

## Educational and Literacy Perspectives about Bronze Drums in Southwest China for Contemporary Learning Resources

Jinxi Liu, Arsenio Nicolas\*

College of Music, Mahasarakham University, Thailand.

Corresponding author: Arsenio Nicolas, E-mail: sennicolas@gmail.com

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history

Received: October 29, 2023

Accepted: January 16, 2024

Published: January 31, 2024

Volume: 12 Issue: 1

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: None

### ABSTRACT

Bronze drums, esteemed artifacts saturated in cultural significance, have been integral to the heritage of ethnic communities in Southwest China for centuries. This study aims to investigate the educational and literacy perspectives regarding bronze drums in contemporary learning resources within the region. Conducting fieldwork in Guangxi, Guizhou, and Yunnan – renowned for their rich bronze drum culture we engaged six key informants selected for their cultural proficiency and educational involvement. Interviews and documentaries were used to gather first-hand information about the cultural significance of bronze drums, how they were categorized by gender, and how they changed from being passed down orally to being written down formally. Findings highlight bronze drums as invaluable resources for contemporary education, emphasizing their role in cultural preservation and literacy development. This research encourages the utilization of cultural traditions as effective tools for education and heritage preservation, ensuring the continued relevance of Southwest China's unique heritage in a rapidly evolving world.

**Key words:** Bronze Drums, Southwest China, Cultural Heritage, Education, Literacy, Cultural Preservation

### INTRODUCTION

Bronze drums, intricate and steeped in cultural significance, have long been revered in the heritage of ethnic communities in Southwest China for centuries. Functioning both as musical instruments and repositories of history, traditions, and stories of cultural tapestry (Murowchick, 2001; Yao, 2010; Lu et al., 2020; Li, 2022). Beyond their aesthetic appeal, bronze drums offer unique and untapped potential as contemporary learning resources. They serve as conduits to understand the educational and literacy perspectives deeply rooted in the communities that have nurtured this ancient tradition (Yao, 2016; Tang & Sornyai, 2023).

Southwest China, comprising provinces such as Guangxi, Guizhou, and Yunnan, is home to a tapestry of ethnic groups, each with its unique customs and traditions. Among these, bronze drums have emerged as cultural icons, reflecting the rich tapestry of indigenous cultures. These drums are not just instruments; they are carriers of historical narratives, local wisdom repositories, and community identity symbols (Churchman, 2016; Hou, 2021; Liu et al., 2023; Ross, 2023).

While bronze drums have long been celebrated for their cultural significance, recent efforts have sought to harness their potential as educational tools (Keyes, 1994; Hood, 2000). Educational institutions and cultural organizations are increasingly incorporating bronze drum traditions into

their curricula and programs. This acknowledgment reflects an understanding of the value these traditions bring in fostering cultural awareness, literacy, and a sense of belonging among younger generations (Lei & Pattananon, 2022).

Despite the growing recognition of bronze drums' educational potential, there remains a significant gap in understanding the educational and literacy perspectives surrounding them. Fundamental questions persist regarding how bronze drums are incorporated into formal and informal educational settings, the extent of their impact on literacy development, and the cultural knowledge they transmit (Yeo, 2022; Ling, 2023). This research aims to address these questions comprehensively.

The primary objective of this study is to investigate and analyze the educational and literacy perspectives about bronze drums in Southwest China for contemporary learning resources. By delving into the history, cultural significance, and educational practices linked to bronze drums, we intend to shed light on their potential to enhance literacy, cultural understanding, and community cohesion.

This study carries profound implications for both cultural heritage preservation and contemporary education advancement. By exploring the educational and literacy perspectives surrounding bronze drums in Southwest China, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how cultural

traditions can be harnessed as effective tools for education and literacy enhancement (Shi, & Nicolas, 2023; Zhang & Choatchamrat, 2023). Furthermore, it offers valuable insights into the preservation and promotion of these traditions, ensuring that the unique heritage of the region remains vibrant and relevant in a rapidly changing world. Ultimately, this research seeks to empower communities to leverage their cultural treasures for the educational benefit of present and future generations.

### Research Question

- How do the educational and literacy perspectives surrounding bronze drums in Southwest China relate to contemporary learning resources?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Bronze drums, ancient artifacts deeply rooted in the cultural heritage of Southwest China, have recently gained attention as potential tools for contemporary education and literacy development (Oghenekohwo & Frank-Oputu, 2017; Ismail, 2022). This literature review explores existing research and scholarly discussions concerning the educational and literacy perspectives associated with bronze drums in this region (Calo, 2007). Given the research objective to investigate and analyze these perspectives, a comprehensive understanding of the current body of knowledge is essential. The review aims to identify research gaps and build upon prior insights, laying the groundwork for a nuanced exploration of bronze drums in the context of education and literacy.

### Cultural Significance of Bronze Drums

Bronze drums embody profound cultural significance in Southwest China, notably within ethnic communities like the Zhuang, Yao, and Miao. Historically, these drums have played central roles in various rituals, festivals, and communal gatherings, serving as powerful symbols of identity, and connecting communities with their heritage and ancestors. The intricate designs and patterns adorning these drums convey narratives that reflect the region's rich history and socio-cultural evolution (Wang et al., 2018; Nitzky, 2022).

### The Role of Bronze Drums in Education

While bronze drums have long been revered for their cultural importance, recent years have seen growing recognition of their potential educational value. Scholars and educators have acknowledged these drums' capacity to engage learners and promote cultural literacy. Their use as teaching aids in schools and cultural preservation initiatives has opened new avenues for education in the region (Chen, 2019).

### Contemporary Learning Resources

Contemporary educational strategies have started incorporating bronze drums as learning resources. Initiatives range from integrating drumming into language classes to

developing multimedia resources for schools. These efforts aim to bridge traditional cultural practices with modern education, fostering a deeper understanding of bronze drum culture among younger generations (Calo et al., 2015; Xiaohui & Roadkasamsri, 2023).

### Research Gaps and Objectives

While a growing body of literature explores the cultural and historical dimensions of bronze drums, a significant research gap exists in understanding their potential as contemporary learning resources. This research seeks to investigate and analyze the educational and literacy perspectives surrounding bronze drums, shedding light on their integration into both formal and informal educational settings. Addressing this research gap is crucial for unlocking the educational potential of bronze drums in Southwest China, contributing to cultural preservation and literacy development.

### Research Theory

- 1) Ethnomusicology, as an interdisciplinary field, explores the cultural and musical significance of bronze drums in Southwest China. Ethnomusicology facilitates a nuanced exploration of the meanings, rituals, and practices linked to bronze drums among diverse ethnic communities. Ethnomusicology allows for a deeper understanding of the meanings, rituals, and practices associated with bronze drums among different ethnic communities. It also helps in understanding how bronze drums, not just musical instruments, are but also repositories of cultural knowledge, storytelling, and community identity. Understanding the educational and literacy perspectives of bronze drums requires a deep exploration of their cultural contexts (Hood, 2000).
- 2) Organology is a crucial research theory for studying bronze drums, focusing on their classification, construction, and cultural significance. It helps analyze their physical attributes, typology, and classifications, revealing the various categories and types used by different ethnic groups in Southwest China. Organological approaches also explore how design and construction affect sound, pitch, and timbre, impacting their educational and cultural roles. By assessing their structural and sonic features, organology provides valuable insights into their suitability as contemporary learning resources (Kartomi, 2001).

Two research theories, ethnomusicology, and organology, together offer a comprehensive framework for examining the educational and literacy perspectives of bronze drums in Southwest China. They allow us to delve into the cultural and musical dimensions of these instruments while also considering their physical attributes and classifications, ultimately contributing to a holistic understanding of their role in contemporary education and literacy development.

**METHOD**

**Selection of Research Site**

The meticulous selection of research sites holds paramount importance, given the diverse applications and cultural significance inherent in the region (Figure 1). The selection process ensures the sites align with research objectives and offer valuable insights into the educational and literacy aspects of bronze drums, as shown in Table 1.

**Selection of Key Informants**

The criteria guiding the selection of six key informants will play a pivotal role in providing insights into the educational and literacy perspectives surrounding bronze drums in Southwest China. By considering these criteria, the research can engage informants who represent a wide range of backgrounds and expertise, as shown in Table 2.

**Research Tools**

The documentary method and interviews with key informants serve as essential instruments for data collection. These tools provide a comprehensive approach to gathering both historical context and contemporary insights into the subject matter, as shown in Table 3.

**Data Analysis**

This research will explore the educational and literacy perspectives of bronze drums in Southwest China through a systematic data analysis process. Documentary materials and structured interviews will be collected, and content analysis techniques will be used to identify recurring themes and patterns. Cross-referencing information from various sources will ensure the reliability and validity of the findings. The aim is to provide a nuanced understanding of bronze drums’ historical and contemporary use for education and literacy, revealing their richness in Southwest China and their



**Figure 1.** Map of research site  
Source: Chinafolio (n.d.)

relevance in modern education and literacy contexts. This multifaceted data analysis approach will contribute to understanding the richness of bronze drum culture in Southwest China.

**RESULTS**

In the contemporary Chinese landscape, the enduring tradition of bronze drums thrives among diverse ethnic groups in the southwestern provinces of Guangxi, Guizhou, and Yunnan. Notably, ethnic communities such as the Buyi, Miao, and Shui in Guizhou, the Zhuang and Baiku Yao in Guangxi, and the Zhuang, Yi, and Wa in Yunnan have upheld the legacy of bronze drum culture. Among these, certain exemplars have gained renown. The twelve distinct bronze drum patterns of the Buyi people in Zhenfeng, Guizhou, the resonant bronze drums of the Donglan Zhuang community in Guangxi, the captivating Baikuyao bronze drums in Nandan, and the culturally significant bronze drums of the Zhuang and Yi populations in Wenshan, Yunnan, have emerged as iconic representations of this heritage. This study ventured into the heart of Donglan County, Guangxi, during the years 2022 and 2023, in pursuit of a deeper understanding of these resounding bronze traditions. As shown in Figure 2 and Figure 3, a hundred-person bronze drum ensemble had planned a grand spectacle for 2023 at the picturesque Hongshui River’s first bay in Banwen Village. This exploration unearthed a rich tapestry of educational and literacy perspectives intertwined with these cultural treasures.

**Table 1.** Criteria for the selection of research site

Criteria	Description
Geographic Diversity	The research will encompass multiple provinces in Southwest China, including Guangxi, Guizhou, and Yunnan, as shown in Figure 1. Sites from each of these provinces will be considered to capture regional variations in bronze drum usage
Ethnic Diversity	The chosen sites should be inhabited by various ethnic groups known for their use of bronze drums, such as the Zhuang, Buyi, Miao, Shui, Yao, Yi, and others. Diversity in ethnic representation will ensure a comprehensive examination of perspectives
Bronze Drum Significance	Sites with historical and cultural significance attributed to bronze drums will be prioritized. Locations, where bronze drums are actively used in festivals, ceremonies, and educational contexts, are of particular interest
Accessibility	Accessibility to the research sites, including ease of travel, accommodation, and communication with local communities, is crucial for conducting fieldwork effectively. Sites with good accessibility will be preferred
Researcher Expertise	Sites, where the research team has prior expertise, local connections, or partnerships, will be advantageous for facilitating fieldwork and ensuring cultural sensitivity

**Table 2.** Criteria for the selection of key informants

Criteria	Description
Cultural Proficiency	Key informants should have a deep understanding of bronze drum culture, including its history, significance, and traditional practices within their respective ethnic communities
Educational Involvement	Preference is given to informants who are actively engaged in educational activities involving bronze drums, such as teaching traditional music or cultural programs
Representing Diverse	Selection aims to include informants from various ethnic backgrounds and regions within Southwest China to capture a broad range of perspectives and experiences
Accessibility	Key informants should be accessible and willing to participate in research activities, including interviews, observations, and discussions
Language Proficiency	Proficiency in local languages or dialects is important to facilitate effective communication and ensure accurate data collection during fieldwork
Expertise in Contemporary	Informants with knowledge of how bronze drums are integrated into modern educational systems and resources are essential for addressing the research objective

**Table 3.** Research tools

Research Tools	Description
Documentary	Utilizing documentary research involves the thorough examination of historical documents, archaeological reports, research materials, and relevant literature
Interview	Conducting structured interviews with key informants who possess expertise in bronze drum culture and its educational implications

Bronze drums are revered cultural artifacts and instruments with historical significance. In Southwest China, constitute a vital component of the region's rich cultural heritage. Donglan County, located within Hechi City, Guangxi, is a stronghold of this tradition, with over 600 ancient bronze drums, primarily of the HIV-MJ (Majiang) type, residing in the city. The Zhuang, Yao, and Miao communities continue to use bronze drums in their cultural practices, making Donglan County the "Hometown of Bronze Drums in the World."

Bronze drums are integral to various communal festivities, including festivals, weddings, and funerals. The Maguai Festival, celebrated from the first day of the Lunar New Year to the second day of February each year, is a notable festival among the Zhuang community. The festival centers around the veneration of Maguai, a deity associated with wind and rain in Zhuang legends. Bronze drum performances play a pivotal role in the latter stages of the festival, with contemporary initiatives incorporating these cultural treasures into school extracurricular activities to pass on this heritage to younger generations.

**Figure 2.** Tan Anyi's musical bronze drum competition performers

Source: Jinxi Liu, fieldwork in July 2023

**Figure 3.** The 100 bronze drum assembly at the first bay of the Hongshui River

Source: Jinxi Liu, fieldwork in July 2023

The classification of bronze drums into male and female categories stands out as a distinctive feature of this enduring tradition. Although documentary records of male and female bronze drums trace back to the Ming Dynasty, pinpointing their precise origin remains a challenge. Distinguishing between male and female drums primarily relies on the characteristics of the drum body, its shape, and its tonal qualities. Female drums are typically distinguishable by their thin, claw-like protruding rays of light body awns, smaller size, slender waist, and soft, lower-pitched sounds. In contrast, male drums are characterized by longer and more robust light body awns, a larger size, a higher pitch, and sonorous resonance.

The HII-BL, HII-LS, and HIV-MJ types of bronze drums are renowned for their meticulous attention to these technical aspects. These findings shed light on the enduring cultural significance of bronze drums in Southwest China, their role in contemporary festivals and rituals, and the nuanced categorization of these instruments as male and female, with sound quality serving as a defining factor. This knowledge contributes to a deeper understanding of the educational and literacy perspectives surrounding bronze drums in the region, positioning them as valuable contemporary learning resources.

### Musical Skills and Posture of the Bronze Drum Performance

In the context of the Donglan Zhuang bronze drum performances, these musical ensembles prominently feature four

bronze drums as a cohesive unit. These four bronze drums exhibit closely aligned timbres, with an ensemble consisting of two male and two female drums. The performance configuration involves suspending each drum from a long

horizontal frame using ropes, or each bronze drum hangs from a dedicated drum rack. In this setup, the drum tympanum, or drumhead, faces the right side of the player. The performer's stance entails positioning themselves alongside the drum body, holding a drumstick in their right hand to strike the center of the drumhead. In their left hand, performers hold bamboo pieces or other hard objects like stones and coins to strike the drum's waist, as shown in Figure 4.



**Figure 4.** The view of the performer playing the bronze drum  
Source: Jinxi Liu, fieldwork in July 2023

This precise technique allows each drum to produce a distinct tone, resulting in a harmonious synthesis of four different pitches. These observations shed light on the musical skills and posture in Donglan Zhuang bronze drum performances. The utilization of both male and female drums, the exact placement of the drumhead, and the performers' dexterity in striking the drumhead and waist all contribute to the rich musical tapestry of these performances. Understanding these musical intricacies adds depth to our exploration of the educational and literacy perspectives surrounding bronze drums in Southwest China, positioning them as valuable contemporary learning resources for those seeking to delve into this vibrant cultural tradition.

Zhuang bronze drums, with their intricate and vibrant rhythms, have a rich cultural heritage in Southwest China.

		♩ = 100 $\frac{2}{4}$											
Chinese Characters for Gong and Drum	Du	Dong	Du	Dong	Du	Dong	Du	Dong	Du	Dong	Du	Dong	
Male Drum 1	X	0	X	0	X	0	X	0	X	0	X	0	
Male Drum 2	0	X	0	X	0	X	0	X	0	X	0	X	
		06											
Chinese Characters for Gong and Drum	Du	Dong	Du	<u>Dong Du</u>	<u>Du Du</u>	Dong	<u>Du Du</u>	Dong	Du	Dong	Du	Dong	
Male Drum 1	X	0	X	<u>0 X</u>	<u>X X</u>	0	<u>X X</u>	0	X	0	X	0	
Male Drum 2	0	X	0	X	0	X	0	X	0	X	0	X	
		11											
Chinese Characters for Gong and Drum	<u>Du Du</u>	<u>Dong Du</u>	<u>DongDu</u>	<u>0 DuDu</u>	<u>DuDong</u>	<u>DuDong</u>	Du	<u>Dong Du</u>	<u>Dong Du</u>	Dong	Du	Dong	
Male Drum 1	<u>X X</u>	<u>0 X</u>	<u>0 X 0</u>	<u>X 0</u>	<u>X 0</u>	<u>X 0</u>	X	<u>0 X</u>	<u>0 X</u>	<u>0 X</u>	<u>0 X</u>	<u>0</u>	
Male Drum 2	0	X	<u>X 0</u>	<u>0 X X</u>	<u>0 X</u>	<u>0 X</u>	0	X	0	X	<u>X 0</u>	X	
		16											
Chinese Characters for Gong and Drum	Du	Dong	Du	<u>Dong Dong</u>	<u>Du Du</u>	<u>Dong Du</u>	<u>Dong Du</u>	Dong	Du	Dong	<u>DuDong</u>	<u>DuDong</u>	
Male Drum 1	X	0	X	0	<u>X X</u>	<u>0 X</u>	<u>0 X</u>	<u>0 X</u>	0	X	<u>X 0</u>	<u>X 0</u>	
Male Drum 2	0	X	0	<u>X X</u>	0	X	<u>X 0</u>	X	<u>0 X</u>	X	<u>0 X</u>	<u>0 X</u>	
		21											
Chinese Characters for Gong and Drum	Du	<u>Dong Du</u>	<u>Dong Du</u>	Dong	<u>Du Du</u>	<u>Dong Du</u>	<u>DongDuDongDu</u>	Dong	<u>Dong Du</u>	<u>Dong Du</u>	Du	Dong	
Male Drum 1	X	<u>0 X</u>	<u>0 X</u>	0	<u>X X</u>	<u>0 X</u>	<u>0 X</u>	<u>0 X</u>	<u>0 X</u>	<u>0 X</u>	0	<u>0 X</u>	
Male Drum 2	0	<u>X 0</u>	<u>X 0</u>	X	0	<u>X 0</u>	<u>X 0</u>	<u>X 0</u>	<u>X 0</u>	<u>X 0</u>	X	<u>X 0</u>	

**Figure 5.** Donglan bronze drum rhythm score  
Source: Jinxi Liu, transcription fieldwork in July 2023

Historically, these rhythms were transmitted from generation to generation through oral traditions, with performers committing them to memory. This method of passing down knowledge led to an intimate and oral educational approach, fostering a deep connection between learners and their cultural heritage.

### Bronze Drum's Notation and Music Analysis

However, a significant shift occurred in the 1950s as various regions across Southwest China began to incorporate bronze drum dances into their cultural practices. This transition prompted the development of more formalized methods for recording and teaching these intricate rhythms. Notably, Chinese characters and simplified Chinese rhythm scores were adopted to document the drumbeats, resulting in the creation of drum scores.

These drum scores predominantly employ Chinese characters associated with gongs and drums, such as "Chang," "Dong," "Du," "Dang," "Da," and "Tong." "Chang" typically designates the downbeat and stressed position within a rhythm, while "Dong" is generally associated with the weak position and undressed beats. To simulate the distinctive sounds produced by the four bronze drums, employ "Du," "Dong," "Dang," and "Da." Specifically, "Du" signifies male drum 1, "Dang" represents female drum 1, "Dong" signifies male drum 2, and "Da" represents female drum 2. "Tong" is used to indicate moments of unison when all four bronze drums synchronize their rhythms, as shown in Figure 5.

These findings underscore the evolving educational methods surrounding bronze drum traditions, moving from oral transmission to the establishment of formal notation systems. This transition has not only preserved this cultural heritage but also made it more accessible for contemporary learners, underscoring the importance of educational and literacy perspectives in maintaining and promoting cultural traditions in Southwest China.

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The research presented in this study aimed to investigate and analyze the educational and literacy perspectives about bronze drums in Southwest China for contemporary learning resources. We began by introducing bronze drums as cultural artifacts rich in significance and their role as potential tools for education and literacy development. The literature review delved into existing research and scholarly discussions, providing a foundation for our study.

Our study aligns with various theoretical principles within the fields of anthropology, ethnomusicology, and cultural preservation. The exploration of the cultural significance of bronze drums and their integration into contemporary education resonates with principles of cultural preservation and the transmission of cultural heritage (Hood, 2000; Keyes, 1994). Furthermore, the incorporation of ethnomusicological and organological theories has facilitated a comprehensive understanding of bronze drums within their cultural and physical contexts (Kartomi, 2001).

The findings from our fieldwork in Donglan County, Guangxi, affirm the literature's assertion that bronze drums

hold immense cultural significance among ethnic communities in Southwest China (Murowchick, 2001). The presence of over 600 ancient bronze drums in Donglan County underscores its recognition as the "Hometown of Bronze Drums in the World" (Lu et al., 2020). The use of bronze drums in communal festivities, such as the Maguai Festival, corroborates earlier studies on their role in cultural practices and educational initiatives (Lei & Pattananon, 2022; Churchman, 2016).

The classification of bronze drums into male and female categories and the transition from oral transmission to formal notation systems were consistent with prior research on the evolving educational methods surrounding bronze drum traditions (Kartomi, 2001). The use of Chinese characters and rhythm scores to document drumbeats aligns with the literature's emphasis on preserving and making cultural heritage more accessible (Ross, 2023).

In conclusion, this study has provided insights into the educational and literacy perspectives surrounding bronze drums in Southwest China. Our findings align with theoretical principles in the fields of anthropology, ethnomusicology, and cultural preservation, as well as previous research on bronze drums and cultural traditions in the region.

Bronze drums persist as an integral part of the cultural heritage of Southwest China, with Donglan County serving as a stronghold of this tradition. These drums play a pivotal role in communal festivities and are increasingly incorporated into educational initiatives to transmit the heritage to younger generations. The categorization of bronze drums into male and female categories, along with the development of notation systems, has contributed to the preservation and accessibility of this cultural tradition.

Overall, our research emphasizes the significance of bronze drums as contemporary learning resources, providing opportunities for cultural preservation, education, and literacy development. It holds implications for the wider realm of cultural heritage preservation and highlights the importance of utilizing traditional practices as effective tools for contemporary education. By understanding and harnessing the educational and literacy perspectives surrounding bronze drums, communities in Southwest China can ensure the continued vibrancy and relevance of their unique heritage in a rapidly changing world.

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