First and foremost, a study in the literary values of Hát Xẩm needs to define and formalize Hát Xẩm. 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 “xẩm” was defined as “a blind person, speaking in a contemptuous manner” and “Rōan xẩm” or “phường xẩm” - a herd of the blinds. To speak with respect, one uses quảng mắt. ¹

Hence, we can say that Hát Xẩm is a folk song troupe of the blinds, formed in a society where the blinds are not normally respected. Hát Xẩm 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 Xẩm.

Hát Xẩm was born and formed in the heart of the people, and it contains distinctive features of folklore music and folk culture. Xẩm 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

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 khổ, 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 ô 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 poems.

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  
Lá mưa rớt ngang tay người  
Tiếc chi em một nụ cười  
Qua sông này khúc oan khiên  
Đắm thuyền em cứ ván thuyền mà ôm  
Mai kia sóng vỗ bèo tan  
Về qua chốn cũ cỏ vân sông  
Hỏi lòng, lòng lại dặn lòng”

A rain-on leaf  
It rains on a leaf landed on your palm  
Don’t regret, my lover, at the over charm lost smile  
Crossing the river ‘tis a painful tune  
Of a sinking boat, just hold on to the broken board  
Soon the waves would surge and the water-fern are gone  
You’d be back to the memorial river station of withering grass  
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 người /ŋɯəy222/- “you; human” which rimes with the sixth syllable of the next [eight syllable] verse, that is cười /kwʌɪəy222/- “smile.” And the eighth syllable of this [eight syllable] verse duyên /jwɪən444/- “charm” rimes with the last [sixth] syllable of the next [six syllable] verse khiên /xɪən444/ (khiên in the compound word oan khiên, that means “painful paradox.”) This syllable rimes with the

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

3 By Trần Nghi Hoàng, 1989.
sixth syllable of the fourth [eight syllable] verse *thuỷôn* /θwian/222/ “boat.” In turn, the last [eighth] syllable of the fourth [eight syllable] verse *ôm* /om/444/ “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* /tan/444/- “gone” which rimes with the sixth syllable of the sixth [eight syllable] verse *vàng* /vɑŋ/222/ “withering; yellow.” And lastly the eighth syllable of the last [eight syllable] verse *sông* /soŋm/444/ “river” rimes with the last sixth syllable of the last, seventh [sixth syllable] verse *lòng* /lɔŋm/222/ “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* /lɔŋm/222/ “self; soul” is about a fifth below the high level tone /444/ of *sông* /soŋm/444/ “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 *Riềm Huế*—“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
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 say chàng quá đỗi nên mê
Chàng về cho thiếp đi kèm theo sau
(Hết khổ. lưu không)
Kể từ ngày ta mới gặp nhau
Thầm yêu trộm nhớ bấy lâu không rời
Em nhớ thường chàng làm làm chẳng ơi

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!

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Tài này sắc ấy xứng đôi vợ chồng
Em chỉ muốn cho loan phụng một phòng
(Để khổ, lưu không)
Em chỉ muốn cho loan phụng một phòng
Loan ôm lấy phụng phụng bồng lấy loan

Chàng mà đi đâu em tưởng tượng trăm đàng
 Ủ ê mày liễu dạ càng kém tươi
Bâng khuâng em nhớ cảnh thôi lại nhớ người
(Để khổ, lưu không)
Bâng khuâng em nhớ cảnh thôi lại nhớ người

Nhớ nơi đôi ta kỳ ngộ để nỗi chẳng rời chân ra
Cành hồng nhắc thấy nẻo xa
Xuân lan thu cúc mặn 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 drown 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 đôi 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 kề theo sau
Từ ngày ta mới gặp nhau
Thầm yêu trộm nhớ bấy lâu không dời
Em thương chàng lắm chàng ơi

Tài này sắc ấy xứng đôi vợ chồng
Em chỉ muốn cho loan phụng một phòng
Loan ôm lấy phụng phụng bồng lấy loan

Chàng mà đi đâu em tưởng tượng trăm đàng
 Ủ ê mày liễu dạ càng kém tươi
Bâng khuâng em nhớ cảnh thôi lại nhớ người
Nhớ nơi đôi ta kỳ ngộ để nỗi chẳng rời chân ra
Cành hồng nhắc thấy nẻo xa

Ước mong sao đôi ta khăng khít trọn đời
In this Xẩm 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 trầu
Bằng lòng thương (yêu đến) thiệp (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 Xẩm song happen at each specific performance. Xẩm 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 Xẩm 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 Xâm song whose the lyrics lean on a series of the seven-seven-six-eight syllable quadruplets to exhibit the richness of Hát Xâm, in Chênh bong tune\(^5\)-“tilted and loosed”:

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

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

The seven syllable verses in this lyrics have been improvised to the point that they don’t feel like seven syllable verses. The Xâm artists are playful and so free in their expressive power. Even more surprisingly stunning, the last syllable of the six-syllable verse thọ tʰɔː²¹ “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 “ngố” in the previous verse and “họ” in the next verse) has a non-level tone, to rhyme with the sixth syllable hɔː²¹/-“families; clan” of the next eight-syllable verse also with a non-level tone.

Almost all Xâm songs are drawn from the folk poetry, and music, only a few had authors. The ideas came from folk knowledge and Xâm 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. Xâm artists perform for a living, and the audience’s enjoyment is a suggestion for a better version. Both cooperate to perfect the Xâm folk songs. For that reason, Xâm folk songs maintain the naïveté and brightness. They make fun of or critic bad habits and custom, but never with ill will. Because Xâm folk songs must be enjoyed by everybody.

**II. Overall structure of Xâm literature**

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

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

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

1. **Lyrics**, the major leading element in the fluidity of the Xẩm 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 Xẩm 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, Xẩm lyrics is simple in form but condensed in meaning. A syllable in Vietnamese can have many meanings and melodical 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 Xẩm 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.  

2. I believe that almost all Xẩm songs already form their melody as soon as they have the lyrics. The lyrics shape the melody. Almost all Xẩm 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 **mấy**, **thì**, **mà**, **ứ**, **ừ**, **ư** ... help expose the unrestraint freedom of this style of storytelling songs.

   “Xẩm 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.”

   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 Xẩm song melodies:

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

   “Cô giận ai ngày ngày cắp 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

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Cô bực vì một nỗi chưa chồng
Chín đêm ấp bóng nằm không cả mười
Không chồng khổ lắm chị em ơi
Có chồng như đũa có đôi thiết gì
Có chồng ngủ ngáy tì tì
Không chồng thức dậy có khi giật mình
Bắc Nam ơi sao chẳng thương tình
Để em gánh vác một mình sao nên
Lá dong non đem gói bánh không dèn
(mất trổ, lưu không)
Lá dong non đem gói bánh không dèn
Trách người ơi lì sà chẳng nên tâm chồng
Vàng mười đem đốt lửa không hồng
Thương em là gái chưa chồng mà thôi
Làm trai ba chốn bốn bốn nơi
Thương nàng phận gái như cánh huê rơi một thì
Phải lòng nhau lấy quách xách tuột nhau đi
(mất trổ, lưu không)
Phải lòng nhau lấy quách xách tuột nhau đi
Đừng chờ ông Tơ bà Nguyệt làm chỉ cho bận lòng
Chiếu chăn nên đạo vợ chồng
Đôi ta hả hả nhạng ngạng lòng trờ xui.

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, Xẩm 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 Xẩm 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
Chàng nằm đâu chàng nhủ thiếp nằm cùng”
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
“Minh chẳng lấy ta ắt là mình thiệt
Ta không lấy mình ta biết lấy ai”

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 nói những bạc cùng vàng
When you’re winsome, you talk silver and gold
Hết duyên ốc được của càng cùng vồ
When it’s gone, you’d take even snail and crab
Còn duyên ken chọn trai to
When you’re pretty, you look for cool lad
Hết duyên cô móm cùng vồ làm chòng
When it’s gone, you’d take even a toothless man
Còn duyên dòng culpa ken chòng
When you’re still stunning, men just knock
Hết duyên cô dụng chòng mòng mà gào
your locked door

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: Riềm huê - “flirting”

“Thiép mới gặp chàng
When I first met you, it’s when
Chàng vừa gặp thiệp đôi đang gặp nhau
you have just meet me. We see each other
Gặp chàng đấy mời chàng xơi nước xơi trầu
Please enjoy the refreshment of tea and betels
(Hết khổ, lưu không)
(end of phrase, style instrumental)
Gặp chàng đấy mời chàng xơi nước xơi trầu
Now we meet, please enjoy tea and betel
Bằng lòng thương yêu lấy thiệp bảo về dâu
If you think we’re meant for each other, I
thiép cùng vẹ
would go wherever you say
Thiép say chàng quá đội nên mê
I am so crushed by you, I become crazy
Chàng ve cho thiệp đi kẻ theo sau
I will tag along when you leave
Kể từ ngày ta mời gặp nhau
Marking the day we first see each other
(Hết khổ, lưu không)
(end of phrase, style instrumental)
Kể từ ngày ta mời gặp nhau
Since the day we met each other
Thầm yêu trớm nhỏ bày lâu không rồi

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 đó đánh
Chẳng nên tháo chỉ lấy mụn giả anh
Để anh đem bán lấy hai trăm lạng vàng

Đã yêu anh thì quyết với anh
Nhà tre cột nứa lợp tranh xuềnh xoàng
Gỗ lim chạm trổ tổ càng mất công

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 taels
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 Xẩm 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 Xẩm lyrics.

Tune 3: Ba Bực - “Three Steps”

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...

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Tối hôm qua em ngồi cửa đợi chào
Chiêm bao thì thấy dậy sờ chiếu không

Thiếp mời chàng vào chung gói loan phòng
Chung chăn phi chí thỏa lòng bày nay\(^\text{14}\)

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

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 Xâm 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:

*Lệnh đền giạt nước cánh bèo*

Đã từng lưu lạc lại nhiều giang tran
Vạt tay lên nằm ngậm cổ tran
Đời người may lục giang tran vật và mà già
Ai ơi liệu bày lo ba

Đạo bên chồng cũng nặng nghĩa bên cha
cùng dấy

Xót lòng vật và xa gan
Không ai vò mà rồi không ai đan mà dâu

Minh tôi đứng tội ngôi sau
Đa than với Nguyệt lại râu với hoa

Hong nhân đã lòng công phu
Kiếp này đáng dỗ đường tụ biệt mãi

Thà rằng chẳng dán cho cam
Dắn cả vào thùng châm sao mãi không xanh\(^\text{15}\)

Like a water fern drifting on the wild torrent
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

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

It pains me thinking of my hardships
No beat, no pound, it twists and squeezes my guts
I stand alone with regrets and sadness
I complain to the moon and spill my hearts to the flowers…

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

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

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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 kiểm chút con riêng
Gia tự điển sản bạc tiền mẹ phó giả con riêng
Bố con chết đi mẹ đây chú hay còn them...
Mẹ xem quẻ tướng thấy còn thằng em trong bụng này
Con vào gọi bà gọi bác gọi chú con ra đây...
Mẹ không sao ở vậy phải bước chân đi lấy chồng
Mẹ có thác đi con cúng mẹ năm bảy con gà
Cũng không bằng con để mẹ ra phen này
Ôi hỏi con ơi!

My own birth child, my own birth child, I’m going to remarry to find myself my own birth child
Properties, lands, money, I’ll give back all for you, my old son
Your father died, but I still have my desires
I asked the fortune teller and was told I still have another young brother in me
Come fetch your grandma, your uncles here quickly
I can’t stay alone and have to take another husband
If and when I die, even if you honor me with five or seven chickens
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

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), Tròng quán (Happy Tune) (for cute songs like Thách cưới “Wedding challenge”, Ngược đời “Upside down world”, Hồi chim “Birds Festival”, Dậu lời “Lazy Daughter-in-law”, and so on²⁰), Đò đatra - “Crossing boat”, Lý Giao duyên - “Heart-to-heart”, Cô là - “Stretching Stork Wings”, Hát Vĩ - “Simile”, Hát Văn - “Medium Chant”, Lưu thủy - “Running Water”, Hành văn - “Floating Cloud”, Nam Thương “Southern Huế Loving”, Phù thủy “Witch/Shaman” (including songs such as Xóc đĩa “Four Coins Gambling”, Nhang hoa “Curling Incense”, etc.) There are other storytelling songs²³ such as Trường Nự Vương - “The Trưng Sister Kings”, Bà Ba Cai Vàng - “Madam Canton Chief Cai Vàng,” Về 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  
Đừng dùng anh chẳng thể trộm làm gì²⁴  
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

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Poems by other famous poets, such as Phan Bội Châu25, Tản Đà26, Á Nam Trần Tuán Khải27 (who is famous for his poem Tiễn 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 Đứa 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 dứa Không gai’… Đáng trách hơn nữa là có một số bài dem tật 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 Đứa 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 Đứa 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 chửa 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”

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25 Phan Bội Châu (1867-1940): Vietnamese nationalist and poet, famous with the patriot poetry.
27 Á Nam Trần Tuán Khải (1895-1983): Famous Vietnamese poet who adapted the accurate, modern expression in his poetry.
28 The term đứa dại “the screw pine” is also called đứa gai “thorny screw pine”. The title of the song is a play of words.
Oản tẻ 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.)

…

“Nữa một mai nó xốc xa xốc xếch, xộc xà xộc xệch
Chẳng còn gì là cái xuân xanh
Hây cú 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 mấy (ư) anh, chơi xuân mát ruột càng lành
Chơi cho (mà) oản tẻ 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 xệch - “they sag, hanging and dangling” is a brilliant use of multiple reduplications. In Vietnamese folk poetry, the never-seen-images of oản tẻ, 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 bắp cây
Thân hình cô nhỏ nhắn coi tày 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
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 lệ đặt gặp thì đào yêu
Trên sông ríu 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 (“mấn,” in Southern dialect is equal to “lâm” in low Red River delta’s phonology,) - “hold silent”, thời huê đào - “flirting behavior”, mâ hương – (“hương” in Southern dialect is equal to “hồng”) - “rosy cheeks”, vấn tuyền (“tuyền” in Southern dialect is equal to “toàn,”) - “well accomplished”, méch lòng (“méch” in Southern dialect is equal to “mát,”) - “hurtful”, ... which show their well-traveling experience of Xẩm artists.

Even the names of the tunes, such as huê ~ hoa, in riềm huê33 - “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, mần thính ~ làm thính - “keep silent”, méch lòng ~ mặt 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

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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 Nhàn

Reference:
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Trần Nghi Hoàng is the author of about 17 volumes, including poetry, poetic epics, short stories, novels, notes, critics, plays, screen plays. He is the founder and editor in chief of Văn Uyển “Literary Garden” magazine and Văn Uyển Publishing House, 1987 to 1997. He is also a translator of William Faulkner, Oscar Wilde, Pablo Neruda, Garcia Lorca, v.v.

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