

ISSUES IN THE LITERARY FEATURES OF HÁT XÂM
“THE FOLK SONGS OF BLIND SINGERS-VAGABONDS”

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First and foremost, a study in the literary values of Hát Xâm needs to define and formalize *Hát Xâm*. We could find its reference in the first Latinized Vietnamese Dictionary, *Dictionarium Annamiticum Lusitanum et Latinum*, by Alexandro de Rhodes, published in Roma, 1651, where the word “xâm” was defined as “a blind person, speaking in a contemptuous manner” and “*Rõan xâm*” or “*phường xâm*” - a herd of the blinds. To speak with respect, one uses *quáng mắt*.¹

Hence, we can say that Hát Xâm is a folk song troupe of the blinds, formed in a society where the blinds are not normally respected. Hát Xâm is a genre of folk music sprung up from the low delta of Red River, in northern Vietnam from the days of old, perhaps from the first decades of the XXth Century. The most significant feature of this genre of folk music is that it is the means to make a living of many visual deficient people who have some talents in music.

The second significant feature of this folk genre of music is that the pervasive lyric-use of Vietnamese folk poetry styles of *stringing six-eight syllable couplets* and *seven-seven-six-eight syllable quadruplets ad infinitum* to form poetic lyrics.

I. Some descriptions of the six-eight syllable couplets and double-seven six-eight syllable quadruplets used in Hát Xâm.

Hát Xâm was born and formed in the heart of the people, and it contains distinctive features of folklore music and folk culture. Xâm songs have always been transmitted orally. In Vietnamese folklore, there exists a distinct folk literature. Vietnam has a rich and diverse heritage of folk literature. It includes folk poetry, ritual poetry, dialect poetry, rice field poetry, folk sayings, aphorism, children rhyme poetry, etc. Folk literature has been tempered and refined through time. Forms of Vietnamese classical music or folk music have close links, or better, sources in folklore. In folklore, either folk poetry or folk sayings, or classical music, or folk music, the six-eight syllable couplet base is the most popular.

The six-eight syllable couplet is rhythmic, and flexible, which is easily memorized, the first verse fluidly gives impetus to the second verse to flow forth, which receives the energy from the

¹ Alexandre De Rhodes. *Tự điển Annam-Lusitan-Latinh*. 1st Ed. NXB Khoa học Xã hội. Pp. 249-50.

first verse to fruition. That feature of six-eight syllabus couplet carries all the sounds and senses as well as the soul of folk literature in Vietnam. So is Hát Xẩm. Almost all of Hát Xẩm song lyrics are improvised six-eight syllable couplets. Only a few song lyrics are based on double-seven-six-eight syllable quadruplets, also improvised and indulged on-the-spot like all rhythms of spoken songs, especially freely rule breaking.

A *khố*, full phrase in Hát Xẩm, consists of four six-eight syllable verses. However the brilliance of the six-eight syllable couplet formula is that one can stretch the poem as long as one wants. A folk poem can be ten verse long, or five six-eight syllable couplet long, such as *Lý Mười Thương*—“Song of Ten Reasons to Fall in Love.” It can be twenty verse long, or ten six-eight syllable couplet, like *Thách Cưới*—“Song of Dowry Challenge”. Hát Xẩm has songs more than two thousand verses, comparable to the famous epic *Truyện Kiều* “The Tale of Kiều” by Tiên Điền Nguyễn Du. And on the other end, a song may only need half of a stanza, one six syllable verse, and one eight syllable verse, being heard all over the entire repertoire of the Vietnamese folk poetry appearing throughout the three regions of Vietnam:

*“Gió đưa cây cải về trời
Rau răm ở lại chịu lời đắng cay.”*
The wind brings the mustard to heaven
Leaving the hot mint behind to endure the bitter rumors.
(Southern folk poem)

*“Học trò xứ Quảng ra thi
Thấy cô gái Huế chân đi không đành”*
Student from Quảng Province comes to take the royal exam
He takes a look at a Huế girl and his feet refuse to move...
(Central folk poem)

*“Yêu nhau cởi áo cho nhau
Về nhà mẹ hỏi qua cầu gió bay”*
For love, I take off and give you my blouse
At home, parents ask, the wind blew it off of me crossing the bridge.
(Northern folk poem)

Just with two verses, the poems tell the meanings intended fully. The rule of six-eight syllable couplet is clear and unassuming. The last syllable of the six-syllable verse rimes with the sixth syllable of the next eight-syllable verse. They and the eighth syllable of the eight-syllable verse must be in with a level tone. These are marked bold and italics in the examples above. If a stanza has four verses, the last syllable of the first [six-syllable] verse has to rime with the sixth syllable of the second [next, eight-syllable] verse. In turn, the last syllable of the second verse has to rime with the last [sixth] syllable of the third [six-syllable] verse. This is called *niêm*—“glue” that joins the two six-eight syllable couplets together. And likewise, the last syllable of the third [six-syllable] verse rimes with the sixth syllable of the last [eight-syllable] verse. And so on.

Six-eight syllable couplet is a widely popular poetic form in Vietnam, similar to the Iambic Tetrameter or the Iambic Pentameter in the English tradition. It seems like every Vietnamese is capable of writing a few poems in six-eight syllable couplets in his/her lifetime. However, among all Vietnamese poets, only a few became famous through poems in six-eight couplet form. Composing poems in six-eight syllable couplets requires poets to be well versed in Vietnamese language, especially, which is a tonal language, and the six-eight syllable couplet has basic tone rules that regulate the musicality of the poems².

Even though the six-eight syllable couplet may look simple, but it contains elements for stunningly intricate variations, when they interpolate with the tone rules. A six-eight syllable couplet poem is usually ends with an eight syllable verse, no matter how long the poem or a phrase is. To end the poem at the eight syllable verse is considered a satisfactory cadence. It gives the readers a feeling of resolution and recites a satisfactory rest. But to end the poem or a phrase at the six syllable verse, or take a break at the six syllable verse is an invention. It is like a hung imperfect cadenced ending, or ending an European song with a fifth chord. It forces the listeners to fill in the unsaid and untold between the words.

I am a poet. Thirty years ago, I wrote a lot of six-eight syllable couplet poems. I had tried to hang the poems at a six syllable verse at the end. This is one of my short poem as an example to this phenomenon in the six-eight syllable couplet poetry:

Lá mưa	A rain-on leaf
Lá mưa rớt ngang tay <i>ngươi</i>	It rains on a leaf landed on your palm
Tiếc chi em một nụ <i>cười</i> chêt <i>duyên</i>	Don't regret, my lover, at the over charm lost smile
Qua sông này khúc oan <i>khiên</i>	Crossing the river 'tis a painful tune
Đắm thuyền em cứ ván <i>thuyền</i> mà <i>ôm</i>	Of a sinking boat, just hold on to the broken board
<i>Mai kia sóng vỗ bèo tan</i>	Soon the waves would surge and the water-fern are gone
Về qua chôn cũ cỏ <i>vàng</i> bên <i>sông</i>	You'd be back to the memorial river station of withering grass
Hỏi lòng, lòng lại dặn <i>lòng</i> ³	Wonder on, I talk to myself and hold deep in my soul...

The last syllable of the first [six syllable] verse in the above poem is *ngươi* /ŋuɔɯy²²²/- “you; human” which rimes with the sixth syllable of the next [eight syllable] verse, that is *cười* /kɯɔɯy²²²/- “smile.” And the eighth syllable of this [eight syllable] verse *duyên* /jwɪɛn⁴⁴⁴/- “charm” rimes with the last [sixth] syllable of the next [six syllable] verse *khiên* /xiɛn⁴⁴⁴/ (*khiên* in the compound word *oan khiên*, that means “painful paradox.”) This syllable rimes with the

² Vietnamese has six phonetic tones on 5 levels of pitch, where level 1 is low creaky and glotal like: *ngang* /⁴⁴⁴/ “high level”, *huyền* /²²²/ “low level”, *hỏi* /³²⁴/ “low rising”, *ngã* /⁴¹⁵/ “creaky rising”, *sắc* /³⁵/ “high rising”, *nặng* /²¹/ “creaky falling”. They are ordered in pairs of high vs. low. A poem resolution always lands on *bằng* level tones, *ngang* and *huyền*. The tone rules regulate *bằng trắc* “level vs non-level” tone sequence in a style. Thus a *ván bằng* “level rhyme” means the syllable must have a level tone, *ngang* or *huyền*. Cf. Ngô Thanh Nhân, 1984.

³ By Trần Nghi Hoàng, 1989.

sixth syllable of the fourth [eight syllable] verse *thuyền* /thwɪɒn²²²/ “boat.” In turn, the last [eighth] syllable of the fourth [eight syllable] verse *ôm* /om⁴⁴⁴/ “embrace; hold” partially rimes with the last [sixth] syllable of the next [sixth syllable] verse, which by the way begins a new stanza, on the fifth verse. The last [sixth] syllable of this verse is *tan* /tan⁴⁴⁴/- “gone” which rimes with the sixth syllable of the sixth [eight syllable] verse *vàng* /vaŋ²²²/ “withering; yellow.” And lastly the eighth syllable of the last [eight syllable] verse *sông* /soŋm⁴⁴⁴/ “river” rimes with the last sixth syllable of the last, seventh [sixth syllable] verse *lòng* /loŋm²²²/ “self”.

The poem ends and dangles with a six-syllable verse:

“*Hỏi lòng, lòng lại dặn lòng*”

Wonder on, I talk to myself and hold deep in my soul...

Vietnamese poetry readers would wonder why one reminds oneself, who, how and why the subject is in this situation. Consequently, it urges the readers to participate in the interpretation of the dangling in midair of the poem. Note that the Vietnamese low level tone /²²²/ of *lòng* /loŋm²²²/ “self; soul” is about a fifth below the high level tone /⁴⁴⁴/ of *sông* /soŋm⁴⁴⁴/ “river.” A six-eight syllable couplet poem rarely rests at the six syllable verse, but when that thing takes place, it serves many other functions, besides luring the readers into the poet’s world.

And, since I began to study Hát Xẩm, I was pleasantly surprised in this discovery. Not only that almost every Xẩm song ends with a six-syllable verse, but also at every end of a *khổ* phrase, followed by a *lưu không* “tune specific instrumental” break, to signify that the song has not ended. This six-syllable verse will repeat to start a new phrase when the song resumes after the instrumental display. Thus, the six-syllable verse ends a phrase, and repeats at the start of the next phrase after the tune specific instrumental intervention. Let’s watch this song in *Riêm Huê*- “flirting” tune,⁴ the lyrics of which is an improvised six-eight syllable couplet—the rimes and glues are marked in bold italics, the improvised padding words are underlined.

“Thiếp mới gặp ***chàng***
 Chàng vừa gặp thiếp đôi ***đàng*** gặp ***nhau***
 Gặp ***chàng*** đây mời chàng xơi nước xơi ***trầu***
 (Hết khổ, lưu không)
 Gặp ***chàng*** đây mời chàng xơi nước xơi ***trầu***
 Bằng lòng thương yêu lấy thiếp ***bảo*** về ***đâu***
thiếp cũng ***về***
 Thiếp say chàng quá đổi nên ***mê***
 Chàng về cho thiếp đi ***kê*** theo ***sau***
Kê từ ngày ta mới gặp ***nhau***
 (Hết khổ. lưu không)
Kê từ ngày ta mới gặp ***nhau***
 Thăm yêu trộm nhớ bấy ***lâu*** không ***rời***
 Em ***nhớ*** thương chàng lắm ***lắm*** chàng ***ôi***

When I first met you, it’s when
 you have just met me. We met each other
 Please enjoy the refreshment of tea and betels
 (end of phrase, style instrumental)
 So we meet, please enjoy tea and betels
 If you know we’re meant for each other, I
 would go wherever you say
 I am so crushed by you, I become crazy
 Can I tag along when you leave
 Marking the day we first met each other
 (end of phrase, style instrumental)
 Since the day we met each other
 I had a secret crush with no relent
 I miss you too much, oh lover,
 Talents and beauty, we are a true couple!

⁴ Trần Việt Ngữ. Op. cit. Pp. 78-79.

Tài này sắc ấy xứng **đôi** vợ **chồng**
Em chỉ muốn cho loan phụng một **phòng**
(Hết khổ, lưu không)

Em chỉ muốn cho loan phụng một **phòng**
Loan ôm lấy phụng phụng **bồng** lấy **loan**

Chàng mà đi đâu em tương nhớ trăm **đàng**
Ủ ê mày liễu dạ **càng** kém **tươi**
Bâng khuâng em nhớ cảnh thôi lại nhớ **người**

(Hết khổ, lưu không)
Bâng khuâng em nhớ cảnh thôi lại nhớ **người**

Nhớ nơi đôi ta kỳ ngộ đề nổi chẳng **rời** chân
ra

Cảnh hồng nhác thấy nẻo **xa**
Xuân lan thu cúc mạn **mà** cả **đôi**

Ước mong sao đôi ta khăng khít trọn **đời**

phoenixes should share the same nest.

(end of phrase, instrumental)

The phoenixes should share the same nest

The female hangs on to the male, and the male carries her.

Wherever you are, my mind will follow you

My face down in sadness, my heart feels dry

My mind is on the scenery, my mind is on

you, dazed

(end of phrase, instrumental)

My mind is on the scenery, my mind is on

you, dazed

I miss the place we met where we could not

part

I saw the sight of roses from afar

The lilies in Spring, the mums in Autumn are

both forever winsome

Let's dream we'll be together for life.

The entire poetic lyrics of this song follows the improvised folk six-eight syllable couplet poetry, the improvised syllables of which Trần Việt Ngữ calls *dôi chữ* “extra syllables.” I will present this poem in its strict folk six-eight syllable couplets below, reprinting the words not underlined above:

“Thiếp mới gặp chàng
Chàng vừa gặp thiếp đôi đàng gặp nhau
Mời chàng xơi nước xơi trầu
Chàng mà thương thiếp về đâu cũng về
Thiếp say chàng quá nên mê
Chàng về cho thiếp đi kè theo sau
Từ ngày ta mới gặp nhau
Thâm yêu trộm nhớ bấy lâu không đời
Em thương chàng lắm chàng ơi
Tài này sắc ấy xứng đôi vợ chồng
Muốn cho loan phụng một phòng
Loan ôm lấy phụng phụng bông lấy loan
Chàng đi em nhớ trăm đàng
Ủ ê mày liễu dạ càng kém tươi
Bâng khuâng nhớ cảnh nhớ người
Nhớ nơi kỳ ngộ chẳng rời chân ra
Cảnh hồng nhác thấy nẻo xa
Xuân lan thu cúc mạn mà cả đôi

Duyên ta kháng khí trọn đời”

In this Xâm song, the improvised syllables are not padded nonsense sounds. They are improvised words that emphasize the meaning of the lyrics. For example:

(Gặp chàng đây) mời chàng xơi nước xơi tràu
Bằng lòng thương (yêu đến) thiếp (bảo) về đâu (thiếp) cũng về
(Since we've met here) let's enjoy tea and betels
If you know we're meant for each other, I can go wherever you say...

Those extra syllable here (“*Gặp chàng đây, yêu đến, bảo, thiếp*”- “*Since we've met here, for each other, I can, you say,*”) emphasize the subjects as a couple of the lovers who act to show their love. These rule breaking twists in the lyrics of a Xâm song happen at each specific performance. Xâm artists would lean on the excitement of the moments to improvise. But no matter how they break the rules, they still keep the rhymes “*vần lưng*”- at-middle-verse repeated rhyme: the last syllable of the six syllable verse rimes with the sixth syllable (third from the last) of the eight-syllable verse, and “*vần chân*”- at-end-verse repeated rhyme: the last syllable of the eight-syllable verse rhymes with the last syllable of the following six-syllable verse, even though each rhymed syllable position can be displaced by the padded words.

The melody break is effective, which is formally placed between the previous and the following phrases/sections to let the artists play the specific instrumental tune after an identical six syllable verse. The last six syllable verse of the previous phrase/section creates an expectation from the audience. The repeat of the same six syllable verse in the following phrase/section creates a glue or continuation that the audience has been waiting for. The instrumental is tune specific, to create the mood for the next section, then an audience would think “ah, this is what I have been waiting for.” But alas, most Xâm song ends with a hanging six syllable verse. This seeds a suspense among the audience, to expect more from the performers.

Here I would speak a little bit about the seven-seven-six-eight syllable quadruplet style. It is exactly what is in the name, a seven-seven-six-eight syllable quadruplet has 4 verses, starting with two seven syllable verses followed by a six-eight syllable couplet. The last (seventh) syllable of the first seven syllable verse must have a non-level tone, can rhyme with the second, third, fifth or seventh syllable of the next (second) seven syllable verse. And the last (seventh) syllable of the second seven syllable verse has to be in a level tone, to be glued with the last (sixth) syllable of the next six-syllable verse. This syllable is to rhyme with the sixth syllable of the eight syllable verse like in a regular six-eight syllable couplet. That fourth verse, is also the last verse of the quadruplet, can be glued by rhyme with the third or fifth syllable of the first seven syllable verse of the next quadruplet, and so on. The musicality of the seven-seven-six-eight syllable quadruplet is a bit different from that of the six-eight syllable couplet. The melody of the six-eight syllable couplets is like running water and flowing clouds, while that of the seven-seven-six-eight syllable quadruplets is rather tragi-heroic.

It may be useful to give an excerpt of a Xẩm song whose the lyrics lean on a series of the seven-seven-six-eight syllable quadruplets to exhibit the richness of Hát Xẩm, in *Chênh bong* tune⁵- “tilted and loosed”:

Again, in the example below, the padded syllables are underscored.

Ta với mình đương con kì ngộ	You and I are in an extraordinary encounter
Chẳng duyên <u>thì</u> nợ chẳng vợ thì chồng	If not fortune, then debt, of wife and husband
Giấy hồng <u>đem</u> phong đôi chữ thọ	A crimson paper written the golden double
Gửi <u>bức</u> thư về thăm cả họ bình yên	“Happiness”
...	And send it to our families to wish them longevity
<u>Mình</u> chẳng lấy ta ắt là mình thiệt	...
<u>Ta</u> không lấy mình ta biết lấy ai	If you don’t marry me, it’ll be your loss
Răng đen còn có khi phai	If I can’t marry you, who can I be with
Má hồng khi nhạt tóc dài khi thưa”	Your shiny ebony teeth will eventually wane And rosy cheeks fade, dense hair thinned

The seven syllable verses in this lyrics have been improvised to the point that they don’t feel like seven syllable verses. The Xẩm artists are playful and so free in their expressive power. Even more surprisingly stunning, the last syllable of the six-syllable verse *thọ* /t^hɔ:²¹/ “longevity” (In the cultural context, the suggested word here should be “Happiness” but the performer used the word “*thọ*”- “longevity” that glues with the words “*ngộ*” in the previous verse and “*họ*” in the next verse) has a non-level tone, to rhyme with the sixth syllable *họ* /hɔ:²¹/- “families; clan” of the next eight-syllable verse also with a non-level tone.

Almost all Xẩm songs are drawn from the folk poetry, and music, only a few had authors. The ideas came from folk knowledge and Xẩm artists brought them into their creativity and performances. That is why they are so popular: pushed and pulled by the artists’ subsistence needs and the familiar materials that the audience already know and enjoy. They are spoken with the same language and emerge in the same culture. Xẩm artists perform for a living, and the audience’s enjoyment is a suggestion for a better version. Both cooperate to perfect the Xẩm folk songs. For that reason, Xẩm folk songs maintain the naïveté and brightness. They make fun of or critic bad habits and custom, but never with ill will. Because Xẩm folk songs must be enjoyed by everybody.

II. Overall structure of Xẩm literature

Style of the language used in Xẩm literature: because melody tunes of music presented by the blind artists, the overall structure of Xẩm literature is rather complex. Performing features have their important role in the delivery of Xẩm literature. Not only from the lyrics, but also the melodies of the musical instruments in concert, and depending on when and where, the

⁵ Op. cit. Pp. 55-56.

performance of artists has to be taken into accounts as the unseparated parts of the structure of Xâm literature. The rest is the free choice of music tunes and topics of songs.

We will go over the Xâm lyrics in each melodic form:

1. **Lyrics**, the major leading element in the fluidity of the Xâm literature:
Although it is still dependent on the Vietnamese classical theater, music and song traditions which is characterized by voice, that is the lyrics. The Vietnamese artists traditionally, commonly do not bend the lyrics to the melody, on the contrary, their specific dialect and ideolect bend the melody. However, each Xâm artist has his/her own way, ideolect, of improvisation in performances. Vietnamese has six tones: *ngang* - “high level”, *huyền* - “low level”, *hỏi* - “low rising”, *ngã* - “creaking rising”, *sắc* - “high rising” and *nặng* - “creaky falling.” Each phonemic tone attached to the segmental syllable gives that syllable a different meaning. That’s why people say Vietnamese is rich in musicality. Basically, Xâm lyrics is simple in form but condensed in meaning. A syllable in Vietnamese can have many meanings and melodic differences. This requires the artists to articulate the lyrics distinctly in the spirit of *tròn vành rõ chữ* - “well sounded singing, distinct lyric enunciation.” The Xâm singing technique demands singers *đàn ngọt hát chín* “sweet/ smooth playing, well sung.” *Hát chín* - “well sung” means that each syllable has to be sung distinctly sweet and fine, clear and warm, projecting but also full of emotion.⁶
2. I believe that almost all Xâm songs already form their melody as soon as they have the lyrics. The lyrics shape the melody. Almost all Xâm song lyrics are based on the six-eight syllable couplets, and a few seven-seven-six-eight syllable quadruplets, which can be improvised by padding or shrinking at will. The padding words or syllables like *máy*, *thì*, *mà*, *ừ*, *ừ*, *ừ* ... help expose the unrestraint freedom of this style of storytelling songs.

“Xâm lyrics is influenced and rooted deeply in folk saying, poetry, and folk music of the Red River delta, the lower Red River delta to be exact, and with it the characteristics of folk culture.”⁷

Its rustic in lyrics projects the honesty of the stories, of the matriarchal society, and thus, allows free unrestraint rule and custom breaking away from the confucian social norms. We are going into the different tunes of Xâm song melodies:

Tune 1: *Chênh bong*, song 1: Following is the entire song to familiarize readers with the concept of *trố* or *khố* “phrase, section; patch of linen”, and the repeating of the last lyric verse in the new phrase.

“Cô giân ai ngày ngày cấp nón ra **đi**
Buôn gì chẳng có bán **gì** thì **không**

What bothers you every day when you put
your conical hat on and leave home
You’re not buying or selling anything

⁶ Op. cit. Page 37.

⁷ Op. cit. Pp. 38-39.

Cô bực vì một nỗi chưa **chồng**
 Chín đêm áp bóng nằm **không** cả **mười**
 Không chồng khổ lắm chị em **ơi**
 (hết trô, lưu không)
 Không chồng khổ lắm chị em **ơi**
 Có chồng như đùa có **đôi** thiệt **gì**
 Có chồng ngủ ngáy tì **tì**
 Không chồng thức dậy có **khi** giật **mình**
 Bắc Nam ơi sao chẳng thương **tình**
 (hết trô, lưu không)
 Bắc Nam ơi sao chẳng thương **tình**
 Để em gánh vác một **mình** sao **nên**
Lá dong non đem gói bánh không **rền**
 (hết trô, lưu không)
Lá dong non đem gói bánh không **rền**
 Trách người lịch sự chẳng **nên** tâm
chồng
 Vàng mười đem đốt lửa không **hồng**
 Thương em là gái chưa **chồng** mà **thôi**
 Làm trai ba chón bón bón **nơi**
 Thương nàng phận gái như cánh huê **roi**
 một **thì**
 Phải lòng nhau lấy quách xách tuột nhau
đi
 (hết trô, lưu không)
 Phải lòng nhau lấy quách xách tuột nhau
đi
Đừng chờ ông Tư bà Nguyệt làm **chi** cho
 bạn **lòng**
 Chiêu chăn nên đạo vợ **chồng**
 Đôi ta hạnh ngộ ra **lòng** trời xui⁸

You are bothered because you're single
 You sleep alone ten nights out of nine
 Unmarried is such a pain, oh sisters
 (End of phrase, instrumental)
 Being unmarried is such a pain, oh sisters
 There is no loss in pairs, like the chopsticks
 You then can sleep and snore at will
 Without him, you wake up shaking
 Why don't feel pity, this whole country
 (End of phrase, instrumental)
 Why don't you feel pity, this whole country
 How can you leave me alone, burdened
 Baby phrynium leaves can't hold rice cake
 (end of phrase, instrumental)
 Baby phrynium leaves can't hole rice cake
 Heartless gentleman be my sweetheart
 Grade Ten gold can't burn under fire
 You must feel pity for me, an old maid
 You are a man, running up and down
 Love me, a woman, like a petal at one time
 If you feel for me, even a tiny bit, love me
 and take me with you
 (End of phrase, instrumental)
 If you fall in love with me, , marry me and
 take me with you
 Don't be bothered with that god Hymen
 Once sharing the bed, we are for spouse
 faith at once
 Magical meeting is exactly that God's will.

In fact, she is not angry at anybody. She is only angry with herself, being unmarried. She “sleep[s] alone ten nights out of nine” is a big tragedy for her. She cried out loud “being unmarried is such a pain, oh sisters.” She calls on all people in the country, from north to south, but finally she takes a bold step on her own, “if you fall in love with me, marry me and take me with you.” Being a blind vagabond, Xăm artists face this problem every day all their life. We can feel why they dwell on this subject, male or female.

We do hear it again somewhere in Xăm songs, a woman sometimes is so “shamelessly” bold to the point of being utterly cute, like in Vietnamese folk poetry:

“Sao chàng chẳng nhớ tới tiết mùa đông lạnh lùng

⁸ Op. cit. Pp. 43-44.

Chàng nằm đâu chàng ngủ thiếp nằm cùng”⁹
Why don’t you think about chilly winter nights,
Will you call me to bed to snug next to you”

Or the rusty but mischievous flirt of a young man

“Mình chẳng lấy ta ắt là mình thiệt
Ta không lấy mình ta biết lấy ai”¹⁰
If you don’t sleep with me, it’s your loss
If I can’t mate with you, who else can I mate then?

Honesty and folksiness do not always work, when the lady plays hard to get, he might turn wicked:

Còn duyên <u>nói</u> những bạc cùng vàng	When you’re winsome, you talk silver and gold
Hết duyên óc đực cua càng cũng vờ	When it’s gone, you’d take even snail and crab
Còn duyên kén chọn trai tờ	When you’re pretty, you look for cool lad
Hết duyên <u>ông</u> lão móm cũng vờ làm chông	When it’s gone, you’d take even a toothless man
Còn duyên đóng cửa kén chông	When you’re still stunning, men just knock your locked door
Hết duyên cô đứng chông mông mà gào ¹¹	When it’s gone, you yell “man” till your bottom sticks on air.

He was just wicked for a moment to break the ice, but he’s still cute, and never forget to praise her at every turn.

Tune 2: *Riêm huê* - “flirting”

“Thiếp mới gặp chàng	When I first met you, it’s when
Chàng vừa gặp thiếp đôi đàng gặp nhau	you have just meet me. We see each other
<u>Gặp chàng</u> <u>đây</u> mời chàng xơi nước xơi trầu	Please enjoy the refreshment of tea and betels
(Hết khổ, lưu không)	(end of phrase, style instrumental)
<u>Gặp chàng</u> <u>đây</u> mời chàng xơi nước xơi trầu	Now we meet, please enjoy tea and betel
Bằng lòng thương <u>yêu</u> <u>lấy</u> thiếp <u>bảo</u> về đâu	If you think we’re meant for each other, I
<u>thiếp</u> cũng về	would go wherever you say
<u>Thiếp</u> say chàng quá <u>đổi</u> nên mê	I am so crushed by you, I become crazy
Chàng về cho thiếp đi kê theo sau	I will tag along when you leave
<u>Kê</u> từ ngày ta mới gặp nhau	Marking the day we first see each other
(Hết khổ. lưu không)	(end of phrase, style instrumental)
<u>Kê</u> từ ngày ta mới gặp nhau	Since the day we met each other
Thầm yêu trộm nhớ bấy lâu không rời	

⁹ Op. cit. Page 49.

¹⁰ Op. cit. Page 56.

¹¹ Op. cit. Pp. 59-60.

Em nhớ thương chàng lắm lắm chàng oi
Tài này sắc ấy xứng đôi vợ chồng
Em chỉ muốn cho loan phụng một phòng
(Hết khổ)
Em chỉ muốn cho loan phụng một phòng
Loan ôm lấy phụng phụng bông lấy loan¹²

I had a secret crush with no relent
I miss you too much, oh lover,
Talents and beauty, we are a true couple!
The phoenixes should share the same nest.
(end of phrase, instrumental)
The phoenixes should share the same nest
The female hangs on to the male, and the
male carries her.

Any young man who got a girl going this crazy over him is indeed lucky. She is so bold in words and reveals her hearted desire for him. However, there are eager young men who fail miserably:

Khăn anh nàng lấy vá vai
Bây giờ nàng đã nghe ai dỗ dành
Chẳng nên tháo chỉ lấy mụn giả anh

Đề anh đem bán lấy hai trăm lạng vàng

...
Đã yêu anh thì quyết với anh
Nhà tre cột nửa lợp tranh xuềnh xoàng

...
Gỗ lim chạm trở tổ càng mất công¹³

You cut my prized scarf to patch
the shirt of someone you've given your
heart
You don't have to un-patch it and return to
me
So I can sell it for two hundred gold tael
...
If you love me, say it firmly
I'll build a modest thatched house
...
I should not toil to build one of decorated
ironwood

Almost all of recorded Xâm songs were composed around the first few decades of the XXth Century. The topics and the lyrics are basically folksy, with intricate terminologies of the savvy middle class savants. Those terminologies were well digested and turned into honestly simple Xâm lyrics.

Tune 3: *Ba Bực* - "Three Steps"

Bên thời mành, gió Nam phảng phất bên
thời mành

Phảng phất gió đưa bên mành
Tỉnh ra mới biết rằng mình chiêm bao

...
Tuông chàng quân tử ra vào phòng loan

Kể từ phen đá biết tuổi vàng

The south breeze wafts by the window
blinds
The breeze plays by my window blinds
Awakened, I realize I've just had a dream
...
I thought you, lover, who came in and out
my bedroom
Since the time we got each other's heart...

¹² Op. cit. Page 78.

¹³ Op. cit. Pp. 86-87.

...
Tôi hôm qua em ngỏ cửa đợi **chờ**
Chiêm bao thì thấy dậy **sờ** chiếu không

...
Last night, I waited with the door open
You came in my dream, but not on my bed
mat

...
Thiếp mời chàng vào chung gối loan
phòng
Chung chăn phi chí thoả **lòng** bấy nay¹⁴

...
I invited you to come and join in my room
Sharing the blanket and the pillows, we
were to satisfy fully our life long desire

It is not difficult to discover that in Xẩm songs, the women are totally open about their love, without being cant, coquettish or shy, and their dreams of romance sometimes become the hopeless because of the misery and suffering they have to experience. Most typical is the song *Giạt nước Cánh bèo* - "A drifting water fern on the wild torrent", in tune *Phồn huê* - "Prosperous Flower" in Tune 4:

Lênh đênh giạt nước cánh **bèo**

Like a water fern drifting on the wild
torrent

Đã từng lưu lạc lại **nhieu** gian **truân**
Vắt tay lên **nằm** ngấm cơ **trần**
Đời người mấy lúc gian **truân** vắt vả mà
già
Ai ơi liệu bấy lo **ba**

I've been wandering and enduring pain
Thinking about my sad fortune
How I spend my life, hard working and
suffering and getting old
Oh people, who worry sick like me

...
Đạo **bên** chồng cũng nặng nghĩa **bên** **cha**
cũng dày

...
The heavy debt of love to my husband,
compounds the debt of life to my father

...
Xót lòng vất vả xa **gần**
Không **ai** vò mà rồi không **ai** **dần** mà **đau**

...
It pains me thinking of my hardships
No beat, no pound, it twists and squeezes
my guts

Mình tôi đứng tủi ngòi **sầu**
Đã than với nguyệt lại **rầu** với hoa

I stand alone with regrets and sadness
I complain to the moon and spill my hearts
to the flowers...

...
Hồng nhan đã luống công **phu**
Kiếp này dang dở đường **tu** **biết** mấy
mươi lần

...
Life of a lady is cultivated carefully
How many tens of times I've missed the
chance to restart ...

...
Thà rằng chẳng dấn cho **cam**
Dấn cả vào thùng **chàm** sao mãi không
xanh¹⁵

...
It'd better not to commit myself to a stain
I dipped both my hands into the indigo
dye pot but none remain on my skin

Tune 5: *Hò Bốn mùa* - "Four Seasons Holler"

¹⁴ Op. cit. Page 91.

¹⁵ Op. cit. Pp. 99-102.

This tune is usually for pieces on year-round activities of folks in the countryside, esp. the peasants.¹⁶

Tune 6: *Hát Ai* - “Lament”

Con riêng con riêng, mẹ đi lấy chồng kiếm chút con riêng	My own birth child, my own birth child, I’m going to remarry to find myself my own birth child
Gia tư điền sản bạc tiền mẹ phò già con riêng	Properties, lands, money, I’ll give back all for you, my old son
Bố con chết đi mẹ đây chứ hầy còn thèm ...	Your father died, but I still have my desires ...
Mẹ xem quẻ tướng thấy hầy còn thằng em trong bụng này	I asked the fortune teller and was told I still have another young brother in me
Con vào gọi bà gọi bác gọi chú con ra đây ...	Come fetch your grandma, your uncles here quickly ...
Mẹ không sao ở vậy phải bước chân đi lấy chồng	I can’t stay alone and have to take another husband
Mẹ có thác đi con cúng mẹ năm bảy con gà	If and when I die, even if you honor me with five or seven chickens
Cũng không bằng con để mẹ ra phen này Ơi hỡi con ơi ¹⁷	It’s nothing compare to letting me go further, Oh child, oh child

Tune 7: *Thập Ân* - “Ten Love Debts of Life”

The lyric contents of *Xẩm Thập Ân* “Song of Ten Love Debts of Life” were adapted from the *Phật thuyết Đại báo Phụ Mẫu ân trọng kinh* - “Buddha’s teaching on the Sutra of the Great Appreciation for Parents’ Gift of Life” (or *Kinh Báo Hiếu*, Sutra of Appreciation for Gift of Life). Like many other Buddhist sutras, this sutra is written as a dialogue between Disciple Ananda and Sakyamuni. One day, from Jetavana Garden of Anāthapindika, the Buddha and Disciple Ananda walked south, they found human skeletons on their path. The Buddha knelt and bowed in front of the skeletons. Surprised, Disciple Ananda asked for His reason. The Buddha said, among them are bones of his parents over many re-incarnations ago. He then asked Ananda to separate the male from the female bones. Ananda asked how could he separate them. The Buddha said, the heavier and whiter are the men’s, the lighter and the darker are women’s, because the women had to give birth.

Một ân: Kể từ mẹ mới có thai Âm dương mù mịt nào ai biết gì	First grace: It’s when I got pregnant My world was in chaos, who would know
--	--

¹⁶ Op. cit. Pp. 103-106.

¹⁷ Op. cit. Page 107.

...	what'll happen
Ba ân vừa tới tháng sinh	Third grace: At the point of birth
Khác nào vượt biển một mình đăm đương	It's like I crossed the ocean on my own
...	...
Bao giờ thấy con đầy mẹ đầy mới mừng... ¹⁸	I only was happy until I could see you completely healthy in my arms...

In many sutras, the Buddha usually teaches, “when I am gone, or during the time when there is no buddha in the world, the Buddhists honor two in - house Buddhas, who are their own parents, like they honor me.”

Other tunes of Xẩm songs such as *Sa mạc* (Self-pity Tune), *Trống quân* (Happy Tune) (for cute songs like *Thách cưới* “Wedding challenge”, *Ngược đời* “Upside down world”, *Hội chim* “Birds Festival”, *Dâu lười* “Lazy Daughter-in-law”, and so on¹⁹), *Đò đưa* - “Crossing boat”, *Lý Giao duyên* - “Heart-to-heart”, *Cò lả* - “Stretching Stork Wings”,²⁰ *Hát Ví* - “Simile”, *Hát Văn* - “Medium Chant”,²¹ *Lưu thủy* - “Running Water”, *Hành vân* “Floating Cloud”, *Nam Thương* “Southern Huế Loving”, *Phù thủy* “Witch/Shaman”²² (including songs such as *Xóc đĩa* “Four Coins Gambling”, *Nhang hoa* “Curling Incense”, etc.) There are other storytelling songs²³ such as *Trung Nữ Vương* - “The Trung Sister Kings”, *Bà Ba Cai Vàng* - “Madam Canton Chief Cai Vàng,” và *Ông Đề Thám* - “Children Rhyme for the Yên Thế Commander”, *chợ Đồng Xuân* - “Spring Field Market”, and other Xẩm songs written by famous poets such as Nguyễn Khuyến, named *Mục hạ vô nhân* - “There’s no-one under my nose”.

Mục hạ vô nhân, chúng anh đây là mục hạ vô nhân Nghe em nhan sắc lòng xuân anh nào nùng Dù em phấn má chỉ hồng Dừng đừng anh chẳng thèm trông làm gi ²⁴	No-one under our nose We men see no-one under our nose Your stunning beauty arouses excitement in our hearts No matter how rosy are your cheeks We would not even sneak a peek
---	---

¹⁸ Op. cit. Page 110.

¹⁹ Op. cit. Pp. 131-137.

²⁰ Op. cit. Pp. 140-145.

²¹ Op. cit. Pp.146-156.

²² Op. cit. Pp. 157-172.

²³ Op. cit. Pp. 173-210.

²⁴ Op. cit. Page 218.

Poems by other famous poets, such as Phan Bội Châu²⁵, Tản Đà²⁶, Á Nam Trần Tuấn Khải²⁷ (who is famous for his poem *Tiến chân anh Khóa xuống tàu* - “Seeing [my lover] Student boarding the Boat [to the King’s Exam]”).

This paper is based greatly on the documents in the book *Tìm hiểu Nghệ thuật hát Xẩm* - “A Research in the Arts of Hát Xẩm” by Trần Việt Ngữ. He is well versed in Vietnamese classical music. However, I do not agree with the author on some of his observations about the arts of Hát Xẩm, typically on two pieces *Dừa dại không gai* - “Wild screw pines have no thorns”²⁸ and *Cô gái Sơn Tây* - “The Beauty of Sơn Tây Province” in *Huê Tình* - “Flirting” tune. These are two outstanding pieces, which show the sexual, playful, and humorous nature of Hát Xẩm. He also leaves out *Huê Tình* as a tune of Hát Xẩm. He writes:

“*Thậm chí hàng trăm bài lạm dụng cái tục để gây cười dễ dãi như trong bài ‘Cây dừa Không gai’... Đáng trách hơn nữa là có một số bài đem tạt nguyên con người ra làm trò cười như ‘Anh Còng chị Sứt,’ ‘Cô gái Sơn Tây’.*”²⁹

“Specifically, hundreds of Xẩm songs overuse obscenity to get cheap laughs such as the song *Dừa dại không gai* - “Wild screw pines have no thorns”... Even worse, some songs make fun of people’s disabilities such as *Anh Còng Chị Sứt* - “Brother Hunch Back and Sister Cleft Palate”, and *Cô gái Sơn Tây* - “The Beauty of Sơn Tây Province.”

We should be reminded that Xẩm artists are blind, they don’t think and “see” like we do. Moreover, the lyrics they used in songs were created by many unknown people, and became folk songs. The blind artists are innocent, trying to make a living, while learning to improvise difficult songs. No-one knows whether the baby of the woman character in *Dừa dại không gai* - “Wild screw pines have no thorns” is hers; and no-one can judge the flirt in this Xẩm song “obscene”. Let’s go through the song:

“*Em nói dối anh (ừ ừ) em chưa có chồng (ừ ừ)*
You lied to me you have not married

It sounds like the young man has already acquainted the young woman. He goes on

...
“*Hỏi cái gì lù lù trước ngực cô nàng may*

²⁵ Phan Bội Châu (1867-1940): Vietnamese nationalist and poet, famous with the patriot poetry.

²⁶ Tản Đà Nguyễn Khắc Hiếu (1889-1939): Famous Vietnamese poet who medleyed Sino-Vietnamese tradition and Western cultural influences in the beginning of the 20th Century in his romantic, Taoism-headed poetry.

²⁷ Á Nam Trần Tuấn Khải (1895-1983): Famous Vietnamese poet who adapted the accurate, modern expression in his poetry.

²⁸ The term *dừa dại* “the screw pine” is also called *dừa gai* “thorny screw pine”. The title of the song is a play of words.

²⁹ Op. cit. Page 25.

Oản tử hay cặp bánh dày... vừa trắng vừa xinh”
Pray tell what’s huge on your bosom
The altar offerings or a pair of round sweet-rice cakes... white soothing and cute.

(The altar offerings in Vietnamese folk culture are shaped in conical shapes that might be kiddingly evoked to the sexual symbol - woman breasts.)

...
“*Nhĩa một mai nó xốc xa xốc xếch, xộc xà xộc xếch*
Chẳng còn gì là cái xuân xanh
Hãy cứ nghe anh
Chơi xuân mát ruột nó lại lành”
Soon one day they sag, hanging and dangling
They don’t look fresh and firm no more- no more springtime
Hear me well
Enjoy spring when you can, feeling fantastic and sane

...
“*Nghe máy (w) anh, chơi xuân mát ruột càng lành*
*Chơi cho (mà) oán tử phải đi tìm lấy cậu chuối xanh”*³⁰
Hear me well, enjoy spring when you can, feeling fantastic and sane
Enjoy to the hilt, till the altar offerings running after the fresh banana.

The folk quadruple reduplicated expression *xốc xa xốc xếch, xộc xà xộc xếch* - “they sag, hanging and dangling” is a brilliant use of multiple reduplications. In Vietnamese folk poetry, the never-seen-images of *oản tử*, *chuối xanh* - “altar offerings” vs “green young banana” as the similes to the reproductive organs of female and male are truly folksy and full of humor.

One might have the impression that *Cô gái Sơn Tây* - “The Beauty of Sơn Tây Province” is an arrogant young lady. She’s arrogant because she’s beautiful, as the lyrics admits. But the suitors have no way to approach her. They, the young men, wrote a folk song about her. The language of the poem is extreme, but imaginative to describe an imaginary ugly girl. This is obviously revengeful. They popularized this folk poem to release their frustration. There is no ill will like noted by Trần Việt Ngữ.

“*Hai cổ tay cô như hai cái bấp cày*
Thân hình cô nhỏ nhắn coi tà con voi nan
*Nước da cô trắng tựa hòn than”*³¹
Her wrists are like two plow handles
Her body is dainty like the elephant’s
Her skin is white like a lump of charcoal

³⁰ *Dứa dại Không gai* by Grand Artist Hà Thị Cầu, cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6W_ChzdAF3o

³¹ *Cô gái Sơn Tây* by Grand Artist Hà Thị Cầu, cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hcodi29d-KA>

Grand Artist Hà Thị Cầu sang, “Her skin is lily white like the heart of a charcoal”

I am also surprised to find verses from the classic *Kinh Thi*, - “The Book of Poetry,” one of the Five Basic Book of Confucianism in Hát Xẩm:

“*Hôn nhân lễ đặt gặp thì đào yêu*

Trên sông riu rít thư cưu

Thục nữ quân tử hảo cầu đẹp duyên”³²

Marriage arrangement is set at the age of fresh peach

When, over the river, are chirping the Mandarin ducks

Virtuous young woman and gentleman make a beautiful couple...

I also am pleasantly surprised to find in Xẩm song lyrics the terms that could only come from the low Red River delta, and other terms which might be influenced by dialects of the south, i.e. from Huế down to the southernmost tip of Cà Mau. Those terms such as *mặt huê* (“*huê*,” in Southern dialect is equal to “*hoa*” in low Red River delta’s phonology) - “face like a flower”, *mân thính* (“*mân*,” in Southern dialect is equal to “*lâm*” in low Red River delta’s phonology,) - “hold silent”, *thói huê đào* - “flirting behavior”, *má hường* - (“*hường*” in Southern dialect is equal to “*hông*”) - “rosy cheeks”, *ven tuyền* (“*tuyền*” in Southern dialect is equal to “*toàn*,”) - “well accomplished”, *méch lòng* (“*méch*” in Southern dialect is equal to “*mất*,”) - “hurtful”, ... which show their well-traveling experience of Xẩm artists.

Even the names of the tunes, such as *huê ~ hoa*, in *riềm huê*³³ - “Flirting”, *phồn huê* - “Prosperous flower”, *huê tình* - “flowery romantic” as well as *chênh bong*.³⁴

Some of the dialect terms may have come from king’s taboo adherence habits of the historical time, but it seems more likely they are fully southern dialect borrowings. Without a hint of taboo adherence, unseen from terms used of the north, for examples the pairs of south ~ northern dialects, *mân thính ~ làm thính* - “keep silent”, *méch lòng ~ mất lòng* - “upset”.

3. **Instruments:** One can visualize a Xẩm song in a performance as a black-lines-on-white-silk painting, where the lyrics are in the role of the lines that sketch the images of mountains, rivers, trees and shrubs, then the instrumental sounds create the colors, the lights and shades over those images. The lead instrument, *đàn bầu* - “monochord,” or *đàn nhị* - “two-stringed fiddle” is rarely played side by side with the lyrics singing, but when they do, it is to emphasize the lyrics. *Cặp kè* - “wooden clappers” and *trống mảnh* - “twin small drums” are played continuously to keep tempo, boosting their specifically rhythmic quality. When a phrase/section is done, the lead instrumental comes with a

³² Op. cit. Pp. 48-49.

³³ Op. cit. p. 85

³⁴ Op cit. p. 49, 52, 53, 57, ...

chosen tune to expose the song musical theme. The alternation between the lyrics singing and the instrumental simultaneously varies and bolds melody, making full texture, and signifying the musical and literary invention of Hát Xẩm. This invention allows a Xẩm song can be as long as it is enjoyed, for the artists to rest, and to improvise in a live performance to fit the audience.³⁵

For the tight coordination between the voice, the tempo setters, and the tune, I believe they must be counted as parts of the whole of the literary contribution of Hát Xẩm into the Vietnamese literary tradition.

4. **The acting:** We can imagine the acts and choreography of a Xẩm song, as light on the black-lines-on-white-silk painting, organically coexists with both voice and instruments to make a wholesome experience for the audience.

II. The major distinctive characteristics of Xẩm literature—folk:

1. **The movement, or improvisation, in at-the-moment creation:** even though Hát Xẩm has its own form allowing on-the-spot creation as a permanent part of a Xẩm performance, it can be seen as jazz improvisation along with the Western song chord procession.
2. **Innocence and rustic:** The sounds of *đàn cò ke* or *đàn nhị* - “two-stringed fiddler” and other Xẩm rustic, self made instruments, merge with the clear-cut, honest lyrics to form the innocent quality and unassuming literature, which can transform a story or a topic no matter how vulgar, gross, or obscene into a universally innocent and humane one.
3. **Playful and humors:** This is the main goal of Xẩm songs, to entertain the audience.
4. **Morality and Optimism:** The stories of Xẩm songs have resolutions different from the real world. They don’t seem to allow heroes and actors to fall into dead ends or defeats, such as *Bà Ba Cai Vàng* “Canton Chief Cai Vàng’s Third Wife”, or *Vè ông Đội Cấn* “Children Rhymes About Commander Cấn.”
5. **Proactive Infusion:** the strength of Xẩm songs is in their readily receptive to different and new ideas and terms from different sources and incorporate them into the repertoires of lyrics, terms and music.

III. Conclusion:

Lyrics is the main carrier of literature of Hát Xẩm. The authors of the Xẩm lyrics are everybody in the society. It comes from the treasures of Vietnamese folk poetry and folk sayings. It contains the mixed views of many strata of people in the society, from the normal and honest average people to the sophisticated middle class, and at times, terms from the bookish literature are found in their lyrics. Xẩm songs have been performed by the artists over and over, refined and perfected gradually, and making the borrowed

³⁵ Op cit. p. 28.

materials in Xẩm characteristic more imprinted, i.e. honest, pure, and folksy. They are sung proudly by artists, smartly combined with the multipurposed musical tunes from the self-made simple but multiple in duties instruments, in a playful manner and the wits in the performing style. Together, they constitute the literary intrinsic character of Hát Xẩm, worthy to be included in the literary tradition of Vietnam.

Translated by Đỗ Khánh Phương and proofed by Dr. Ngô Thanh Nhân

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