is primarily contextual and conceptual, concerning how the humanitarian narratives associated with Ex Camp Vietnam might be interpreted as preliminary diplomatic resources without assuming that a formal Indonesia–Vietnam heritage diplomacy initiative already exists.

The absence of an integrated interpretation of refugee heritage and bilateral diplomacy presents scientific and practical challenges for understanding the contemporary significance of Ex Camp Vietnam. Humanitarian narratives in Southeast Asia reflect different political understandings of regional responsibility, making their public representation consequential for how humanitarian experiences are subsequently remembered and interpreted (Spandler, 2022). Research on museum diplomacy and postcolonial memory demonstrates that presenting sensitive historical experiences can influence the interpretive foundations through which societies understand their relationships with other countries (Riyanto et al., 2025). The continuing development of Indonesia–Vietnam relations provides a relevant bilateral setting for examining historical connections that extend beyond conventional political and economic cooperation (Nguyen et al., 2025). Existing educational public diplomacy initiatives illustrate the presence of sociocultural engagement between the two countries, although such initiatives do not establish that refugee heritage has become an operational component of their diplomatic cooperation (Lusianti & Azizah, 2024). Without a careful assessment of historical representations and their possible diplomatic implications, Ex Camp Vietnam risks being understood primarily through its tourism function, while the more complex relationships among humanitarian assistance, displacement experiences, collective memory, and potential intercultural dialogue remain analytically underdeveloped.

The present study positions Ex Camp Vietnam at the intersection of refugee heritage, humanitarian memory, and international cultural relations by examining the conditions under which its historical narratives might support future heritage diplomacy. Existing conceptual scholarship establishes heritage diplomacy as a field concerned with the international uses and interpretations of

cultural heritage, whereas this research applies that perspective to a former refugee camp whose diplomatic possibilities have received limited direct examination (Lähdesmäki & Čeginskas, 2022). Practice-based approaches to heritage diplomacy generally address the relationships between heritage activities and diplomatic engagement, while the present investigation focuses on identifying preliminary possibilities before any formal bilateral programme can be established from the available evidence (Todorović, 2022). The emphasis on dialogic international cultural relations provides an analytical basis for considering how Indonesian institutional representations might eventually be examined alongside Vietnamese historical perspectives and the memories of former refugees (Čeginskas & Lähdesmäki, 2023). Scholarly discussion of heritage diplomacy also indicates the importance of distinguishing the international relevance of heritage from its actual mobilisation within diplomatic practice (Winter, 2023). The proposed contribution is an exploratory interpretive concept, provisionally termed *heritage diplomacy of refuge*, which describes the potential use of refugee-related historical and humanitarian narratives as resources for international cultural understanding. This preliminary formulation distinguishes historical significance from diplomatic implementation and treats narrative sensitivity, stakeholder participation, and institutional cooperation as matters requiring further investigation rather than as outcomes already demonstrated by the present study.

This study aims to examine the early potential of Ex Camp Vietnam as an instrument of heritage diplomacy in Indonesia–Vietnam relations through a critical reinterpretation of its historical and humanitarian narratives. The first objective is to identify the historical representations and humanitarian values observable at the site through limited visual observation and contextual analysis of its historical significance. The second objective is to examine how these representations might provide preliminary foundations for cultural dialogue, shared historical understanding, and future bilateral heritage engagement. The third objective is to identify potential limitations associated with narrative selectivity, the representation of refugee experiences, institutional coordination, and the absence of demonstrated collaborative heritage management. The study introduces *heritage diplomacy of refuge* as a tentative analytical proposition for examining the relationship between refugee heritage, humanitarian remembrance, and prospective diplomatic engagement without presenting it as an established theory or existing policy instrument. Its expected contribution is to provide an initial conceptual and interpretive framework that can guide subsequent empirical research, stakeholder consultation, and policy consideration concerning the responsible use of Ex Camp Vietnam as a possible resource for Indonesia–Vietnam cultural cooperation.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed an exploratory qualitative research design integrating direct observation, a structured narrative literature review, and document analysis to examine the preliminary potential of Ex Camp Vietnam as an instrument of heritage diplomacy in Indonesia–Vietnam relations. Field observation was conducted on 14–15 April 2026 at Ex Camp Vietnam on Galang Island, Indonesia, covering four principal zones identified through preliminary searches: the reception area and information centre, former residential and camp facilities, religious sites comprising Quan Am Tu Temple and the Catholic Church, and the memorial monument and cemetery. Observations focused on the physical condition of historical structures, spatial arrangements, displayed photographs, interpretive texts, and the general atmosphere of the site, with relevant information documented through written field notes. The observation considered the site's established historical and tourism functions as a basis for examining its possible significance beyond conventional heritage tourism (Irawan & Sidabutar, 2025). Particular attention was given to the distinction between physical remains and the cultural meanings associated with displacement, reflecting the relevance of tangible and intangible heritage in former refugee camp settings (Neikirk et al., 2024). The observational procedure did not involve interviews with site managers, visitors, former refugees, or diplomatic representatives, restricting the empirical material to directly observable features and publicly available historical representations.

The structured narrative literature review involved searches in Scopus and SINTA using four keyword combinations: “Vietnam camp + Galang,” “refugee camp + Indonesia + Vietnam,” “heritage diplomacy + ASEAN,” and “cultural diplomacy + Indonesia–Vietnam.” The searches initially identified 86 articles, of which 47 were downloaded following title and abstract screening, while 22 were retained after full-text examination based on their substantive relevance to refugee heritage, cultural diplomacy, or heritage management in Indonesia. Documentary materials comprised official brochures issued by

the site management, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees report concerning the Comprehensive Plan of Action, and media coverage documenting diplomatic visits associated with the site. The analytical framework applied heritage diplomacy as an interpretive concept for examining relationships between historical representations, cultural heritage, and prospective international engagement without presuming the existence of an established diplomatic programme (Lähdesmäki & Čeginskas, 2022). Thematic analysis was conducted by examining field notes, selected publications, and documentary materials through four categories—historical narratives, diplomatic potential, implementation obstacles, and mechanisms of memory transformation—while distinguishing potential diplomatic applications from established heritage diplomacy practices (Todorović, 2022). Interpretive credibility was addressed by maintaining distinctions among direct observations, documentary information, and conceptual interpretations, although the two-day observation period, absence of stakeholder interviews, and lack of independent verification of diplomatic outcomes limit the findings to a preliminary assessment rather than a comprehensive evaluation of bilateral heritage diplomacy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Historical and Humanitarian Narratives across the Four Observed Zones of Ex Camp Vietnam

The field observation conducted on 14–15 April 2026 identified four spatially distinct narrative zones at Ex Camp Vietnam: arrival and shelter, community life, transnational spirituality, and memorialisation. These zones were distinguished by the functions of surviving buildings, the objects displayed, the explanatory materials provided, and the sequence through which visitors encountered the former refugee settlement. The arrangement created a movement from reception and emergency accommodation toward ordinary communal activities, religious practices, and commemoration of those who died during displacement. Research on the heritage potential of the Vietnamese Village on Galang Island provides a relevant point of comparison, although the present observation examines narrative representation rather than tourism development alone (Irawan & Sidabutar, 2025). The interpretation also recognises that refugee heritage extends beyond physical structures to include the remembered experiences and cultural expressions of displaced communities (Neikirk et al., 2024). The four-zone mapping consequently serves as an observational framework for identifying which aspects of humanitarian history are made visible at the site and which remain insufficiently explained.

The arrival and shelter zone begins at the principal gate, where the inscription "Kamp Pengungsian Vietnam" identifies the former camp and a marker records its period of operation as 1979–1996. A nearby information area contains photographic panels depicting crowded wooden boats, the registration of arriving refugees by Indonesian naval personnel, and expressions of fatigue and relief among those photographed. A wooden boat replica in the courtyard reinforces the connection between maritime flight and the experience of reaching an Indonesian place of refuge. The combination of images and objects makes the act of arrival especially prominent, directing visitors' attention toward rescue and the provision of temporary shelter. This emphasis is consistent with the broader significance of humanitarian protection as a recurring element in Southeast Asian accounts of refugee governance, although such accounts vary in their political framing (Spandler, 2022). The photographs remain documentary representations rather than direct testimonies from the individuals whose experiences they depict. This distinction matters because the appearance of relief in a photograph cannot independently establish how individual refugees understood their journeys, their reception, or the conditions that followed.

The interpretive sequence in the arrival zone contains little explicit explanation of the Vietnam War or of the political and social conditions that contributed to the refugees' departure. The visual narrative consequently begins primarily at the moment of refuge rather than tracing the circumstances that made displacement necessary. This emphasis highlights Indonesia's humanitarian role but offers a limited basis for interpreting the agency, losses, and divergent trajectories of the refugees themselves. Studies of heritage diplomacy caution against treating historical representations as politically neutral, since the meanings attached to heritage are shaped by decisions about selection and presentation (Lähdesmäki & Čeginskas, 2022). The observed omission cannot be attributed confidently to a deliberate curatorial strategy because interviews with site managers and access to curatorial planning records were not included in the investigation. The observation establishes a representational imbalance between the visibility of reception and the relative absence of historical contextualisation, rather than demonstrating the intentions of those responsible for the displays.

The community-life zone comprises rows of former refugee barracks, some of which appeared empty or partially restored during the observation. Dioramas inside the buildings present a communal kitchen, an improvised classroom with an old blackboard, and a health room furnished with wooden beds. Faded Vietnamese writing and landscape drawings remain visible on several barrack walls, introducing traces of individual expression into otherwise institutionally organised displays. The absence of audio materials and the limited explanatory text, predominantly written in Indonesian, restrict the range of historical perspectives immediately accessible to visitors who cannot read the displayed language. The recurring emphasis on collective order and everyday routines makes the zone interpretable as a history of adaptation, although it does not establish that camp life was consistently harmonious. Material traces of personal occupation are especially relevant to research on refugee lifeworlds because they shift attention from administrative descriptions of displacement toward experiences embedded in lived spaces (Nguyen, 2026). Table 1 consolidates the observed characteristics of the four narrative zones and identifies the principal limitations of their historical representations without assigning unverified motives to the site managers.

Table 1. Narrative Characteristics of the Four Observed Zones at Ex Camp Vietnam

Narrative Zone	Observed Physical and Interpretive Features	Dominant Humanitarian Narrative	Limitations of Historical Representation
Arrival and Shelter	Main entrance, information centre, historical photographs, registration images, and wooden boat replica	Refugee arrival, humanitarian rescue, and temporary protection provided by Indonesia	Limited explanation of the Vietnam War, causes of displacement, and experiences preceding arrival
Community Life	Former barracks, communal kitchen diorama, emergency classroom, health room, and Vietnamese graffiti	Community adaptation, everyday survival, education, health care, and communal organisation	Predominantly Indonesian-language information, limited personal testimonies, and minimal representation of uncertainty or conflict
Transnational Spirituality	Quan Am Tu Temple, Catholic Church, religious objects, and information concerning religious celebrations	Religious coexistence, spiritual continuity, and solidarity among refugee communities	Limited explanation of everyday interfaith interactions and the complexity of religious experiences
Memorialisation	Humanitarian Monument with Indonesian, Vietnamese, and English inscriptions, refugee cemetery, and maintained gravestones	Humanitarian solidarity, remembrance, respect, and commemoration of deceased refugees	Limited information concerning repatriation, resettlement, and refugees' lives following camp closure

The community-life displays provide a partial counterweight to the reception narrative by representing refugees as participants in education, health care, domestic activities, and collective routines rather than exclusively as recipients of humanitarian assistance. The remaining graffiti is particularly significant because it introduces evidence of personal presence that is not fully incorporated into the standardised scenes represented by the dioramas. Neither the identities of the individuals responsible for these markings nor their intended meanings could be established through the two-day observation. Research on the intangible cultural heritage of refugee camps indicates why such traces should be interpreted with attention to displaced communities' cultural expressions rather than exclusively through the physical preservation of buildings (Neikirk et al., 2024). The displays do not visibly elaborate on interpersonal tensions, emotional uncertainty, or unequal experiences of confinement, although the absence of these topics cannot be interpreted as evidence that particular incidents occurred. The principal analytical finding concerns the distinction between the diverse social

experiences suggested by the surviving historical environment and the narrower range of experiences explicitly communicated through its present interpretation.

The transnational spirituality zone contains Quan Am Tu Temple and a nearby Catholic church, both observed in maintained physical condition during the field visit. Candles, incense, and flower offerings at the temple, together with the church's visible religious symbols, make spiritual practice a distinct component of the site's historical representation. An information board associates the camp period with Vesak and Christmas celebrations and presents religious coexistence as a characteristic of the refugee community. The proximity of the two places of worship makes religious plurality spatially visible and provides visitors with a tangible reference for considering community organisation under conditions of displacement. Research on dialogic heritage diplomacy suggests that historical sites can facilitate engagement across different cultural traditions when heritage meanings are negotiated collaboratively rather than presented exclusively through institutional interpretations (Čeginskas & Lähdesmäki, 2023). The observed religious structures offer a possible foundation for such engagement, but their preservation does not establish that historical interfaith relations were free from disagreement or that contemporary bilateral dialogue already occurs at the site. The representation of harmony should consequently be understood as a historical narrative presented through the site's interpretive materials, whose broader accuracy requires corroboration through additional testimonies and archival evidence.

The memorialisation zone centres on a five-metre Humanitarian Monument bearing inscriptions in Indonesian, Vietnamese, and English, making it one of the site's most explicit representations of transnational humanitarian remembrance. A nearby cemetery contains maintained graves marked with Vietnamese writing, connecting the monument's commemorative message with the deaths of individuals who experienced displacement. The quiet environment, memorial structures, and multilingual inscription collectively communicate respect for deceased refugees while reinforcing the historical significance of Indonesia's humanitarian assistance. The memorial nevertheless provides limited information about repatriation, third-country resettlement, or the subsequent experiences of individuals who passed through Galang Island. Research on museum diplomacy and postcolonial memory demonstrates the interpretive importance of acknowledging historical experiences that complicate celebratory national narratives (Riyanto et al., 2025). The field material supports identifying a commemorative emphasis on respect and humanitarian solidarity, while leaving unresolved how former refugees and their descendants might interpret the same memorial landscape.

Viewed sequentially, the four zones establish a recognisable narrative progression from rescue and shelter to everyday adaptation, religious coexistence, and commemoration. Their material characteristics preserve evidence of the camp's humanitarian history, while their textual and visual interpretations consistently emphasise organised communal life and Indonesian assistance. The strongest empirical basis for this assessment derives from the observed photographs, dioramas, graffiti, religious buildings, monument, gravestones, and information panels rather than from unverified assumptions about the personal memories of former residents. The limited representation of departure circumstances, prolonged uncertainty, interpersonal disagreement, repatriation, and resettlement indicates a restriction in the publicly accessible historical narrative rather than demonstrating that such experiences were uniform among refugees. Scholarship on humanitarian narratives in Southeast Asia helps explain how representations centred on protection can acquire public significance while leaving competing experiences comparatively less visible (Spandler, 2022). Critical approaches to memory governance similarly emphasise the importance of examining whose experiences receive institutional recognition and how historical interpretations are shaped through practices of remembrance (Le & Tran, 2025). Ex Camp Vietnam consequently offers substantial material for more inclusive historical interpretation, although the available observations support only a preliminary assessment of its narrative opportunities and limitations rather than a conclusion that the site has already developed an operational diplomatic function.

Reinterpreting Humanitarian Memory as a Potential Instrument of Indonesia–Vietnam Heritage Diplomacy

The historical and humanitarian representations identified at Ex Camp Vietnam provide an initial basis for examining whether a former refugee settlement can acquire diplomatic significance beyond its established function as a heritage tourism destination. Its potential derives from the historical relationship between Indonesian humanitarian assistance and the experiences of Vietnamese refugees,

which connects the site's material remains with memories involving more than one national community. Heritage diplomacy scholarship conceptualises cultural heritage as a resource through which international relationships can be constructed, negotiated, and maintained, although historical importance alone does not establish diplomatic effectiveness (Lähdesmäki & Čeginskas, 2022). The four observed zones preserve distinct elements of this relationship through representations of reception, communal adaptation, religious coexistence, and humanitarian commemoration. These elements offer possible foundations for cross-cultural interpretation because they concern experiences of protection and displacement rather than exclusively nationally bounded cultural achievements. Winter (2023) emphasises the relational dimensions of heritage diplomacy, suggesting that the significance of Ex Camp Vietnam should be examined through the interactions it might facilitate rather than through an assumed diplomatic value inherent in its historical status.

The relationship between Indonesia as a receiving country and Vietnamese refugees as displaced individuals represents a historically asymmetrical encounter whose contemporary interpretation requires attention to both institutional responsibility and personal experience. The photographs of refugee arrivals, registration procedures, and emergency accommodation primarily foreground Indonesia's humanitarian role, while the barrack graffiti, religious buildings, and cemetery retain more direct traces of refugee presence. These representations could support a shared historical narrative, but such a narrative would remain incomplete if the experiences of former refugees were subordinated to an exclusively state-centred account of assistance. Bachleitner (2019) explains that diplomatic engagement with historical memory involves the strategic representation of the past in ways that can influence contemporary international relationships. The application of this perspective to Ex Camp Vietnam remains preliminary because the available evidence does not demonstrate an officially coordinated process of historical reinterpretation between Indonesia and Vietnam. Research on the archaeology of refugee lifeworlds offers a complementary orientation by directing attention toward displaced people's material experiences rather than treating refugee settlements solely as administrative spaces (Nguyen, 2026). A diplomatically responsible interpretation would consequently require a historical account that recognises Indonesia's humanitarian contribution while preserving the agency, uncertainty, and diverse memories of those who experienced displacement.

The diplomatic relevance of Ex Camp Vietnam can also be interpreted through its capacity to provide a setting for cultural encounters involving multiple historical perspectives. The material proximity of religious structures, residential remains, and commemorative facilities creates opportunities to connect narratives of humanitarian assistance with questions of cultural identity and historical remembrance. Grincheva (2023) discusses heritage diplomacy through the concept of contact zones, highlighting the significance of cultural institutions as spaces where different identities and interpretations interact. Applying this concept to Galang Island suggests that its existing heritage environment could potentially accommodate dialogue involving Indonesian communities, Vietnamese institutions, and individuals connected to the former refugee settlement. The site's present interpretation does not establish that such interactions already occur through a sustained diplomatic mechanism, particularly because the investigation did not involve direct engagement with diplomatic representatives or former refugees. The collaborative characteristics of heritage diplomacy described by Čeginskas and Lähdesmäki (2023) indicate that any future initiative would require reciprocal participation in historical interpretation rather than the unilateral transmission of a predetermined humanitarian narrative.

Religious heritage constitutes a particularly relevant component of the site's preliminary diplomatic potential because it connects the historical refugee experience with cultural practices that remain recognisable beyond national boundaries. The maintained condition of Quan Am Tu Temple and the Catholic Church, together with the available account of religious celebrations during the camp period, provides material and interpretive references for examining spirituality as part of displacement history. The coexistence represented through these structures could support cultural dialogue concerning religious plurality, communal adaptation, and the preservation of cultural practices under conditions of forced migration. Neikirk et al. (2024) emphasise the relevance of intangible cultural heritage to the experiences and protection of refugees, supporting an interpretation that extends beyond the preservation of religious buildings as physical objects. Contemporary research on Indonesian cultural and educational engagement in Vietnam also indicates that cross-cultural understanding constitutes an identifiable concern within bilateral sociocultural relations (Widianto & Weix, 2025). The connection between these existing forms of cultural engagement and the religious heritage of Ex

Camp Vietnam remains hypothetical because no evidence was obtained concerning coordinated religious or cultural diplomacy activities at the site. Its significance therefore lies in the possibility of developing historically grounded intercultural interpretation, provided that future research examines the religious experiences of former residents rather than assuming that the displayed narrative of harmony represents every aspect of community life.

The memorialisation zone introduces a more ethically demanding dimension of heritage diplomacy because its monument and cemetery preserve reminders of humanitarian loss alongside expressions of international solidarity. The multilingual Humanitarian Monument provides a symbolic connection between Indonesian and Vietnamese historical experiences, while the cemetery records the presence of individuals whose displacement ended in death. Such commemorative resources cannot be interpreted exclusively as evidence of successful humanitarian intervention because their historical significance also involves suffering, separation, and the limitations of protection. Research on memory governance at historical sites in Vietnam demonstrates the importance of examining how institutional interpretations shape the recognition and public presentation of difficult historical experiences (Le & Tran, 2025). The absence of detailed information concerning repatriation and resettlement at Ex Camp Vietnam suggests that its current commemorative account provides only a partial representation of the refugee experience. This limitation reinforces the need to distinguish humanitarian remembrance from diplomatic celebration, since historically sensitive heritage requires recognition of experiences that may complicate otherwise affirmative narratives of international cooperation (Turunen & Kaasik-Krogerus, 2023).

The potential contribution of Ex Camp Vietnam to Indonesia–Vietnam relations becomes more apparent when the site is considered alongside existing patterns of bilateral sociocultural cooperation. Research examining the development of relations between the two countries identifies a broader historical and diplomatic relationship within which additional forms of cultural engagement may be considered (Nguyen et al., 2025). Educational public diplomacy involving Indonesia and Vietnam illustrates the relevance of knowledge exchange and sociocultural interaction to the bilateral relationship, although it does not establish a direct institutional connection with refugee heritage (Lusianti & Azizah, 2024). The site's historical association with Vietnamese displacement therefore represents a possible additional dimension of engagement rather than an established component of contemporary bilateral policy. Comparative scholarship on heritage diplomacy in Southeast Asia indicates that shared historical and cultural resources can be mobilised to support international relationships when their interpretation is linked to identifiable diplomatic practices (Hajura, 2022). Ex Camp Vietnam nevertheless differs from conventional heritage initiatives because its central historical significance concerns forced migration, temporary refuge, and the unequal circumstances experienced by displaced populations. The diplomatic interpretation of this history would require careful attention to the distinction between Vietnamese national heritage, the experiences of former refugees, and Indonesia's institutional memory of humanitarian reception.

Comparative experiences of museum diplomacy provide a further analytical basis for distinguishing historical preservation from the practical development of diplomatic engagement. Research on the Revolusi! exhibition in Indonesian–Dutch relations illustrates how historical representations can enter contemporary diplomatic discussion when cultural institutions engage with politically sensitive memories (Riyanto et al., 2025). The relevance of this comparison lies in the interpretive relationship between historical memory and international interaction rather than in any assumption that the institutional circumstances of the two cases are equivalent. Todorović (2022) argues for examining heritage diplomacy through its practices, directing attention to the activities and relationships through which cultural heritage becomes diplomatically meaningful. Ex Camp Vietnam currently offers observable historical resources, but the available field and documentary evidence is insufficient to establish reciprocal curation, sustained bilateral programming, or measurable diplomatic outcomes. Its preliminary potential must consequently be differentiated from operational heritage diplomacy, which would require identifiable institutional participation and activities capable of being examined through subsequent empirical research.

The preceding interpretation supports the tentative formulation of *heritage diplomacy of refuge* as an analytical proposition concerning the possible diplomatic use of historical sites associated with refugee reception and humanitarian displacement. This formulation differs from general accounts of heritage diplomacy by placing the relationship between humanitarian assistance, displaced people's

memories, and cross-national historical interpretation at the centre of the analysis. Existing scholarship identifies multiple dimensions of heritage diplomacy, including strategic, ethical, and symbolic engagement, which provide relevant foundations for distinguishing the prospective functions of refugee-related heritage (Parowicz, 2025). The proposed concept also recognises that heritage diplomacy involves interactions across institutional and national boundaries, rather than the simple international promotion of a preserved historical site (Mäkinen et al., 2023). At Ex Camp Vietnam, the four narrative zones offer preliminary symbolic and interpretive resources, but their diplomatic significance remains contingent upon historical verification, broader stakeholder participation, and the development of reciprocal cultural engagement. The concept should not be understood as an established theoretical category or evidence of an existing Indonesia–Vietnam diplomatic programme because the present research lacks interviews, institutional agreements, and evaluations of diplomatic activities. Its contribution is a provisional analytical distinction between the preservation of refugee heritage, the public representation of humanitarian memory, and the conditions under which those resources might eventually become instruments of international cultural cooperation.

Institutional Constraints, Narrative Challenges, and Preliminary Pathways toward Heritage Diplomacy

The field observations indicate a substantial distinction between the historical significance of Ex Camp Vietnam and the conditions required for its prospective development as a heritage diplomacy resource. The four narrative zones preserve physical evidence of humanitarian reception, communal adaptation, religious coexistence, and remembrance, but their interpretive materials provide limited opportunities for examining these experiences through multiple national and personal perspectives. The site's existing historical and tourism functions constitute an important foundation, although tourism potential should not be equated with institutional readiness for diplomatic engagement (Irawan & Sidabutar, 2025). Heritage diplomacy involves identifiable cultural practices, institutional relationships, and processes of interpretation that extend beyond the physical preservation of historically significant places (Todorović, 2022). The two-day observation did not establish the presence of a sustained bilateral programme involving the site, and the documentary materials available for analysis were insufficient to evaluate formal diplomatic arrangements comprehensively. The principal challenge concerns how existing historical resources could be developed into a more inclusive and institutionally supported interpretive setting without overstating the site's current diplomatic function.

Narrative accessibility represents an immediate limitation because explanatory materials across the observed zones were predominantly presented in Indonesian, despite the site's historical association with Vietnamese refugees and international humanitarian assistance. The multilingual inscriptions on the Humanitarian Monument demonstrate the presence of Indonesian, Vietnamese, and English representations within the commemorative environment, but comparable multilingual interpretation was not consistently observed in the remaining zones. Information concerning the causes of displacement, individual experiences during the camp period, and subsequent repatriation or resettlement remains limited, restricting visitors' opportunities to reconstruct the broader historical sequence. Dialogic approaches to heritage diplomacy emphasise the importance of reciprocal interpretation and opportunities for different communities to engage with shared historical representations (Čeginskas & Lähdesmäki, 2023). The development of bilingual Indonesian–Vietnamese information panels could provide an initial response to this limitation, particularly when supported by historical verification and appropriate translation procedures. Additional English-language explanations and accessible digital materials could be considered as complementary measures rather than substitutes for accurate historical documentation. Such improvements would expand the possibilities for cross-cultural interpretation, although their effectiveness would require subsequent assessment involving visitors and relevant stakeholders.

The limited presence of personal refugee testimonies constitutes a second interpretive constraint because most observed representations communicate humanitarian history through institutional photographs, reconstructed activities, buildings, and commemorative objects. Surviving Vietnamese graffiti and cemetery inscriptions provide traces of individual presence, but their historical meanings cannot be established adequately without additional archival information or testimony. Research concerning intangible cultural heritage in refugee settings demonstrates the importance of considering displaced communities' cultural practices and experiences alongside material preservation

(Neikirk et al., 2024). Studies of refugee memory also illustrate how different forms of narration can contribute to the preservation and communication of displacement experiences across communities (Mohan & Varma, 2026). Future historical documentation could examine the feasibility of obtaining voluntarily contributed testimonies, photographs, letters, and other archival materials from former refugees or their descendants, subject to consent and appropriate ethical safeguards. Such contributions would remain prospective research activities rather than established characteristics of the current site, since no former refugees or descendants participated in the present investigation.

Institutional coordination constitutes another issue because the historical preservation and public interpretation of Ex Camp Vietnam involve responsibilities that may extend beyond conventional tourism administration. The observation documented locally presented historical information and visitor facilities, but it did not establish the existence, scope, or absence of formal agreements among site administrators, Indonesian diplomatic institutions, and Vietnamese representatives. Research on cultural heritage preservation in Indonesia identifies stakeholder coordination and community involvement as relevant considerations for sustaining cultural heritage initiatives (Ramli et al., 2025). Scholarship on heritage diplomacy further distinguishes the symbolic international significance of cultural resources from the institutional relationships required to mobilise them through diplomatic practice (Winter, 2023). A preliminary institutional assessment would therefore need to identify existing management responsibilities, conservation arrangements, documentary resources, and potential channels for consultation before proposing formal bilateral activities. The conceptual importance of official diplomatic engagement also suggests that informal commemorative contact should not automatically be interpreted as an established programme of diplomacy with memory (Bachleitner, 2019). Table 2 presents a preliminary development framework that distinguishes observed conditions, potential implications, proposed actions, and the additional evidence required for evaluating their feasibility.

Table 2. Preliminary Heritage Diplomacy Potential, Constraints, and Development Pathways of Ex Camp Vietnam

Development Dimension	Observed Condition or Analytical Constraint	Potential Heritage Diplomacy Value	Preliminary Development Pathway
Historical interpretation	Limited explanation of displacement causes and post-camp refugee experiences	Shared historical understanding between Indonesian and Vietnamese audiences	Review historical documentation and develop more comprehensive interpretive narratives
Multilingual accessibility	Explanatory materials predominantly use Indonesian, while the monument has three-language inscriptions	Improved accessibility for Vietnamese and international visitors	Prepare verified Indonesian–Vietnamese information panels and supplementary English materials
Refugee memory and representation	Limited personal testimonies within the observed displays	Recognition of refugee experiences and transnational humanitarian memory	Explore voluntary oral-history documentation and archival collaboration with former refugees or descendants
Religious and commemorative heritage	Preserved religious buildings, memorial monument, and refugee cemetery	Intercultural dialogue, remembrance, and recognition of humanitarian solidarity	Develop historically grounded interpretive activities concerning religious coexistence and commemoration
Heritage conservation and communication	Weathered structures and predominantly static interpretive displays	Improved preservation and communication of historical resources	Assess conservation needs and consider appropriate digital documentation and interpretation

Community and academic participation	Stakeholder participation could not be comprehensively evaluated through the available observation	Broader public engagement and historical knowledge development	Explore community-based activities and collaborative research with local universities
Institutional and diplomatic engagement	Formal bilateral heritage cooperation was not established by the available evidence	Prospective Indonesia–Vietnam cultural cooperation	Clarify institutional responsibilities and explore preliminary communication with relevant diplomatic representatives

The development pathways presented in Table 2 indicate that physical conservation and historical interpretation should be considered complementary requirements rather than independent management concerns. Several former camp structures displayed signs of weathering during observation, while the information centre relied primarily on static photographs and conventional exhibition materials. The observation did not include a technical conservation assessment, preventing conclusions concerning structural safety, material deterioration rates, or the environmental conditions required for long-term archival preservation. Research on heritage preservation among younger generations identifies changing expectations concerning participation and technology as relevant considerations for communicating cultural heritage (Ramli & Abdull Rahman, 2025). Digital documentation of photographs, inscriptions, architectural remains, and historical records could be explored as a means of supporting preservation and extending access without replacing the physical experience of the site. Decisions concerning digital interpretation should nevertheless follow an assessment of historical accuracy, maintenance capacity, and the ethical implications of displaying sensitive refugee-related materials.

Community participation represents a plausible initial pathway for strengthening public engagement before more formal heritage diplomacy activities are considered. Local residents, tour guides, students, and cultural organisations could potentially contribute to historical discussions, voluntary conservation-related activities, and the identification of underrepresented aspects of the site's humanitarian history. Experiences of shared heritage diplomacy in Southeast Asia suggest that cultural resources acquire broader international relevance when their interpretation becomes connected to cooperation and mutual recognition (Hajura, 2022). Community participation should nevertheless not be treated as a substitute for professional conservation, historically reliable documentation, or the involvement of people whose experiences form the subject of the heritage narrative. A preliminary community initiative could focus on identifying available historical resources, recording questions raised by visitors, and communicating conservation concerns to the responsible institutions. The possibility of participatory historical activities also corresponds with broader discussions of cultural heritage preservation that emphasise engagement across generations rather than reliance exclusively on passive observation (Ramli & Abdull Rahman, 2025). The feasibility of these activities remains untested because the research did not collect systematic information concerning local community preferences, institutional resources, or willingness to participate.

Academic collaboration offers a further pathway for addressing interpretive limitations while maintaining a distinction between historical research and diplomatic implementation. Universities and researchers could be involved in examining documentary records, contextualising the camp's humanitarian history, and assessing how different historical perspectives might be represented responsibly. Research on refugee lifeworlds supports the value of investigating material remains and personal experiences together, particularly where conventional institutional narratives provide limited information about displaced communities (Nguyen, 2026). A collaborative documentation project could initially examine the available photographs, surviving inscriptions, site brochures, and relevant archival sources before considering additional testimony-based research. Historical interpretation could subsequently inform the preparation of multilingual educational materials and more detailed explanations of the site's commemorative and religious features. The use of difficult historical experiences in museum diplomacy demonstrates the importance of historically sensitive interpretation

when cultural heritage becomes connected to contemporary international relationships (Riyanto et al., 2025).

The prospective diplomatic development of Ex Camp Vietnam should proceed through incremental activities whose historical accuracy, institutional feasibility, and public relevance can be evaluated before more extensive international cooperation is proposed. Initial priorities could include improving documentary interpretation, assessing conservation needs, exploring community participation, and identifying opportunities for academic collaboration, followed by preliminary communication with relevant Indonesian and Vietnamese institutions. Existing scholarship on Indonesia–Vietnam relations provides a broader bilateral setting in which such cooperation might eventually be considered, but it does not establish that refugee heritage already occupies a formal position within that relationship (Nguyen et al., 2025). The proposed concept of *heritage diplomacy of refuge* is consequently best understood as an exploratory framework linking the preservation of refugee heritage with the possibility of reciprocal historical interpretation and future cultural engagement. The present study cannot determine stakeholder willingness, diplomatic effectiveness, or the experiences of former refugees because its empirical foundation consists of two days of observation, documentary materials, and a structured narrative literature review without direct interviews. Further research would need to examine institutional arrangements, consult relevant communities, and evaluate how Indonesian and Vietnamese participants interpret the historical meanings represented at the site. Ex Camp Vietnam's preliminary diplomatic potential rests on its surviving humanitarian heritage and opportunities for more inclusive historical interpretation, while its transformation into an operational diplomatic instrument remains dependent on evidence, ethical engagement, and institutional cooperation that have not yet been demonstrated.

CONCLUSION

Ex Camp Vietnam on Galang Island preserves historical and humanitarian representations that provide an initial foundation for exploring its potential as an instrument of heritage diplomacy between Indonesia and Vietnam. Field observations identified four narrative zones—arrival and shelter, community life, transnational spirituality, and memorialisation—which collectively emphasise humanitarian assistance, communal adaptation, religious coexistence, and remembrance. The prevailing narrative highlights Indonesian solidarity, although limited historical contextualisation, predominantly Indonesian-language information, and the insufficient representation of individual refugee experiences restrict its interpretive depth. The surviving buildings, religious structures, memorial monument, and cemetery constitute valuable heritage resources, but their historical significance does not automatically establish diplomatic effectiveness. Physical deterioration, limited interpretive facilities, and insufficient evidence of sustained bilateral heritage cooperation further indicate that the site's diplomatic potential remains at a preliminary stage. The study introduces heritage diplomacy of refuge as a tentative conceptual framework connecting refugee heritage, humanitarian memory, and prospective international cultural engagement. This contribution remains exploratory and requires further empirical validation, particularly through stakeholder participation, historical documentation, and examination of institutional cooperation.

The findings support a gradual development strategy that prioritises historical accuracy, community participation, and institutional feasibility before formal diplomatic initiatives are pursued. Initial activities could involve local residents, students, tour guides, and historical organisations in community-based programmes intended to strengthen public engagement and responsibility for the site's preservation. Collaborative research involving universities and relevant government institutions could improve historical documentation, examine underrepresented refugee experiences, and provide an evidentiary foundation for more inclusive interpretation. The preparation of Indonesian–Vietnamese information materials, supported where appropriate by English translations and digital documentation, could improve accessibility and facilitate cross-cultural understanding. Preliminary communication with relevant Indonesian authorities and Vietnamese diplomatic representatives could subsequently explore opportunities for shared historical recognition without presuming an existing bilateral programme. These proposals represent possible development pathways rather than evaluated interventions, and their feasibility depends on institutional resources, stakeholder interests, and further assessment. The two-day observation period and absence of interviews with former refugees, site

managers, visitors, and diplomatic representatives limit the conclusions to an initial interpretation of the site's historical narratives and prospective diplomatic relevance.

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