

THE CHING IN THE CULTURAL LIFE OF THE XƠ ĐẰNG PEOPLE IN VIETNAM

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Abstract

This chapter delves into an in-depth study of the various sets of chings (ching) within the cultural life of the Xơ Đẳng people, who have long (since the beginning of the last century) resided on the eastern slopes of the majestic Trường Sơn mountain range in the northwestern part of Quảng Ngãi province.

The discussion will go about the following: the three-piece ching set (including regular ching and khung ching); the four-piece can ching set; the six-piece năng ching set; the seven-piece ching set; the h' lênh ching set (with configurations of 8, 9, 10, 12–15 pieces); and a number of Xơ Đẳng ching compositions (that are later dated). Through this, the chapter will address organological issues, scientific parameters concerning the shape and size of each ching set; the naming conventions of each ching in the sets; as well as the function, performance environment, and repertoire of ching in the life of the Xơ Đẳng community.

Keywords

organology, Xơ Đẳng chings, Xơ Đẳng musical instruments, Cadong folk music, Cadong musical instruments

INTRODUCTION

The Xơ Đẳng people refer to a flat gong as ching. There are 2 types of chings: flat chings (ching bằng) and bossed chings (goong or ching goong). In this chapter, the term “ching” is used specifically when referring to the gongs of the Xơ Đẳng.



Figure 1: Provinces of the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Picture in the public domain, and map in the public domain.

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There are Bana, Brau, Churu, Coho, Êđê, Giarai, Giê-Triêng, H'rê, Mạ, Mnông, Romam, and Xơđăng people living in the Central Highlands of Vietnam.

In the article “Musical Instruments in the Cultural Life of the Xơđăng in Quảng Ngãi,” published through SHCM and Logos Verlag Berlin, *Asian-European Music Research Journal* (Nguyễn Thế Truyền, AEMR 12: 57–70. 2023), Xơđăng people were introduced, covering aspects such as geography, natural environment, and culture; musical instrument classification; instrument crafting materials; and general issues. Therefore, these topics will not be reiterated in this chapter.

The Xơđăng people primarily reside in the Sơn Tây Thượng, Sơn Tây, Trà Bồng 2, and Kon Plong in Quảng Ngãi province, as well as in Nam Trà My of Quảng Nam province. Their language belongs to the Mon-Khmer language family, part of the Austroasiatic linguistic system. The Xơđăng people mainly sustained their livelihoods through shifting cultivation, farming, animal husbandry, hunting, and gathering. This study is based on the results of the author's surveys and fieldwork conducted in Xơđăng communities, including the villages of Sơn Bua, Sơn Tân, Sơn Mùa, and Sơn Dung (in Sơn Tây district), Trà Kem, and Trà Xanh (in Tây Trà district) of Quảng Ngãi province, as well as several villages in Kon Plong district, Kon Tum province, some years ago.

The Xơđăng people refer to gongs as ching. The term “đánh ching” means striking the ching with a mallet to produce sound; *đấm ching* refers to using a fist to hit the ching to create sound; and *gõ ching* involves tapping the ching with a knuckle to generate sound.



**Figure 2 (left): Traditional costume of Xơđăng women; Figure 3 (right): Xơđăng girls by the Kem Stream
Photo courtesy by Ngọc Chi.**

Unlike other musical instruments made from bamboo, leaves, rattan, leather, or wood, the ching is considered the most important instrument for the Xơđăng and is made from bronze. Unlike other instruments, where the artisan is also the creator, the Xơđăng people have not yet been able to produce chings themselves. Instead, they must purchase or barter for them with the Vietnamese people from Phước Kiều village, Điện Phương commune, Điện Bàn district, Quảng Nam province, Ward Điện Bàn, Đà Nẵng City, or from other regions, sometimes even traveling as far as Myanmar to obtain these.

The Xơđăng people in Quảng Ngãi have a custom of performing a ritual for newly acquired chings after purchasing or bartering for them. To conduct this ritual, the owner of the ching must invite a shaman (p'dâu) to their home to perform a ceremony to appease the ching spirit before it is used. During the ceremony, a white-feathered chicken is slaughtered, and its blood is smeared onto the new chings. The shaman prays for the ching not to bring misfortune to the owner. After this ritual, the owner is free to use the ching without fear of divine retribution or bad luck.

For the Xơđăng, the ching not only is a valuable asset often traded for livestock such as buffaloes, cows, and jars but also holds significant spiritual importance. Due to the belief that the ching is a sacred object within the family, after use, it is stored in a designated place known as the sacred corner.

Musical instruments of the idiophone family, in general, produce sound through striking or beating with mallets (either bare or wrapped), clubs, fists, pestles, or long sticks. Examples include phách, bells, clappers (Vietnamese), đuông (Mường), t'rung (Xơ Đăng, Mnông, Giarai), buffalo horn wooden blocks (various ethnic groups), thanh la (Nùng, Giáy, Mường, Vietnamese), and chings (various ethnic groups).

THE SET OF THREE CHING

The Xơ Đăng in Quảng Ngãi have two types of three-piece ching sets: the regular three-piece ching and the ching khung.

The regular three-piece ching set: Each ching in this set has two holes drilled into the rim for attaching a carrying rope.

- Mother Ching (vông): Diameter of 40.5 cm, thickness of 5 mm, and a rim height of 7.3 cm.
- Father Ching (k'tum): Diameter of 39.4 cm, thickness of 3 mm, and a rim height of 6.8 cm.
- Child Ching (túc): Diameter of 36.5 cm, thickness of 5 mm, and a rim height of 6.5 cm.

Ching 3	Average Size			Role in Performance	Playing Posture
	Diameter (cm)	Thickness (mm)	Rim Height (cm)		
Vông (Mẹ) (Mother Ching)	40.5	5	7.3	Low tone	Standing, slightly inclined
K'tum (Cha) (Father Ching)	39.4	3	6.8	Keeps rhythms	Placed on the thigh
Túc (Con) (Child Ching)	36.5	5	6.5	Melodic playing	Hung

Figure 4: Some information about the Xơ Đăng people's set of three regular ching instruments in a table made by the author.

The Xơ Đăng ethnic group is known for their preference and use of large-scale ching ensembles, including sets of 7, 9, 11, 13, and 15 chings. In community activities and traditional festivals, the 3-ching set is rarely used among the Xơ Đăng but is notably prevalent among a neighboring ethnic group, the H'rê. It is hypothesized that this 3-ching set may have originated from the H'rê, an ethnic group that has long coexisted with the Xơ Đăng, resulting in cultural integration and exchange over time. The terminology, playing posture, and patterns of this 3-ching set among the Xơ Đăng are analogous to those of the H'rê.

THE 3-CHING ENSEMBLE

The Xơ Đăng 's 3-ching set, often accompanied by a drum (høgur), is referred to as the ching ensemble. This ensemble typically involves four performers: three ching players and one drummer (høgur player). The largest ching is called ching tồ, also known as ching p'rang; the second largest is ching h'lay; and the smallest is ching p'rong.

In the village of Trà Kem, Trà Bồng 2 commune, Quảng Ngãi province, the Xơ Đăng people frequently utilize the 3-ching set and a drum during ceremonies such as buffalo and pig sacrifices. During these events, both men and women, young and old, participate in joyful dances, moving in a counterclockwise circle while holding gron (rattles of various sizes) that produce a distinctive sound.

No.	3-ching ensemble + 1 høgur	Name	Role
1	Largest Ching	Ching Tồ	Low Tone
2	Second Largest Ching	Ching H'lay	Rhythm
3	Smallest Ching	Ching P'rong	Melodic ornamentation
4	Drum	Høgur	Keeping rhythm

Figure 5: Names of the 3-ching ensemble in a table made by the author.

THE 4-CHING ENSEMBLE

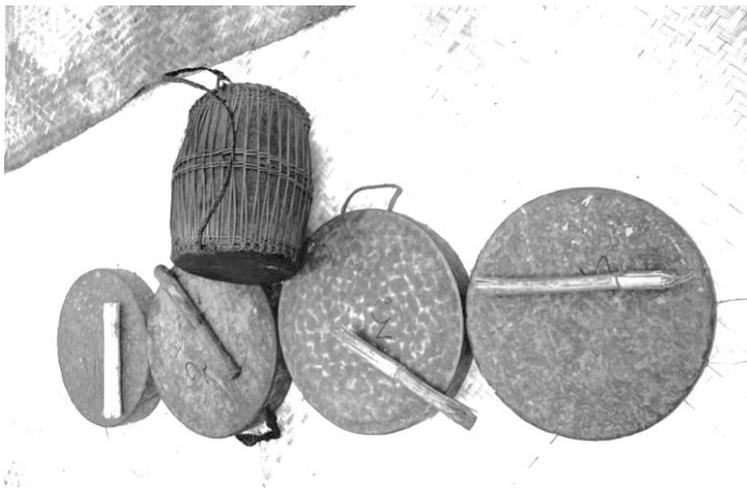


Figure 6: The 4-ching ensemble + 1 drum of the Xơ Đẳng people in Trà Xinh, Tây Trà, Quảng Ngãi. Photo by the author.

The 4-ching set used by the Xơ Đẳng people in Quảng Ngãi is known as Ching Can (Mother Ching). The chings are arranged in order from largest to smallest as follows: Ching Can (Mother Ching), Ching Tok Cãn (Grandmother Ching), Ching Moan (Eldest Child Ching), and Ching Tok Moan (Youngest Child Ching), along with one hogur (drum).

No.	Ching Ensemble	Inner diameter (cm)	Outer diameter (cm)	Ching thickness (cm)
1	Ching can	38.7	39	6.4
2	Ching tok cãn	38.7	38.7	6.1
3	Ching moan	38.6	38.7	6
4	Ching tok moan	37	37.5	6.2

Figure 7: Dimensions of the 4-ching ensemble in a table made by the author.

During performances, the artisan plays the Ching Bà (Grandmother Ching) with a muted technique, producing softer, more subtle sounds compared to the other chings. Meanwhile, the Ching Mẹ (Mother Ching) plays rhythms with many syncopations, while both the Ching Moan (Eldest Child Ching) and the Ching Tok Moan (Youngest Child Ching) maintain the beat. The primary performance method for this ching ensemble involves suspending all the chings in fixed positions, with the performers standing in relatively stationary positions while playing.

No.	Ching Can Ensemble (4 pieces)	Function	Family role	Tones
1	Can	Melody	Mother	Many variations
2	Tok cãn	Staccato	Grandmother	Soft
3	Moan	Keeping meter	Elder Child	
4	Tok moan	Rhythm	Younger Child	

Figure 8: Functions and family roles of each gong in the ching can ensemble (4 pieces) in a table made by the author.

THE 6-CHING CHING NĂNG ENSEMBLE

The 6-ching ensemble, also known as Ching Năng, is another type of ching set highly favored and widely used by the Xơ Đẳng people. The 6-ching set is sometimes used as a substitute for the 4-ching set. In this configuration, the 6-ching ensemble consists of two large chings, two medium-sized chings, and two small chings. The details of this ching set are presented in Figure 9, including the ensemble composition, the names corresponding to family roles, scientific parameters (sizes), and the role of each ching during performances.

No.	Ching ensemble (6 pieces)	Quantity (piece)	Diameter (cm)	Thickness (cm)	Role
1	Can (Mother)	2	40.5	6.7	Staccato
2	Tok (Eldest Child)	1	39	6.63	Rhythm
3	Tok Moan (Second Child)	2	39	6.6	Keeping rhythm
4	Kuân (Youngest Child)	1	38	6	Melody

Figure 9: The 6-ching ensemble in a table made by the author.

THE 7-CHING ENSEMBLE WITH A DRUM



Figure 10: A 7-piece ching ensemble + 1 drum of the Xơđăng people in Quảng Ngãi.
Photo by the author.

The 7-ching ensemble, accompanied by a drum, is widely used by the Xơđăng people in Quảng Ngãi, especially in community life and village festivals. The ching mallets are made from the Ta tree (referred to as Xà Nố or Mần Đậu by the Cor people), with a length of about 29 cm and a diameter of

3 cm. These mallets are typically dried in the sun before use. The dimensions of the 7-ching ensemble are detailed in Figure 11.

No.	Ching ensemble (7 pieces)	Diameter (cm)		Thickness (cm)	Note
		Inner	Outer		
1	Ching 1	40		7.5	Flat
2	Ching 2	40	40.5	7.5	Has a knob
3	Ching 3	39.1	39.5	6.5	Has a knob
4	Ching 4	38.4	38.5	7	Has a knob
5	Ching 5	38.4	38.8	6.6	Has a knob
6	Ching 6	38.1	39.6	7	Has a knob
7	Ching 7	38.7		6.8	Has a knob

Figure 11: The dimensions of the 7-ching ensemble of the Xơ Đăng people in Quảng Ngãi in a table made by the author.

THE CHING H'LÊNH ENSEMBLE

Ching H'lênh is a term used to describe various ching ensembles of the Xơ Đăng people, which come in the following configurations: 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, and 15 chings. The most common configurations are:

- 8-ching Ching H'lênh: 7 flat chings + 1 knobbed ching
- 9-ching Ching H'lênh: 9 flat chings + 1 drum
- 10-ching Ching H'lênh: 9 flat chings + 1 knobbed ching
- 12-ching Ching H'lênh: 11 flat chings + 1 knobbed ching
- 13-ching Ching H'lênh: 8 flat chings + 5 knobbed chings
- 14-ching Ching H'lênh: 11 flat chings + 3 knobbed chings
- 15-ching Ching H'lênh: 12 small flat chings + 3 knobbed chings

In addition to the configurations above, there is usually one hơgur (drum) included in the ensemble. The Ching H'lênh is composed of two types of chings: knobbed and flat. The number of knobbed chings and flat chings is typically odd, except in the case of the 15-ching ensemble. During performances, the artisan stands in place or moves in a counterclockwise circle, holding the ching with the left hand and striking the inner surface of the ching with a mallet held in the right hand.



Figure 12 (left): A 9-piece ching ensemble + 1 drum; Figure 13 (right): Đinh Thị Lu performing a solo on a 9-piece ching ensemble. Photo by the author.



Figure 14: A 10-piece ching ensemble + 1 drum owned by an Artisan in Sơn Tây Thượng Commune. Photo by the author.

THE 10-CHING ENSEMBLE

The 10-ching ensemble includes 7 flat chings and 3 knobbed chings. These chings are named as follows:

- Ching Con (Child Ching)
- Pan Đông Ching (Elder Brother Ching)
- Linh Lang Ching (Younger Sister Ching)
- Pan Đông Tiêu (Younger Brother Ching)
- H'lênh (Eldest Sister Ching, leading the rhythm for the smaller chings)
- Ching Can (Mother Ching)
- Goong Doh (Younger Ching, small flat ching)
- Pam Đông Goong (Elder Brother Ching with a knob)
- Tok Cãn (Grandmother Ching with a knob)
- Goong Can (Mother Ching with a knob)

Each ching plays a specific role in the ensemble, contributing to the overall harmony and rhythm of the performance.

No.	Name	Role	Diameter (cm)	Knob?
1	Goong can (Mother)	Base tone, rhythm	Inside: 56.3, Outside: 60.4	Has a knob
2	Tok cãn (Grandmother)	Base tone + rhythm	Inside: 42.8, Outside: 45.5	Has a knob
3	Pan đông goong (Eldest brother)	Harmony, melody	Inside: 23, Outside: 34	Has a knob
4	Goong doh (Younger brother)	Harmony, melody	40.5	No knob
5	Ching can (Mother)	Harmony, melody	38	No knob
6	Ching H'lênh (Elder sister)	Leads the smaller ching instruments during the ensemble	35	No knob
7	Pan đông tiêu (Second brother)	Melody	32.5	No knob
8	Linh lang ching (Younger sister)	Melody	30.2	No knob
9	Pan dong ching (Older brother)	Melody	28	No knob
10	Ching con (Child)	Melody	25	No knob

Figure 15: All ching roles played in the ensemble, contributing to the overall harmony and rhythm of the performance in a table made by the author.

THE 13-CHING ENSEMBLE

The 13-ching ensemble consists of 8 flat chings and 5 knobbed chings, accompanied by one hogur (drum). Among the 8 flat chings, the Ching Can (Mother Ching) is placed at the beginning of the ensemble, and the Ching Kuân (Youngest Child Ching) is at the end. These two chings are individual and not paired with any other chings. The remaining 6 flat chings are arranged into 3 pairs, each named according to the family roles, such as Eldest Child, Second Child, and Penultimate Child. Each pair of chings is considered a yin-yang couple, or as the artisans believe, a husband and wife pair. During performances, these paired chings play in opposition—where the husband's ching asks, the wife's ching responds. The names and arrangements of the three pairs of chings are as follows:

- First Pair: Ching Tô Tiêu and Ching Tạo Tiêu (husband and wife), also known as Tiêu Ka Lô (husband) and Tiêu Ka Zi (wife).
- Second Pair: Ching Tô Linh Lang Tiêu and Ching Tạo Linh Lang Tiêu (husband and wife), also known as Linh Lang Tiêu Ka Lô (husband) and Linh Lang Tiêu Ka Zi (wife).
- Third Pair: Ching Tô Lênh Lênh and Ching Tạo Lênh Lênh (husband and wife), also known as Lênh Lênh Ka Lô (husband) and Lênh Lênh Ka Zi (wife).

Finally, the Ching Kuân (Youngest Child Ching) is positioned at the end of the ensemble, completing the arrangement.

ADDITIONAL CHING ENSEMBLES

In addition to the 8-flat ching arrangement with its specified family hierarchy, the ensemble includes a group of 5 knobbed chings with the following designations:

- Goong Mang: Small knobbed ching (Youngest Child)
- Goong Tiêu: Medium-sized knobbed ching (Second Child)
- Goong Put: Father Ching, responsible for maintaining the rhythm and controlling the tempo of the ensemble
- Goong Can: Mother Ching
- Goong Cãn: Largest and lowest-pitched knobbed ching, referred to as the Grandmother Ching

The 13-ching ensemble is accompanied by one hogur (drum), creating a complete set for performance.

THE 15-CHING ENSEMBLE

The 15-ching ensemble comprises 12 small flat chings, known as Ching H'lênh, and 3 knobbed chings. The increase in the number of flat chings from the previous arrangements serves to strengthen the middle positions of the ensemble. These 12 flat chings are arranged according to a matrilineal family structure (excluding the father's position), as follows:

- 1 Ching Kol: Also known as Ching Mang (Youngest Child)
- 1 Ching Can: Mother Ching

5 Pairs of chings:

- Tô Tiêu / Tạo Tiêu (Eldest and Younger Wife Chings)
- Tô Nai / Tạo Nai (Eldest and Younger Chings)
- Tô B'roong / Tạo B'roong (Eldest and Younger Chings)
- Tô Linh / Tạo Linh Linh (Eldest and Younger Chings)
- Tô Lênh Lênh / Tạo Lênh Lênh (Eldest and Younger Chings)

These pairs of chings are organized in a manner reflecting family relationships, evoking the traditional longhouse model where multiple small families live together.

THE HƠGUR DRUM

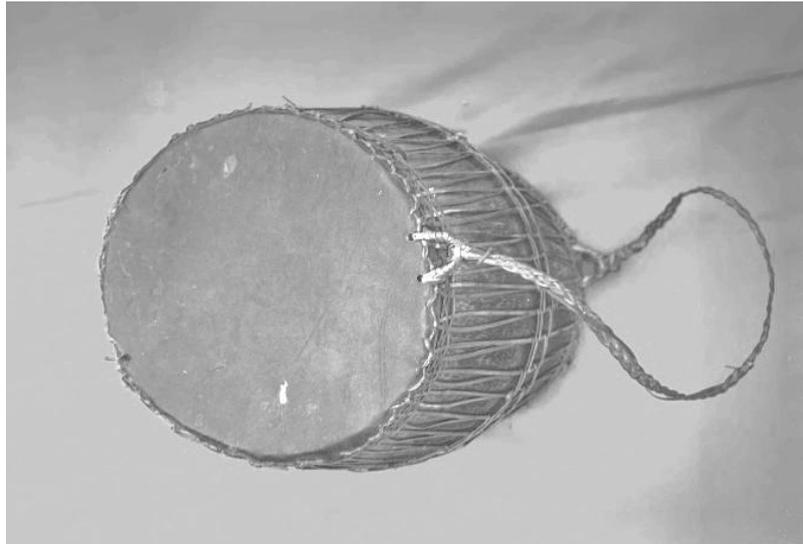


Figure 16: Hơgur Drum of the Xơ Đăng People. The rattan bindings, the body, and the method of skin attachment is clearly visible. Photo by the author.

The hơgur is a small drum used by the Xơ Đăng people, with a size and structure similar to drums used by the Cor and H'rê ethnic groups. The hơgur measures 41–45 cm in length, with a drumhead diameter of 25 cm. The drum body is carved from a single piece of wood, typically from a tree whose fruits attract birds. The outer surface of the drum body is wrapped with over a hundred rattan strips woven in a diamond pattern, and a few pebbles are placed inside to enhance the sound. The drumhead is made from animal skins such as deer, muntjac, goat, or cow, but never buffalo skin. The performer wears the drum around their waist and plays it with their hands (not with sticks), primarily to maintain rhythm during ensemble performances. The hơgur is often played in conjunction with the ching ensemble during many festivals and celebrations of the community; however, like many other Xơ Đăng instruments, it is not permitted to be used in funeral rites.

According to elderly artisans, the Xơ Đăng do not use buffalo skin for drumheads because the buffalo is a sacrificial animal to the deities during the buffalo-stabbing ritual, and its image is highly revered in their daily lives. To make the drums, they usually choose skins from deer, muntjac, serow, or cow, as they believe these skins produce a more resonant and pleasing sound.

SOME XƠ ĐĂNG CHING COMPOSITIONS

The variety and types of Xơ Đăng ching are rich and diverse, which underscores the importance of ching in the cultural life of the Xơ Đăng and reflects the superior development of their musical performance art. However, the number of ching compositions is relatively limited. The Xơ Đăng ching compositions are often lively and joyful, such as *Mừng lúa mới* (Celebrating the new rice), *Mừng chiến thắng* (Celebrating victory), *Ơi anh ơi* (Oh, brother), and *Đãk tu*. Here, we do not intend to delve deeply into the compositions or their harmonization. It can be said that almost every community celebration and joyous occasion of the Xơ Đăng resonates with the sounds of these compositions.

For instance, the *Mừng chiến thắng* ching piece (excerpted melody), collected and notated by Thế Truyền, consists of only six measures, but it is played repeatedly many times.

Biểu diễn: Đội ching
xã Sơn Bua, Sơn Tây

Nhịp nhàng - hân hoan

Hàng âm 8 nốt ứng với 8 hoặc 9 chiếc ching

Figure 17: Melodic excerpt of the piece *Mừng chiến thắng* made by the author.

Biểu diễn: Đội ching
xã Sơn Bua, Sơn Tây

Vui tươi - dân dã

Hàng âm 7 nốt ứng với 7 chiếc ching hoặc nhiều hơn

Figure 18: Melodic excerpt of the piece *Ơi anh ơi* made by the author.

Another example is the *Ơi anh ơi!* ching piece (excerpted melody), also collected and notated by the author.

Among the ching compositions particularly cherished by the Xođăng, *Ơi anh ơi!* stands out as a masterpiece of their folk performance art. When this ching piece is played, it seems that almost everyone in the village, young and old, male and female, wants to join in the celebration. They dance in a circle, moving counterclockwise.

Another notable ching piece is *Mừng lúa mới* (Celebrating the New Rice) (excerpted melody), collected and notated by the author.



Figure 19: The piece with many repetitions, called *Mừng lúa mới*, is a welcome of the harvest. Excerpt made by the author.

The *Mừng lúa mới* ching is used when the harvest is complete or during moonlit nights and festivals, where the Xơ Đăng often perform ching. The sound of the ching reverberates through the mountains and forests, touching the hearts of all who hear it. During festivals, the buffalo-stabbing ceremony, harvest celebrations, weddings, and other joyful community events, people often sing ranghê (a form of spontaneous, free-spirited singing) and play the *Mừng lúa mới* ching. This piece is typically performed with an eight-piece ching ensemble.

Like *Mừng chiến thắng* and *Oi anh ơi*, the *Mừng lúa mới* ching piece is also played repeatedly during community performances. The melody of *Mừng lúa mới* is vibrant, joyful, and lively, captivating everyone.

The *Mừng lúa mới* ching piece is not exclusively used for celebrating the new rice. It is played during almost all joyful community events, such as festivals, weddings, and celebrations of successful hunts, among others.

CONCLUSION

The ching of the Xơ Đăng people is performed in an open system, which is a distinctive feature of their music and folk performance art in general. The composition of Xơ Đăng ching ensembles is rich and diverse, surpassing that of neighboring ethnic groups like the Co and H'rê. The scientific measurements of the ching instruments, including inner and outer diameters, highlight the variety in size among the different ching within each Xơ Đăng ensemble.

The Xơ Đăng view each ching ensemble as a family, with each ching representing a family member. This belief is reflected in the names they give each ching, such as ching mẹ (mother ching), ching chị (sister ching), ching anh (brother ching), and ching con (child ching). The mother ching is always the largest and plays a crucial role in performances. This practice likely traces back to a matriarchal society from the distant clan commune era, as indicated by the structure of their traditional stilt houses, which are also divided in a way that reflects this familial organization.

The music of the Xơ Đăng is a priceless cultural heritage, not only for the Xơ Đăng themselves but also for the broader Southeast Asian musical tradition. Due to its cultural significance, the Xơ Đăng ching, along with the Space of Ching Culture in the Central Highlands, was recognized by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity on 25th November 2005.

Further research is needed to explore the historical origins and cultural value of these folk instruments in the social life of the Xơ Đăng, focusing on their functions in future projects.

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