

# Preservation and Transmission of Cultural Knowledge about Bronze Drums in Donglan County, Guangxi, China

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## Abstract

The preservation and transmission of cultural knowledge about bronze drums in Donglan County, Guangxi, China, is crucial for protecting a valuable cultural heritage that has been passed down through generations. In Guangxi, Guizhou, and Yunnan, several ethnic groups, such as the Zhuang, Buyi, Miao, and others, still include bronze drums in their cultural practices. These drums function as visible connections to ancient customs and are actively conserved through on-site visits and recordings of performances. Donglan County in Guangxi is crucial to this effort, as it has been officially designated as a national-level zone for the protection of both cultural and ecological resources starting in 2023. This project emphasizes the dedication to protecting intangible cultural resources, with cooperation between communities and educational institutions guaranteeing the transfer of this cultural knowledge to future generations through education. The clear differentiation between male and female bronze drums, as well as their specific acoustic characteristics, contributes to the cultural wealth of this heritage. This is preserved through cultural events and educational programs, ensuring its lasting importance for future generations.

**Keywords:** preservation, transmission, knowledge, bronze drums, Donglan County, Guangxi, arts education

## 1. Introduction

Bronze drums are predominantly located in the southern and southwestern areas of China, specifically in Guangxi, Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan, Hunan, and Guangdong. Furthermore, its impact and dissemination reach much beyond the boundaries of China, covering other nations in Southeast Asia. The nations encompassed in this list are Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar, Malaysia, Laos, and Indonesia (Li, 2018; Seekhunlio & Chuangprakhon, 2021).

The bronze drum is an eminent and mythical national historical relic that possesses cultural, artistic, and musical significance. According to Heger's (1902) research, the history of this topic spans more than 2,600 years, beginning in the 7th century BC. This extraordinary instrument not only serves as evidence of China's extensive history but also plays a vital part in the cultural legacy of Southeast Asia (Lu et al., 2020).

The bronze drum holds significance not only as a musical instrument but also as a representation of cultural interchange and historical ties across many Asian locations. This resource is highly helpful for researching the music history and cultural legacy of southwest China and Southeast Asia. It provides insights into the linkages and exchanges between these regions over thousands of years.

The term "Bronze Drum" (Tong Gu) in China was initially documented during the Eastern Han Dynasty in Ban Gu's *Book of the Later Han*, notably in the *Ma Yuan Biography*. Bronze drums have been widely popular for more than 2,600 years, with a broad distribution and diverse categorization. Throughout the process of investigation, preservation, and categorization, individuals have systematically classified them into several categories. Throughout the period spanning from the late nineteenth century to the late twentieth century, a multitude of categorization systems have arisen. There are several classifications of bronze drums, including Heger's classification, the Dong Son drum classification by Vietnamese archaeologists, and the Chinese Eight classification proposed by the Chinese Association for Study of bronze drums. These categories have made a substantial contribution to the knowledge and transmission of information on bronze drums (Kempers, 1988; Murowchick, 2001).

During the Wei-Jin, Southern, and Northern Dynasties, the height of a bronze drum directly correlated with its

value, making it a prominent symbol of wealth and social position among affluent and aristocratic households. Following the Wei-Jin Dynasties, it progressively integrated into the realm of folk culture, assuming the role of a ceremonial tool and musical instrument during festivals and sacrificial ceremonies. Currently, a substantial quantity of bronze drums has been excavated in China. Wanjiaba and Shizhaishan types, belonging to the pre-Heger I type, are primarily discovered in the regions of Yunnan and Guangxi. On the other hand, the Lengshuichong type, along with the Beiliu and Lingshan types, which fall under the Heger I type, are predominantly found in Guangxi. The Ximeng type, categorized as the Heger III type, is most commonly found in Yunnan. The Zunyi type, classified as the Heger IV type, is primarily found in Guizhou. Lastly, the Majiang type, also falling under the Heger IV type, is most commonly found in the regions of Guangxi, Guizhou, and Yunnan. China is the location where all the classified types of Heger bronze drums may be found (Jiang, 2018).

The aforementioned aspects constitute the primary focal points in the examination of the chosen varieties of bronze drums in Donglan County, Guangxi, China. By analyzing these matters and gaining a deeper comprehension of the cultural significance of preserving bronze drums, the evolution of various bronze drum variations, their routes of transmission, their assimilation into the local ethnic culture, and the exploration of musical history across different nations, this study makes a substantial contribution to the preservation, knowledge, and transmission of the valuable legacy related to bronze drums and their cultural importance in the region.

## 2. Research Objectives

To study the preservation and transmission of cultural knowledge about bronze drums in Donglan County, Guangxi, China

## 3. Literature Review

### 3.1 Evolution and Significance of Bronze Drum Classification

The research carried out more than a century ago by Austrian academic F. Heger remains the foundation of the currently accepted categorization method for bronze drums. Heger's examination of bronze drums, considering elements such as visual characteristics and embellishments, resulted in the classification of four primary types according to the development of form and ornamentation (Types I, II, III, IV) (Heger, 1902).

In 1972, American scholar Emma Bunker further contributed to this classification by naming the original bronze drums found in Yunnan, China, and Dongshan, Vietnam, as the first Heger I-type drums in her article titled "Relationship between the Yunnan and Dongshan Cultures." Subsequently, in 1974 and 1979, Japanese scholar Imamura Keir published research articles listing eleven bronze drums discovered in Yunnan, Vietnam, and Thailand. Imamura conducted a comprehensive analysis, including scientific testing, archaeological excavation findings, decoration, and the geographical area of discovery. He argued that these bronze drums belong to the pre-Heger Type I category, which predates the Heger Type I drums. This classification of Pre-Heger Type I bronze drums has since gained widespread acceptance among scholars (Imamura, 1979).

Chinese scholars have traditionally prioritized the categorization, conservation, and understanding of bronze drums. During the 1950s, they operated according to Heger's system. In 1980, academicians in Nanning, Guangxi, devised a classification system consisting of eight distinct types, which were determined by analyzing place names. The initial five categories, referred to as the Dian-Gui system, are widespread in the regions of Yunnan, Guangxi, and Guizhou. The last three, comprising the Yue-Gui system, are predominantly located in the provinces of Guangdong, Guangxi, and Hainan. Although this classification is beneficial in terms of maintaining and advancing knowledge among Chinese scholars, it is not universally acknowledged on a global scale. Therefore, Heger's classification remains widely employed for the examination of Chinese bronze drums and to aid in their preservation for future generations (Jiang, 2018; Ye et al., 2023).

### 3.2 Distribution and Significance of Bronze Drums in Guangxi and Yunnan

The distribution of bronze drums in Guangxi spans a wide geographical range, including cities and counties in the southeast, southwest, northeast (including Hezhou and Zhaoping), south (Mengshan), and northwest (Longsheng and Sanjiang) areas. Bronze drums have been discovered in the Guiqian region, which stretches along the border between Guangxi and Yunnan. Except for a handful of counties in northern Guangxi, no bronze drums have been found. The localities of Yulin, Qinzhou, Wuzhou, Liuzhou, and Nanning in Guangxi have yielded the most extensive discoveries of bronze drums. The Hechi and Baise districts have the most abundant collections of ancestral bronze drums (Jiang, 1999; Shun & Boonsrianun, 2023).

Yunnan, widely recognized as the origin of bronze drums, has a notable abundance of ancient bronze drums, especially in regions surrounding Dianchi, such as Chuxiong, Changning, Maidu, Qujing, Jinning, Jiangchuan, and

Guangnan. These areas have produced bronze drums that date back to the Han Dynasty and even earlier, making them a significant focus for the examination of ancient bronze drums. Explore the spread of late bronze drums along the western border of China with Burma. This territory encompasses the western portions of the Dehong Autonomous Prefecture, stretching southwards to include Lancang, Yulian, Menghai, Simao, Pu'er, Jinghong, Mengla, and other cities and counties. Additionally, it extends eastwards into the Wenshan Zhuang and Miao Autonomous Prefectures, encompassing Guangnan, Funing, and the adjacent territories. Notably, the Ximeng and Cangyuan Wa areas stand out for their significant collections of ancient bronze drums (Jiang, 2007; Yue & Seekhunlio, 2023).

### *3.3 General Knowledge of Bronze Drums in Southeast Asia*

China has undertaken numerous archeological endeavors to examine the bronze drums that have historical significance to both China and Vietnam. The book "Bronze Civilization in Yunnan, China and Vietnam" offers a systematic and localized comparative analysis of the Bronze Age in Yunnan and Vietnam. The author meticulously analyzes the similarities and differences between the Wanjiaba type (pre-Heger I type) bronze drums discovered in Yunnan and Vietnam. This investigation delves into various areas, including their physical structure, ornamentation, source, and routes of transmission. Moreover, the book offers detailed guidance and comparative analysis of the Shizhaishan-type bronze drums discovered in Yunnan and Vietnam. This contributes to a more profound comprehension of the cultural links and importance of these bronze drums in the area (Hein, 2014).

Chinese researchers have performed thorough research on Southeast Asian bronze drums, surpassing their work on Vietnamese bronze drums. Prominent academics in this domain encompass Li Kunsheng, Huang Derong, Xie Chongan, and additional individuals. Their research covers a diverse array of subjects, such as the genesis of bronze drums, their forms and embellishments, the broader bronze culture, and the dissemination pathways of these cultural items (Li & Chen, 2013).

Leading Chinese scholars, like Wan Fubin, Wei Danfang, and Li Fuqiang, have taken the lead in conducting studies on bronze drums from Southeast Asia. Wei Danfang conducted a comprehensive study on Laos Kemu Drums and similar types of bronze drums in neighboring regions for her dissertation. This required conducting thorough field investigations on a total of 64 bronze drums in Laos. In addition, her research included the examination of comparable bronze drums found in Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and Yunnan, China. As a consequence, she amassed a collection of 154 bronze drums of the Heger III type.

Wei Danfang did a comparative study that specifically examined the Heger III bronze drums in Laos and the surrounding regions. In addition, she utilized manufacturing technology analysis on close to one hundred bronze drums and conducted an electron microscope study on slag samples obtained from a bronze drum production site in Laos. The study discoveries she made significantly enhanced our comprehension of the genesis and evolution of the Heger III bronze drum (Wan & Wei, 2018).

### *3.4 Research Theory*

The study investigated the preservation and information transmission linked to the classification of bronze drums in Donglan County, Guangxi, China using the theoretical framework of ethnomusicology. Ethnomusicology offers a multidisciplinary approach to these drums, concentrating on their cultural, historical, and social dimensions. The study stressed the need to keep bronze drums as historical items and pass on knowledge about their cultural relevance to future generations. This approach sought to provide a thorough knowledge of bronze drums in Donglan County, Guangxi, China, including their physical characteristics as well as broader cultural features (Zhang, 1985; Mu, 2003).

## **4. Methodology**

The methodology employed in the study of the preservation and transmission of cultural knowledge about bronze drums in Donglan County, Guangxi, China, combines archaeological and ethnomusicological approaches. Here's an overview of the methodology:

### *4.1 Data Collection*

The study of bronze drums in Donglan County, Guangxi, China utilizes a thorough and multidisciplinary methodology. The process starts with archaeological digs aimed at unearthing and documenting these cultural relics. Data collection is the careful documentation of physical characteristics and embellishments, serving as the foundation for further categorization and examination. Ethnomusicological methodologies explore the cultural and historical background by examining historical documents and oral traditions to comprehend the significance of bronze drums in local cultures. The preservation efforts are of the utmost importance, as they guarantee the long-term physical integrity of these drums for future generations. The transmission of knowledge is actively

sought via scholarly publications, educational initiatives, and cultural activities, which aim to preserve and disseminate understanding regarding bronze drums. Engaging in collaboration with local people and specialists enriches the study, therefore deepening our comprehension of these instruments and their cultural importance in Donglan County, Guangxi, China.

#### *4.2 Data Management*

First, organize the archaeological data according to location, age, physical characteristics, decorations, type, discovery time, and place, and cite the source. This categorization ensures the preservation of crucial information related to each bronze drum.

Second, create archaeological cards, notes, statistical tables, and drawings. These visual and textual representations help in the preservation and organization of data. Additionally, they facilitate the comparison of sorted text data with physical pictures, ensuring accurate documentation.

Third, complete the investigation report, which serves as a crucial tool for knowledge transmission. The report should record the research process, research results, and valuable experiences gained during the study. This document becomes a means of preserving knowledge and sharing it with other scholars and future generations interested in bronze drums.

#### *4.3 Data Analysis*

Data analysis is an essential stage in the examination of bronze drums in Donglan County, Guangxi, China, where the gathered data is carefully scrutinized and evaluated to obtain significant information. The process commences with data cleansing and preparation to ensure the precision and uniformity of the data. It then proceeds to descriptive analysis, which offers an initial overview of the fundamental attributes. Classification and classification are crucial stages in the study process since they allow researchers to arrange bronze drums according to different criteria, making it easier to conduct comparative analysis. Ethnomusicological investigation enhances the background by investigating the cultural and historical importance of these instruments through historical documentation and oral traditions. Data analysis enhances our comprehension of bronze drums and their cultural importance, while also assisting in their preservation and the transmission of knowledge about them to future generations.

### **5. Results**

#### *5.1 Bronze Drum Preservation in Donglan County, Hechi City, Guangxi*

Donglan County, located in Hechi City, Guangxi, plays a crucial role in the preservation and promotion of the cultural heritage related to bronze drums. Hechi City, situated in the northern region of Guangxi and adjacent to Guizhou, holds historical importance as the ancestral territory of the Baiyue people during the pre-Qin dynasty. The Hongshui River, which originates from the Qujing region in Yunnan, flows through the area, acting as a crucial historic water route that links Yunnan, Guizhou, and Guangxi. This area is known for having the largest quantity of bronze drums that have survived over time, and it remains a place where these drums are being used and their cultural significance is actively preserved.

The Ministry of Culture and Tourism of China approved the creation of a national-level cultural and ecological preservation zone in July 2023, acknowledging the significant cultural value of bronze drums. This program seeks to provide comprehensive protection for regional intangible cultural resources, such as the practices associated with bronze drums. These customs are highly concentrated, and distinct, and possess a significant amount of cultural richness. The ecological zone is primarily centered in Donglan County, Nandan County, and Tian'e County.

Hechi City is characterized by its heterogeneous population, encompassing eight distinct ethnic groups, namely Zhuang, Han, Yao, Miao, Mulao, Maonan, Dong, and Shui. Within these societies, the Zhuang, Yao, and Miao ethnic groups persistently engage in the utilization of bronze drums. Donglan County, primarily populated by the Zhuang ethnic group, is widely recognized for its commitment to the preservation of bronze drums. Approximately 600 bronze drums, predominantly of the HIV-MJ (Majiang) variety, have been inherited throughout generations in Donglan County. The notable cultural heritage serves to strengthen the dedication to preserving, disseminating knowledge about, and advocating for bronze drum traditions through educational and cultural endeavors.

#### *5.2 Bronze Drum Preservation in Donglan County, Guangxi, China*

In contemporary China, various ethnic groups in the southwestern regions of Guangxi, Guizhou, and Yunnan use bronze drums to maintain their cultural history. These ethnic groups, which include the Buyi, Miao, Shui, Zhuang, Baiku Yao, Yi, and Wa, have kept the bronze drum tradition alive. The twelve rules of bronze drums used by the

Buyi people in Zhenfeng, Guizhou; the Donglan Zhuang people in Guangxi; the Baikuyao bronze drums in Nandan; and the bronze drums used by the Zhuang and Yi groups in Wenshan, Yunnan, are all notable examples.

The devotion of these ethnic groups to continue using and performing with bronze drums in modern circumstances demonstrates their preservation efforts. These drums serve as a concrete link to their cultural history, expressing a dedication to the preservation of their traditions. The author's visits to Donglan County, Guangxi, in 2022 and 2023, as well as the recording of a hundred-person bronze drum formation performance at the Hongshui River in 2023, demonstrate the author's commitment to the active preservation of this cultural practice.

Furthermore, knowledge of bronze drum usage and performance is being passed on to new generations in these communities. Teachers in local schools, such as Tan Anyi, play an important role in educating pupils about bronze drums and modern music drums. The author's work with teacher Tan in collecting and recording bronze drum performances in Dong Lan illustrates the author's dedication to passing down this cultural knowledge to future generations and ensuring the continuing transmission of this rich heritage (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The position of four bronze drums (Source: Jinxi Liu)

### 5.3 Cultural Significance of Bronze Drums in the Maguai Festival

Bronze drums play an important role in a variety of cultural activities, particularly festivals, weddings, funerals, and other significant events. The Maguai Festival is one of the most well-known traditional celebrations among the Zhuang people. The term “Maguai” translates to “frog” in the Guangxi dialect. The Maguai event, also known as “au ja kve” in Zhuang, is also known as the “asking for the frog woman” event in Chinese. This event, which normally lasts from the first day of the Lunar New Year to the second day of February each year, is especially popular in Zhuang villages around the Hongshui River. Maguai is the deity in charge of wind and rain in Zhuang folklore. People attend this festival to make sacrifices to Maguai in exchange for good weather, plentiful harvests, and prosperity for both humans and animals. Several ritual processes are included in the Maguai Festival, including inviting Maguai, making sacrifices, paying filial homage, and conducting burial rites. These precise rituals may differ between villages.

Bronze drumming is an important component of the Maguai Festival's final three essential components. Hechi City has designated the bronze drum performance portion of the festival for exchanges and public displays to preserve the cultural significance of bronze drums. Bronze drum performers from all across Hechi City gather each year at various bronze drum festivities to execute collective bronze drum displays according to historical records. Bronze drum playing has also been introduced into extracurricular activities at local schools, ensuring the transmission of this traditional heritage among primary and secondary school students. These educational activities help to preserve and transmit information about bronze drum traditions, ensuring their cultural significance for future generations.

#### *5.4 Distinguishing Male and Female Bronze Drums in Zhuang Culture*

Male and female bronze drums each have a specific function in Zhuang celebrations, and their distinct qualities have been documented since the Ming Dynasty. While their exact beginnings are unknown, these drums are noted for their various sizes and sounds, which contribute to worship ceremonies and amusement. Male and female drums differ primarily in terms of appearance and sound quality, with male drums having larger bodies, longer awns, and high-pitched resonance while female drums have lighter bodies, claw-like awns, smaller sizes, and gentler sounds. Male and female bronze drums most likely appeared with the popularity of HIV-MJ-type bronze drums following the Tang and Song Dynasties. This cultural practice emphasizes the significance of maintaining and passing on this knowledge and heritage through education and cultural efforts.

#### *5.5 Distinctive Bronze Drum Performances for Preservation in Donglan County*

The bronze drum performances in Donglan County include a distinctive musical arrangement, with an ensemble consisting of four bronze drums. The four bronze drums, consisting of two male and two female drums, exhibit comparable timbres. The drums are strung using ropes, either individually on a lengthy horizontal structure or with each drum hanging from a drum rack. During the performance, the drum tympanum is oriented towards the right side of the musician. The artist positions themselves next to the drum structure and employs a drumstick held in their right hand to strike the central area of the drum membrane. Concurrently, they grasp bamboo pieces or solid items such as stones and coins with their left hand to beat the middle part of the drum. Each drum emits a unique tone, with the four drums combining to produce four separate pitches, resulting in a vibrant and rhythmic musical style. The mastery of this particular musical ability and the correct execution of performance stance are crucial for the preservation and transmission of the bronze drum tradition, underscoring the significance of educational and cultural endeavors in upholding this legacy.

#### *5.6 The Unique Sound Classification of Donglan Zhuang Bronze Drums*

The Donglan Zhuang people employ a distinctive method of classifying their four bronze drums, consisting of two male and two female drums, according to their various pitches and timbres. Each type has been designated with customary names: “Ning” and “Nang” belong to one group, while “Neng” and “Nong” make up the other. The “Ning” drum, which is male, is defined by its sharp, high, crisp, and bright sound. On the other hand, the “Nang” drum, which is female, is known for its low, wide, open, and bright sound. The “Neng” drum, which is masculine, produces a resonant and high-pitched sound, while the “Nong” drum, which is feminine, is characterized by its energetic and low-pitched tone. The differentiation between these characteristics is crucial for preserving the pristine and concentrated acoustics of the bronze drums.

The pitch sequence of these bronze drums follows the pattern “Ning-Neng-Nang-Nong,” which corresponds to the musical notes GEDC or GEDA. The identification of the distinct sound of each bronze drum is ascribed to a ceremonial practice in which the guardian of the drum, typically a revered person, communicates with the drum and designates its unique auditory characteristic. This approach enhances the enigmatic nature of the bronze drums and embodies the historical and cultural legacy of the Zhuang people’s artistic inclinations toward sound sequences, tones, and sound quality.

The Zhuang people’s common appreciation for beauty enables them to organize grand bronze drum performances where numerous drums are played simultaneously, creating a harmonious ensemble with consistent timbres. The preservation and transmission of this tradition are upheld through cultural events and education, guaranteeing the legacy of these distinctive bronze drums and their musical importance.

## **6. Discussion and Conclusion**

The discussion and conclusion of the research on the preservation and transmission of cultural knowledge about bronze drums in Donglan County, Guangxi, China, provide useful insights into the cultural significance and historical evolution of bronze drums in the region. This research has focused on maintaining the knowledge and heritage related to bronze drums while actively conveying this knowledge to a wider audience. The following important points summarize the discussion and conclusion:

The categorization of bronze drums, which involves differentiating between male and female drummers and identifying certain pitches and timbres, has greatly enhanced our comprehension of these musical instruments. Moreover, the research has yielded vital insights into the historical evolution of bronze drum music, tracing its inception to the Tang and Song Dynasties. This knowledge plays a crucial role in safeguarding and passing down this cultural heritage so that future generations may fully value and acquire knowledge from it.

Furthermore, a study conducted by Qiuyan Lu et al. on bronze drums of Types Beiliu and Lingshan emphasizes the significance of conserving and disseminating knowledge regarding these objects. Their discoveries illuminate the

ethnic attributes and historical circumstances of these drums, underscoring the necessity to educate the public and future academics about the intricate connections and cultural interactions that prevailed across ancient groups. To ensure the preservation and celebration of the valuable heritage of bronze drums in Donglan County, Guangxi, China, it is crucial to actively participate in education and the spread of knowledge (Lu et al., 2022).

The active transmission of knowledge and collaborative efforts with local communities and specialists has been critical in increasing our understanding of the cultural relevance of bronze drums. Scholars have disseminated the results of their study through a variety of channels, including scholarly publications, educational initiatives, and cultural programs. This dedication to information sharing ensures that the cultural heritage of bronze drums is preserved and appreciated for future generations.

In keeping with the emphasis on knowledge transmission, Alice Yao et al.'s (2020) research has helped shed light on the expansion of bronze working technology in southern China and Southeast Asia. They have produced a revised chronology for the Bronze Age in the Lake Dian basin of Yunnan using radiocarbon dating and Bayesian modeling. This study not only moves the date for copper-base metallurgy back but also reveals discrete periods, such as the emergence of a bronze drum culture. These findings not only add to our understanding of technological transfer but also show potential ties between Yunnan and Mainland Southeast Asia, emphasizing the relevance of knowledge interchange across geographical boundaries (Lu et al., 2020; Gong et al., 2024).

In conclusion, the detailed analysis of the preservation and transmission of information about bronze drums in Donglan County, Guangxi, China, captures the tremendous cultural value of these musical relics as well as the unshakeable devotion to preserving their history. The continuous use of bronze drums in modern celebrations, educational activities, and cultural programs throughout Guangxi, Guizhou, and Yunnan demonstrates their continued importance among many ethnic groups. By systematically classifying male and female bronze drums and investigating their various sound patterns, a more nuanced understanding of their cultural significance emerges. Individuals, as well as collaborative projects involving local communities, contribute significantly to the continued preservation and transmission of this rich cultural legacy. This study emphasizes the critical significance of education and cultural activities in perpetuating the history of bronze drums in Donglan County, Guangxi, China, and ensuring their preservation for future generations to respect and appreciate.

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