

# An approach to revitalization of Hát Xẩm — the blind beggar folk songs of Vietnam

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“Recentering the Periphery”

*The 132nd Annual Meeting of the American Folklore Society*

October 14-17, 2020

Hyatt Regency, Tulsa, Oklahoma

## Abstract

*Hát Xẩm* “the blind beggar folk music” is marginalized in the Vietnamese written history. It is believed that beggars, the lowest class, illiterate, are incapable of creating music and literature. Bibliographic search for this genre is impossible. Yet, hundreds of singers and musicians of this genre are still living and performing in the lower Red River delta of north Vietnam. They hold annual festivals of the founder. The music is unique. The lyrics are folksy. A beggar troupe consists of three or four persons. They no longer wandered from village to village, from markets to river banks or festivals like in the feudal society. This paper begins to explore the struggling national attempt to revive this folk art.

The national approach, since 1954, after the French colonial rules left the country, is a research, preservation and advancement. This approach has not yielded any significant results and has not included *Hát Xẩm* in the education system, for lack of data and centralized archives. The current attempt explores a series of conferences and studies mixing performers with researchers, incorporating web technologies, open archives, and multi-disciplinary approach, chiefly folklore, ethnomusicology, sociology, and oral history to collect data of an art that relies chiefly on oral transmission. This new approach also adds a study on functionality and properties of the *Xẩm* musical instruments, ethnomusical analysis, and the literary values of its lyrics. The instruments are light for traveling, consisting of a lead *đàn cò ke* “two-string fiddler”, two *trống mảnh* “light small drums”, *cặp kè* “dual clappers”, a *đàn xẩm* “monochord”, and sometimes *chiêng* “gongs” and others whenever available. Their song forms alternate between vocal *khố* blocks of verses, sung in folk music styles, flowing into *lưu không* “instrumental melodic refrain”. The lyrics are sung in improvised folk poetic forms adhering to the tonal and monosyllabic nature of the Vietnamese language. All songs tell real stories, those of common people and their conditions in the society, laden with folk sayings and the singers’ own experiences. The ideolectal and regional accents are prominent. The paper will pick the famous song *Giọt nước cánh bèo* “A fern petal in the turbulent stream” for exposition, sung by Hà Thị Cầu (1928 - 3/3/2013), highlighting her life, born into a beggar family and ended up being the 18th wife of a jealous *Xẩm* beggar, and the common lot of

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Vietnamese women in wars and the feudal society. The exposition is aimed at motivating steps to bring an unfamiliar musical culture of the marginalized lowest class into the richness of the Vietnamese folk arts.

### SHORT ABSTRACT

*Hát Xẩm* “the blind beggar folk music” is marginalized in the Vietnamese written history. It is believed that illiterate beggars, the lowest class, are incapable of creating music and literature. Bibliographic search for this genre is impossible. Yet, hundreds of singers and musicians are still performing in the lower Red River delta. The national approach, since 1954, is research, preservation, and advancement, which has not yielded any significant results. The current approach explores a series of studies mixing performers and researchers, using web technologies, and multi-disciplinary approach, chiefly folklore, ethnomusicology, sociology, and oral history. The song *Giọt nước cánh bèo* “A fern petal in the turbulent stream” shows its richness in Vietnamese folk arts.

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#### SHORT BIOGRAPHIES

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