

National Research University Higher School of Economics

as a manuscript

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**VIETNAMESE FOLK SONGS: CHARACTERISTICS OF GENRES AND
POETICS**

Dissertation Summary
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General description

This dissertation is devoted to the study of Vietnamese song lore, its poetry, music and genre characteristics. The paper includes a translation of some traditional Vietnamese songs into Russian, as well as an interpretation of the imagery and symbols of the songs. Such a classification of the images of Vietnamese song lore has not yet existed in either Russian or foreign Vietnamese studies.

Rationale

The relevance of the topic of study is primarily due to its understudied nature in both Russian and Western scholarship.

Vietnamese song lore exists in a variety of forms, folk songs are widely loved and performed, and are an important part of the culture. However, Vietnamese folk poems and songs have not yet been translated into Russian, while Russian readers can get to know the authors' poetry if they wish.

Interest in folklore has been growing in Vietnam over the past two decades. In 1998, the fifth plenum of the 8th Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam adopted the resolution 'On the Creation and Development of a Progressive Authentic National Culture' (Vietnamese: *Về xây dựng và phát triển nền văn hóa Việt Nam tiên tiến, đậm đà bản sắc dân tộc*). Among other things, the resolution proclaims the need to protect cultural heritage.

In the two decades since the resolution was adopted, interest in the study of Vietnamese song lore has grown. In addition, UNESCO has inscribed several musical genres on its Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The so-called *Nhã nhạc* of Huế court music (Vietnamese: *Nhã nhạc cung đình Huế*) was the first to be included in the list in 2003, and the first folk song genre to be included was the call-and-response songs *hát quan họ* of Bắc Ninh province. In addition to *hát quan họ*, other song genres on UNESCO list to date include *hát xoan* (2017), *hát ví* and *hát giặm* of Nghệ Tĩnh province (Vietnamese: *Dân ca ví, giặm Nghệ Tĩnh*) (2014), as well as *ca trù* (2009) and the distinctive South Vietnamese *Đờn ca tài tử* (Vietnamese: *Đờn ca tài tử Nam Bộ*) (2013), which cannot be considered fully folk because they involve the performance of author's poetry to

music¹.

The issue of folk music in general, and the inclusion of certain genres on the UNESCO list in particular, has political and ideological significance in contemporary Vietnam. The most political connotation lies in the decision to include the genre of *hát xoan*, which traditionally accompanies the Hùng King worship rituals, which were inscribed on the List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage a year later.

The inclusion of various genres of call-and-response songs in the UNESCO list is also aimed at raising the status of and interest in folk art. However, the increased interest in folk art and the ideological underpinnings of this interest can play a positive role, but also a very ambiguous one, as the modern reconstruction and interpretation of the songs is not always identical to the indigenous tradition.

Because the issue is not well developed, but important in contemporary Vietnam, the topic of this study is very relevant.

Extent of prior research

This paper is intended to be the first comprehensive study of Vietnamese folk songs in Russian and Western history. Vietnamese song lore has been studied most extensively in Vietnam, including the characteristics of genres, music and folk poetry. In addition, there are ongoing efforts to collect and process folklore materials in Vietnam.

The history of the study of national folklore in Vietnam dates back to the nineteenth century. The interest in collecting and understanding traditional national songs in Vietnam was linked to the interest in the Confucian canon, especially the Classic of Poetry², and the growing Confucian sentiment in the wake of the national

¹ In addition to the listed cultural properties directly related to this topic, the following Vietnamese properties are also included in the List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage: the space of gong culture, Central Highlands (Vietnamese: *Không gian văn hóa Cồng Chiêng Tây Nguyên*) (2005), Gióng festival of Phú Đông and Sóc temples (Vietnamese: *Hội Gióng tại đền Phú Đông và đền Sóc, Hà Nội*) (2010), worship of Hùng kings in Phú Thọ (Vietnamese: *Tín ngưỡng thờ cúng Hùng Vương*) (2012) and tug of war common to rice-farming cultures (2015, the region of the games includes the Philippines, Cambodia and Korea).

² The Classic of Poetry (or the Book of Songs, *Shijing* 詩經) is the oldest piece of Chinese fiction, one of the Five Classics that make up the Confucian canon. The Classic of Poetry consists of four parts: *Guó fēng* ('Airs of the States'), *Xiǎo yǎ* ('Lesser Court Hymns'), *Dà yǎ* ('Major Court Hymns') and *Sòng* ('Eulogies'). There is evidence in Chinese literature that the songs for this collection were personally selected by Confucius.

liberation movement at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Confucianists were the first to collect folk songs and to associate Vietnamese folklore with the Classic of Poetry, especially the Airs of the States (*Guó fēng*).

The literal translation of *Guó fēng* (國風) is ‘local songs’ and this section contains 160 songs from 15 ancient kingdoms of China, with an indication of the kingdom of origin. Similar to the Confucian canon, some recordings of Vietnamese songs include chapters on the provinces and districts where the songs were recorded. Some of these collections contain the Vietnamese text only in Vietnamese script *Chữ Nôm*³, while others include the Vietnamese Latin script *Chữ quốc ngữ*.

Scientific challenge

It can be said that the level of knowledge about Vietnamese song lore is still insufficient. Despite their undoubted authenticity and artistic value, traditional Vietnamese songs are still inaccessible to Russian-speaking readers. The poetics of Vietnamese folk songs, artistic and stylistic techniques, genre characteristics and music of Vietnamese folklore have not yet been the focus of Russian researchers. The consideration of all these issues is of great interest.

Working hypothesis

It can be assumed that there is a genetic affinity between Vietnamese folk songs and oral folklore without music. Traditional song lore must be seen as a unity of text, music and genre characteristics. Vietnamese Confucianists, the first folklore collectors, probably influenced the interpretation of folk songs. The lyrics of existing folk songs show a distinct Chinese influence on Vietnamese folk culture.

Object

The object of the study is Vietnamese song lore

Subject

Vietnamese folk songs, recorded by Vietnamese researchers in XX century

Aim:

To provide a comprehensive analysis of Vietnamese song lore.

³ *Chữ Nôm* (字喃) is a script formerly used in Vietnam that adds Chinese-style Vietnamese characters to the features of the traditional Chinese script.

Objectives

This aim includes the following study objectives:

- Determining the place of folk song in Vietnamese folklore;
- Classification and description of Vietnamese folk song genres;
- Exploration of the characteristics of the music of Vietnamese folk songs and identification of the specific features of the musical language of Vietnamese folk songs;
- Study of the characteristics of traditional Vietnamese song lyrics, including the peculiarities of verse forms and imagery;
- Identification of the cultural context in which Vietnamese song lore exist;
- Determining the place of song lore in the past and present of Vietnamese culture;
- Translation of some Vietnamese folk songs into Russian.

The theoretical and methodological background of the study was mainly the publications of folklorists from Russia: A. N. Veselovsky, V. Y. Propp, S. G. Lazutin, I. V. Zyryanov, V. P. Anikin, P. G. Bogatyrev, V. I. Yeremina, B. N. Putilov, V. M. Shchurov, etc.

In particular, this study drew parallels between Vietnamese and Russian song lore referring to Mr Lazutin's and Mr Zyryanov's papers on ditties, as *ca dao* songs have some similarities with ditties. The questions of symbolism and interpretation of songs were based on the works of Ms Yeremina, Mr Propp and Mr Veselovsky. The classification of genres was based on the works of Mr Putilov, Mr Shchurov and others.

A comparison of Vietnamese folklore with Chinese folklore was based on the following publications: a study by I. V. Voitsekhovich on Chinese phraseology, the work of N. A. Speshnev on Chinese popular literature, the studies of I. S. Lisevich and B. B. Vakhtin on ancient Chinese poetry, M. E. Kravtsova's work on Chinese art, which pays much attention to symbols in the Chinese tradition, A. G. Storozhuk's work on the relationship between philosophy and culture in the Chinese tradition.

The chapter devoted to the study of Vietnamese folk music includes the methods of musicology. The theoretical background of this chapter was mainly the

study of A. S. Ogolevets. Mr Ogolevets' approach is believed to reveal the musical language of any culture as a logical system that develops according to certain laws. The study also draws on the writings of Vietnamese folklorists: Dương Quảng Hàm, Vũ Ngọc Phan, Lư Nhất Vũ, Lê Ziang, Lê Anh Trung, Nguyễn Đông Chi, etc.

Sources

This dissertation was prepared using compilations of Vietnamese folk song lyrics compiled at different times, as well as modern field recordings of Vietnamese folk songs, which include not only lyrics but also melodies, collected by Vietnamese researchers. The main sources include the following editions:

- An Anthology of Local Songs (Vietnamese: *Quốc phong thi tập hợp thái* 國風詩集合採), compiled in 1910 by the Confucianist Nguyễn Đăng Tuyên. It contains 113 folk songs from different Vietnamese provinces of Vietnam in the Vietnamese *Chữ Nôm* script and Vietnamese Latin *Chữ quốc ngữ* script, with a Chinese translation of each song and a commentary in Chinese, following the tradition of interpreting the Confucian canon.
- A Collection of Proverbs and *Phong Dao* (Vietnamese: *Tục ngữ phong dao*) compiled by Nguyễn Văn Ngọc. This collection was published in 1928 in two parts. The first part contains about 6,500 proverbs and 2-line folk songs, the second part contains about 850 4-line folk songs (*phong dao*) and about 350 riddles.
- A Collection of Proverbs and *Ca Dao* in Some Books in Chinese Hieroglyphics and *Chữ Nôm* Script (in Alphabetical Order) (Vietnamese: *Tục ngữ ca dao trong một số sách Hán Nôm (Sắp xếp theo vần chữ cái từ A-Z)*), compiled by researcher Trần Đức Các;
- A Collection of Love Songs (Vietnamese: *Câu hát huê tình*) compiled by Đặng Lễ Nghi;
- A Collection of Vietnamese *Ca Dao* (Vietnamese: *Ca dao Việt Nam*) compiled by Nguyen Bich Hang;
- A Collection of Selected Proverbs, *Ca Dao* and Folk Songs (Vietnamese: *Tuyển chọn tục ngữ, ca dao, dân ca Việt Nam*) compiled by Phúc Hải;
- A Collection of Vietnamese Proverbs and *Ca Dao* (Vietnamese: *Tục ngữ và ca dao*

Việt Nam) compiled by Mã Giang Lân;

- Dictionary of Vietnamese Incidents and Proverbs (Vietnamese: *Từ điển tục ngữ và thành ngữ Việt Nam*) compiled by Professor Nguyễn Lân.

Novelty

This dissertation is the first study of Vietnamese song lore in Russian history.

The paper provides a translation of some Vietnamese folk songs into Russian, as well as an interpretation of the imagery and symbols of the songs. Such a classification of the images of Vietnamese song lore has not yet existed in either Russian or foreign Vietnamese studies.

The dissertation describes the types of Vietnamese folk songs and classifies the different forms of folklore. An Anthology of Local Songs (Vietnamese: *Quốc phong thi tập hợp thái* 國風詩集合採) is reviewed, which is the first introduction of such an anthology of folk songs into scholarly use in Vietnamese studies.

A detailed analysis of Vietnamese musical tradition is provided for the first time. It is also the first to examine the Chinese influence on Vietnamese folk culture, challenging the traditional notion that Vietnamese culture is divided into elite Chinese and popular indigenous culture.

Theoretical significance

The theoretical significance of the dissertation lies in the fact that it extends and deepens the knowledge of Vietnamese song lore. This study is valuable for the further study of Southeast Asian folklore, as well as for the study of interpenetrations and influences in East and Southeast Asian literatures.

Practical significance

The results can be used in the development of studies on the literature and folklore of East and Southeast Asia, as well as in the preparation of textbooks.

The following theories will be defended:

- Vietnamese Confucianists were the first folklore collectors, which has had a significant impact on the tradition of interpreting and understanding Vietnamese song lore;
- Vietnamese song lore must be seen as a unity of text, music and genre, because

song lore is a syncretic folk art where words, music and performance features are integrated parts of a comprehensive artwork;

- There is a genetic affinity between Vietnamese folk songs and oral folklore without music, especially *tục ngữ* proverbs. The boundaries between *tục ngữ* proverbs, *ca dao* song verses and *dân ca* songs are quite permeable;

- Song lore has a large variety of genres, such as call-and-response songs, work songs, romantic songs, epic songs, etc.;

- The aesthetic principles underlying Vietnamese folk music are close to those manifested in Chinese ritual music;

- Vietnamese folk songs use a variety of verse forms, the most popular of which is *lục bát*, which is etymologically related to the poetic forms of the *Muong* people, who are culturally and linguistically close to the Vietnamese. In addition to *lục bát* and its related *song thất lục bát*, there are four-syllable, five-syllable, seven-syllable and eight-syllable forms;

- Vietnamese folk poetry has been greatly influenced by Chinese cultural tradition. Vietnamese folk songs contain images and symbols of Chinese origin, wordplay based on hieroglyphics, and allusions to classical Chinese texts.

Evaluation and implementation of results

Some of the provisions and results were presented at the following conferences:

1. 5th Research and Practice Conference ‘Anniversaries of 2014-2015 in Vietnamese History’ (Moscow, 2014). Paper: Chinese Images and Symbols in Vietnamese Poetry;
2. *Bảo tồn và phát huy giá trị của dân ca (trường hợp Dân ca Ví, Giặm Nghệ Tĩnh)* [Safeguarding and Promotion of Folk Songs (The Case Study of Vi and Giam Folk Songs of Nghe Tinh)]. Vinh, Vietnam, 2014. Paper: *Về những vấn đề lý thuyết trong việc nghiên cứu âm nhạc dân gian Việt Nam* (Some Theoretical Problems in Researching of the Vietnamese Folk Music);
3. 8th EuroSEAS Conference Vienna 2015. Paper: Sinitic Traits in Viet and Muong Song Lore

4. The Linguistics of Vietnam: 30 Years of Renovation and Development (Hanoi, 2015). Paper: *Về Các Yếu Tố Hán Việt Trong Dân Ca Việt Và Dân Ca Mường* (Sinitic Traits in Viet and Muong Song Lore)
5. 1st International Youth Conference ‘Methods of Exact Sciences in Oriental Studies’ (Saint Petersburg, 2015). Paper: Methods of Recording and Analysing Song Lore through the Study of Vietnamese and Muong Folklore Materials;
6. 7th Research and Practice Conference ‘Renewal in Vietnam: Modernity and History’ (Moscow, 2016). Paper: Characteristics of Muong Song Lore and Support for the Study of Small Folk Culture in Modern Vietnam.

Structure and scope

The dissertation consists of an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography, an illustrative appendix and a text appendix. The text appendix contains an artistic translation of over two hundred Vietnamese *ca dao* song lyrics (*ca dao* is 2 to 10 lines long). The total length of the dissertation is 260 pages.

Main sections

Chapter 1 explores the place of folk songs in the system of folklore genres. In Vietnamese, the terms *tục ngữ* (proverb), *ca dao* (folk song lyrics) and *dân ca* (folk song) are often used together to denote a kind of ensemble, with the term *ca dao* in modern Vietnam being either a separate folk art genre or a verse base for different genres of Vietnamese folk song (*dân ca*). The line between *ca dao* and *tục ngữ* is very flexible: concise couplets can be considered both proverbs and folk song lyrics. A *ca dao*, consisting of two or four lines, can be combined to form more sophisticated poetic structures. Folk songs of different genres often consist of several *ca dao*.

The intermediate position between folk and elite arts in Vietnamese culture is occupied by semi-professional song genres, including the singing of professional female singers *hát ca trù* (also called *hát ả đào*), *ca Huế* and the singing of itinerant

singers *hát xẩm*.

Chapter 2 attempts to categorise and classify the genres of *dân ca* folk songs, which is a very difficult task as songs of different nature and purpose can coexist within a single genre. In the dissertation, different genres of dialogue songs are placed in a separate group: *hát quan họ*, *hát phường vải*, *hát ví*, *hát giặm* and others.

Chapter 3 is devoted to a study of Vietnamese folk music, including musical pitch, modes and melodies. Vietnamese folk music has extremely common 5th degree modes. In addition to the 5th degree mode, there are 7th degree modes, the most common of which are Dorian and Mixolydian. An important feature of Vietnamese music is monody, i.e. the absence of polyphony. The processed recordings of Vietnamese music and the examination of research indicate that the aesthetic principles behind Vietnamese music are similar to those manifested in Chinese ritual music.

Section 3.5 focuses on the indigenous Vietnamese monochord, the *đàn bầu*, which was inextricably linked to the *hát giặm* genre in ancient Vietnam and is an important symbol of Vietnamese ethnic culture and the most famous national musical instrument in modern Vietnam.

Chapter 4 deals with the characteristics of Vietnamese song poetry. Section 4.1 focuses on the Anthology of Local Songs, a collection of 113 Vietnamese folk songs compiled in 1910 by the Confucianist Nguyễn Đăng Tuyển. It is an anthology of traditional songs influenced by the Confucian tradition of folk song collection and interpretation.

Section 4.2 focuses on the verse forms of Vietnamese folk poetry, the most common of which is *lục bát*. A *lục bát* stanza consists of two lines, the first of 6 syllables and the second of 8, with the sixth syllable of each line joined by a rhyme. An interesting feature of Vietnamese versification is the so-called internal rhyme (Vietnamese: *vần lưng*), which is typical of *lục bát* and *song thất lục bát* forms, although it can also occur in seven-syllable and five-syllable forms. The internal rhyme is also typical of Muong, which is close to Vietnamese, suggesting that Vietnamese and Muong versification are genetically related.

Section 4.3 examines the compositional features of folk songs, such as parallel syntax and frequent introductions, while section 4.4 focuses on puns in Vietnamese folk poetry.

Section 4.5 analyses the images and symbols common to Vietnamese song poetry. The study identifies symbols related to animals and plants, astral and mythological symbols, and symbols related to inanimate and man-made objects. Many of the images and symbols of Vietnamese folk poetry are borrowed from Chinese culture, often common to the entire Far Eastern region.

Conclusion

Vietnamese song lore has both indigenous features in common with Muong and features borrowed from Chinese culture. The interpenetration of these traditions makes Vietnamese song lore unique. The significant and extensive Chinese influence on Vietnamese song lore suggests that elite and popular culture, including poetry and music, are not opposed to each other, but are related and similar. In addition, the break with Chinese tradition in the 20th century leads to some images and symbols of Chinese origin being either reinterpreted or misunderstood by modern culture bearers.

Difficulties in understanding some folk songs, as well as their loss of relevance, are leading to a loss of song tradition. However, Vietnam is now actively engaged in preserving its cultural heritage, with some genres inscribed on UNESCO List of World Intangible Cultural Heritage, the training of professional singers and the activities of folk clubs. It seems that folk music is still close to the hearts of the Vietnamese people and this is probably another reason why folk songs are still popular today.

It seems that further research on Vietnamese song lore has rather broad prospects: firstly, the study of Vietnamese folklore codes written by Vietnamese Confucianists and the classification of songs and commentaries on them could be continued; secondly, work on poetic material seems promising, which could lead to a dictionary of images and symbols of Vietnamese song lore, with data on the frequency of various symbols and their origins; thirdly, further work on music,

namely on aspects of music that were left out of the scope of this study, seems interesting. Finally, the study of folklore in the context of cultural identity construction seems very promising.

Publications:

Publications in journals included into the list of high-level journals prepared by the National Research University Higher School of Economics, as well as indexed in the Scopus database.:

1. E. O. Starikova. Moon, Sun and Stars in Vietnamese Folk Poetry // Vietnamese Studies. 2023. Vol. 7. No. 1 P. 82-94. List D
2. E. O. Starikova. Heritage and the Image of National Culture in Vietnam// Asia and Africa Today. 2020. No. 1. P. 61-65. List D
3. E. O. Starikova. Musical Instrument Đàn Bầu as a Symbol of Ethnic Culture in Vietnam and Beyond // Vietnamese Studies. 2020. Vol. 2. No. 4. P. 58-70. List D
4. E. O. Starikova. Muong Song Lore in a Comparative Context: Identity and Commonality with Vietnamese Tradition // Anthropological Forum. 2017. No. 33. P. 65-83. List B, Scopus Q2
5. E. O. Starikova. Influence of Confucian Tradition on the Collection and Understanding of Vietnamese Song Lore (Based on the Example Literary Miscellany “the Anthology of the Airs of States” (1910) // Bulletin of Novosibirsk State University. Series: History, Philology. 2016. Vol. 15. No. 10. P. 68-74. List C, Scopus Q1

Other publications:

6. E. O. Starikova. Modal Thinking of the Viets// Bulletin of Saint Petersburg University. Series 13. Oriental Studies. African Studies. 2011. No. 3. P. 90-105.
7. E. O. Starikova. Musical Thought of the Viets// Bulletin of Saint Petersburg University. Series 13. Oriental Studies. African Studies. 2011. No. 4. P. 77-86.
8. E. O. Starikova. Vietnamese Folk Song Poetry and the Influence of Chinese Tradition // Bulletin of Saint Petersburg University. Series 13. Oriental Studies. African Studies. 2014. No. 2. P. 74-83.

9. Starikova E. Genres of Call-And-Response Songs in Vietnam // St. Petersburg Annual of Asian and African Studies. 2014. No. 3. P. 97-112.
10. Starikova E. Sinitic Traits in Viet and Muong Song Lore / Basic Research Programme. Series HUM 'Humanities'. 2015. No. WP BRP 108/HUM/2015
- 11.E. O. Starikova. Methods of Recording and Analysing Song Lore through the Study of Vietnamese and Muong Folklore Materials // Book: 1st International Youth Conference 'Methods of Exact Sciences in Oriental Studies', 10-11 November 2015: Conference Proceedings / Editor-in-Chief: M. A. Soloshcheva. Saint Petersburg: Russian Christian Academy of Humanities Publishing House, 2015., P. 65-71.