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The Image and Connotation of Small Sculptures on Bronze Drums in Southern China

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Abstract

Lengshuichong type (冷水冲型), Lingshan type (灵山型) and Beiliu type (北流型) bronze drums are collectively known as 'Large Bronze Drums'. They were popular in Guangxi and Guangdong from the Han to Tang Dynasty (202 BCE – 907 CE), and were characterized by their large shape and numerous small sculptures located on the drum face or foot. In addition to the main frog motifs, there are also depictions of horses, cattle, birds, tigers, aquatic animals, and scenes of human-animal interactions such as riding, plowing with oxen, children playing with turtles and watching frogs fight, etc. The position of the sculptures reflects the playing method of each type of bronze drum: drums with sculptures on the face are generally played while placed flat on the ground, whereas drums with sculptures on the body are typically played while suspended. The sculptures on the bronze drums integrate elements of Lingnan culture, Central Plains Han culture, and Dian culture, reflecting the caster's contemplation of the universe, nature, and their relationship with humanity.

Keywords

Bronze drums – Multifarious sculptures – Totemism

Bronze drums are percussion instruments popular in southern China and Southeast Asia. They first appeared during the Warring States period (c. 453–221 BCE) and are still in use today. The drums are large, with a solemn and mysterious appearance, and are often used in folk ritual activities, representing family beliefs, wealth, and authority.

In China, bronze drums are generally classified into eight types. Their shapes and styles are compared in Figure 1 (arranged from left to right in chronological order, from earliest to latest). As can be seen, the bronze drums in the middle of the Figure 1 – the Lengshuichong type, Beiliu

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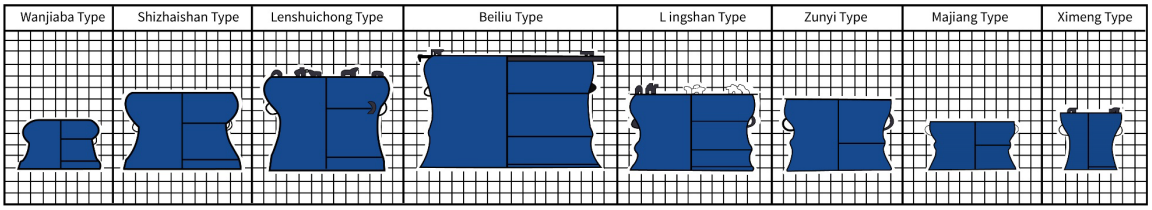

Figure 1: Shape comparison of bronze drums[2]

type, and Lingshan type – are the largest. These drums were prevalent in Guangxi and Guangdong from the Han to Tang dynasties, and are collectively known as 'Large Bronze Drums'. Diverse sculptures are mainly found on large bronze drums.[1]

These sculptures are also made of bronze, and are typically arranged in a counterclockwise direction around the edge of the drum face or beneath the handles on the drum body. Besides the main frog motifs, there are also depictions of horses, cattle, birds, tigers, aquatic creatures, and plants, as well as scenes of human-animal interactions, such as riding, plowing with oxen, maidservants feeding horses, as well as children playing with turtles, watching frogs fight, and striking bronze drums, etc. In contrast to the intricate rings and mysterious sun motifs engraved on the drum face, these sculptures appear simple and realistic. This design approach ensures that the overall decoration of the bronze drum does not become overly monotonous or complex, thereby achieving a visual balance.

1 The Shape and Small Sculptures of Large Bronze Drums

As mentioned earlier, the three types of large bronze drums are similar in their massive size and their sculptures. However, there are also some differences between them.

1.1 Lengshuichong Type Bronze Drums

The drums excavated from Lengshuichong in Tengxian County, Guangxi Province (广西藤县冷水冲, Figure 2), set the standard for Lengshuichong type bronze drums. The area in which they have been unearthed is concentrated in central and southern Guangxi and northern Vietnam, dating from the Eastern Han to Tang Dynasty. They can be divided into three periods. The decoration of Lengshuichong type bronze drums in the late stage is more complicated than that of the early and middle stages, and a fixed paradigm for this type has been established: the face diameter is equal to or slightly larger than the chest diameter, while the waist diameter is significantly reduced. There are often a pair of handles on the drum body in addition to two pairs of braided flat handles. The drum face is adorned with a twelve-ray solar motif at the center, with solid double-feather eye pendant patterns between the rays. Four large, robust frogs draped with rope patterns are arranged counterclockwise around the edge of the drum face, often with other small sculptures between them. The drum face and body are covered with halos and repeating patterns. The main

[1] Any bronze drums mentioned in this article without a specified province were excavated in Guangxi.
[2] Figures 1 and 5–17 are from Wu et. al. 2018.

Figure 2: Parts of a bronze drum. Image: Anthropology Museum of Guangxi, modified by the author.

halo on the drum face features abstract feathered men and flying herons, and the edge of the face often features eye patterns. The drum chest is decorated with abstract boat motifs, the upper part of the drum waist features feathered human figures, and the drum foot is decorated with drop-leaf patterns. The shape and decorations of the Lengshuichong bronze drum are the most consistent among the three types of large bronze drums.

Approximately 182 Lengshuichong type bronze drums have been found so far, most of which feature frog sculptures. Of these, 79 drums, or about 40% of the total, have additional sculptures on the drum face.[3] Notably, the sculptures on Lengshuichong drums are mainly located between the frog figures on the drum face, and are not seen on other parts, a feature that distinguishes them from the other two types.

1.2 Lingshan Type Bronze Drums

The Lingshan type bronze drums, named after the exemplars unearthed in Lingshan County, Guangxi Province (广西灵山县), are commonly found in the regions at the boundary between Guangxi and Guangdong, including Ling Shan, Pu Bei, and Heng Zhou Counties, and also date from the Eastern Han to Tang Dynasty. They are larger than the Lengshuichong type but smaller than the Beiliu type, with a drum face that is larger than the body (Figure 3). The drum handles are flat, featuring leaf-vein patterns. The sun rays in the center of the face are slender and their number varies. The edge of the face typically has patterns of six three-legged frogs arranged counterclockwise, or three single frogs alternating with three stacked frogs, the backs of which feature circular whorl patterns or incised lines. The main halo on the drum face features animal forms, patterns of people riding beasts, or flying herons, while other halos are filled with clouds and thunder patterns, four-petal flowers, Si Chu coins, and cicadas, which are generally used as edge patterns.

More than 70 Lingshan type bronze drums have been discovered to date.[4] The Lingshan type drums with small sculptures on the drum body account for about one-third of the total number,

[3] Luo 2000: 16.
[4] Yao et al. 1990: 931.

featuring only frogs on the drum face. Other figures, such as animals being ridden, birds, tigers, sheep, cattle, monsters, etc., are located at the foot under the handle on one side, as well as some on the inner wall of the drum cavity.

Figure 3: Lingshan type bronze drum.[5]

1.3 Beiliu Type Bronze Drums

The Beiliu type bronze drums, named after the bronze drums unearthed in Beiliu, Guangxi Province (广西北流县), are mainly found in the regions at the boundary between Guangxi and Guangdong, but also slightly further north, and date from approximately the Western Han to Tang Dynasty. Beiliu type drums are known for their large size, with a drum face that is wider than the body and a rim that extends beyond the body (Figure 4). Most of the sun patterns on the drum face have eight rays, and their shape is similar to those on the Lingshan type. The number of frogs ranges from four to six. Unlike the large, plump frogs on the other two types, most frogs on the Beiliu drums are simple, thin, and appear stiff. Initially, the patterns consisted mainly of clouds and thunder, but over time, motifs of coins, water waves, birds, feathered men, and four-petal flowers were gradually added.

Figure 4: Beiliu type bronze drum.

Beiliu type bronze drums typically feature frog sculptures, but there are three examples with additional sculptures: one features birds standing among the frogs on the drum face, and the other two have tigers standing on the drum foot.

The three types of large bronze drums all have large bodies: the face diameter of Beiliu type drums is generally 70–80 cm, while many Lingshan and Beiliu type drums exceed 100 cm. The Shuitong'an Bronze Drum, dates to approximately the Eastern Han period (25–220 CE) and has a face diameter of 165 cm, making it the largest bronze drum in the world. This remarkable size reflects the advanced bronze industry of their creators. Additionally, they all feature frogs on the drum face, indicating a common totemic worship. These similarities are due to the geographical proximity and shared cultural sphere of bronze drums, facilitating mutual influence.

However, their differences are also pronounced. Lengshuichong drums have a slightly elongated and slender body, with a rim that is sometimes extended on the drum face and a proportionally larger waist; in contrast, both Lingshan type and Beiliu type drums feature extended rims and

[5] Figure 3 and 4 are from Anthropology Museum of Guangxi. https://www.amgx.org/.

have a more evenly proportioned drum chest, waist, and foot. On the Lengshuichong type drums, there are often patterns of flying herons, feathered men, and boats, while the other two types lack these patterns and instead feature motifs of coins, clouds, and thunder not found on Lengshuichong drums. Moreover, on Lengshuichong drums, various small sculptures decorate the face, whereas the other two types feature only frogs on the face, with the other sculptures found on the lower sides of the handles or on the inner walls of the drum cavity.

Overall, Lingshan and Beiliu type bronze drums are generally similar to each other, whereas Lengshuichong drums differ somewhat from both. This variation can be attributed to the geographical distance between the user groups. Lengshuichong drums were cast by the Luoyue people (骆越人) and their descendants, the Lingnan Liao people (岭南 '僚人'), and were popular in central and southern Guangxi and northern Vietnam, covering a wider area and often considered a hybrid of Yunnan style and Lingnan style bronze drums.[6] The Lingshan and Beiliu types are thought to have been cast by the Li people (俚人), to whom belonged two of the most influential families from the Southern Dynasties period to the Tang Dynasty period (420–907 CE): namely the Ning and Feng families. The Lingshan type drums are associated with the Ning family,[7] while the Beiliu type drums are linked to the Feng family.[8] They were mainly popular along the border between Guangdong and Guangxi, and are often referred to collectively as Cantonese type drums, Hegel type II drums, and so on.

The Luoyue, Li, and Liao peoples mentioned above are the ancestors of the modern Zhuang. The Zhuang people are a significant ethnic group in Guangxi, and their cosmology appears to have played a notable role in shaping the overall design of the bronze drums. They believed that the universe is a cylindrical structure, divided from top to bottom into three parts: the sky, the earth, and the ocean, with the heavenly realm ruling over the other two. Correspondingly, on the bronze drum, the body is divided into three sections: the drum chest, the drum waist, and the drum foot. The chest is slightly wider than the lower two sections, symbolizing the ruling position of the heavenly realm.[9] The center of the drum face features a large sun motif, surrounded by multiple halos formed by cloud and thunder patterns, as well as heron patterns, seemingly evoking the imagery of a celestial realm. Frog sculptures, located at the edge of the 'heaven', symbolize the messengers connecting heaven with the human world.[10]

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6 Qiu 1997: 39.

7 Zheng 2002: 183.

8 Yao et al. 1990: 934.

9 The Zhuang ethnic myth *Buluotuo* 布洛陀 tells the story of the world's division into three realms at the dawn of the universe. These realms are the sky, the earth, and the ocean. The upper realm is governed by the Thunder God, the middle realm by Buluotuo, and the lower realm by the Dragon King (Nong 2007: 47). Although the myth is not directly attested before the Ming dynasty, its origins are often dated much earlier: cf. e.g. Qin N.C. 2003, Mou 2005, Qin L.D. 2011.

10 The Zhuang folk tale *Casting the Bronze Drum* 铸铜鼓 mentioned that the frog is the son of the Thunder King and is responsible for conveying his commands to the human world (Nong 2007: 371).

2 Frog Motifs and Their Connotations

Frog motifs are a standard feature of large bronze drums (with only a few exceptions), and are often positioned around the edge of the drum face. These are totemistic sculptures created by the Li and Liao people living in the Lingnan area. Although frogs are present on all three types of large bronze drums, different cultural connotations have led to distinct morphological characteristics.

Figure 5: Frog sculpture on Lengshuichong type bronze drum.

The frog sculptures on Lengshuichong drums are notably uniform in both number and form. Four frogs are evenly spaced around the edge of the drum face in a counterclockwise direction. They are robust, with hollow, flattened bellies, round eyes, and pointed snouts, and are adorned with rope-patterned bands (Figure 5). Unlike the other two types, these frogs do not exhibit stacked configurations. However, there are instances where frogs carry other animals on their backs, such as the drum excavated from Fenglin Village, Luobo Town, Wuming District, which features frogs with two small birds on their backs.

Lingshan type drums typically feature six frogs, arranged either as six single frogs or as a pattern of three single frogs alternating with three stacked frogs, often in a counterclockwise direction, though clockwise arrangements are also found. These frogs are also large and robust but shorter than those on the Lengshuichong type. They have round eyes and a pointed snouts, and their bodies are covered with patterns such as grain motifs, concentric circles, and spirals, which are more elaborate than those on the other two types. Frogs on the Lingshan drums often carry additional creatures on their backs, such as other frogs, snails, or birds. The most distinctive feature of these frogs is that their two hind legs merge into one, giving the frog a three-legged stance, commonly referred to as the 'three-legged toad' image (Figure 6).

Compared to the previous two types of bronze drums, the frog sculptures on Beiliu type drums do not follow a fixed pattern. The number of frogs varies, with four being the most common, followed by six, and occasionally up to eight; They are mostly arranged in a counterclockwise direction, although clockwise and paired arrangements are also significant. These frogs have a rather rigid and abstract appearance. Relative to the large drum body, the frogs appear small and inconspicuous, with thin bodies, and front and rear legs composed of four rectangular columns. The tops of the two rear legs are connected to form a square-shaped rump. They have round eyes and pointed snouts, and their bodies are usually plain (Figure 7), although occasionally a frog may carry another frog on its back.

Figure 6: Frog sculpture on Lingshan type bronze drum.

Figure 7: Frog sculpture on Beiliu type bronze drum.

There are several reasons why frogs were considered the most important totem by the ancestors of the Lingnan people, one of which relates to nature worship. For ancient people who relied on a natural economy, rain was a crucial factor for farmland productivity. Frogs often emerge during the damp rainy season, leading people to associate them with rain and view them as messengers of the rain deity, believed to convey news of rain.[11] Lingnan people considered the sound of bronze drums to be powerful and resonant, capable of reaching great distances, similar to the croaking of frogs, which was thought to have the ability to communicate with the gods.[12] Secondly, frog worship is related to the worship of the creation deities. It is believed that the character for frog had the same pronunciation as "Wa" in "Nvwa" in Chinese, with frogs thus equated to Nvwa, the goddess who created humanity in Chinese mythology, endowing frogs with sacred significance.[13] Thirdly, frog worship is related to fertility worship. In ancient societies with limited productivity, human labor was crucial for economic and social development. Frogs can lay thousands of eggs at once, symbolizing fertility and the hope for many offspring. To this day, some Zhuang villages still observe the tradition of the 'Frog Festival'. On the first day of the lunar New Year, villagers perform rituals to worship frogs, praying for disaster prevention and a bountiful harvest.[14]

Although all three types of bronze drums feature frog sculptures, the designs vary slightly, each carrying different symbolic meanings. For instance, the unique three-legged frog on the Lingshan type drums imitate the legendary 'three-legged toad', a mythical object believed to bring wealth. The stacked frogs symbolize fertility worship, reflecting various cultural significances.

3 Diversified sculptures and their connotations

Other thematic sculptures are generally smaller than the frog motifs and lack the intricate patterns seen on the frogs. They are more realistic, focusing on depicting genuine life scenes. This does not imply that they were created casually; ancient bronze resources were highly valuable, and all

[11] The Zhuang folk tale *The Frog and the People* 青蛙与人 mentioned that the frog can foresee impending rain and informs humans about it (Nong 2007: 468).

[12] The earliest records regarding the relationships between thunder, drums, and frogs can be traced back to the Tang Dynasty. For instance, in Feng Zhi's *Yunxian Zaji*, it is noted that 雷曰天鼓, 雷神曰雷公 "thunder is called the heavenly drum, and the thunder god is referred to as Lord Thunder". Additionally, the Tang poet Zhang Xiaobiao mentions in his poem *Autumn Night in Chang'an*: 田家无五行, 水旱卜蛙声 "In the fields, there are no five elements; the sounds of frogs predict drought and flood."

[13] Yu 1991: 122.

[14] The earliest written record of the Frog Festival can be found in the *Hechi County Annals*, compiled by Huang Zuyu and Li Dexuan in 1919.

sculptures required careful design and carving. These decorations are likely to reflect the ancestors' beliefs and their aspirations for a better life.

Figure 8: Horses sculpture on Lengshuichong type bronze drum.

3.1 Horse Motifs

Horse motifs are predominantly found between the frogs on the drum faces of the Lengshuichong type drums or on the drum body near the handles of the Lingshan type drums (the reasons for this placement will be discussed later). The horses are depicted in a fairly uniform manner, typically with a large head, short legs, and a long, drooping tail. The mane is neatly trimmed, the tail is tied, and some horses are equipped with saddles. These representations are inspired by locally bred miniature horses.[15]

Lengshuichong type drums feature a variety of horse sculpture combinations on their faces, with riding scenes being the most common, such as pairs of riders, single riders with foals (Figure 8), and riders carrying or embracing children. On the drums unearthed in Luohan Village, Zhongping Town, Xiangzhou County, there are two groups of single riders, one group of three riders, and a herd of cattle arranged with two at the front and one at the back. On the Guiping No. 13 bronze drum, which was unearthed in Dongtun, Xishan Town, Guiping City, the scene depicts a standing miniature horse with a girl, wearing her hair in double buns, standing beside it. She is shown stroking the horse's back with one hand and offering food with the other (Figure 9). Additionally, on Zugu No. 117, there is a 'mother and foal' sculpture, with a standing mare, which may have originally had a rider, now missing. Beside the mare is a foal that appears to be nuzzling the mare's belly, possibly seeking milk. These depictions illustrate that horses were not only valuable tools for travel and warfare but also integral to daily life.

Figure 9: 'Girl Feeding Horse' sculpture.

As previously mentioned, the horse motifs of Lingshan type drums are located under the handles of the drum body. A bronze drum unearthed at Ganglu Village, Wuwei Town, Yongning District, features a mounted figure on the drum's waist. This horse has a large head, short legs, and a long drooping tail, closely resembling the horse motifs on Lengshuichong type drums. The horse's back is fitted with a saddle, and a rider atop it is pulling back on the reins. The horse's head faces the bottom of the drum. When the drum is laid flat on the ground with the drum face up, the horse's head points downward, which does not convey its full significance. However, when the drum is hung by a rope through the handle, the drum face is oriented sideways (as shown in Figure 10), with the horse's head facing backward, towards the direction of the drum's sound. When the

[15] Wu et al. 2018: 260.

drum is struck, the sound emanates from the opening at the bottom. The horse's head, aligned with the drum's sound direction, harmonizes with the booming drumbeats, reflecting a spirit of vitality and determination.

Figure 10: The state of the drum when it is suspended.

The widespread appearance of horse motifs on bronze drums reflects the flourishing horse industry during the Han Dynasty. Since that time, horses became integral to the daily lives of the people in Lingnan, serving as vital assets for transportation and warfare.[16] However, not everyone could afford horses; only wealthy families had the means to own them. Thus, affluent families commissioned depictions of horseback riding on drums, both to flaunt their wealth and to express their aspirations for a prosperous life. Moreover, the veneration of General Ma Yuan and the admiration for martial valor also significantly contributed to the prevalence of horse motifs on these drums. Emperor Guangwu (5 BCE–57 CE) of the Han Dynasty appointed Ma Yuan (14 BCE–49 CE) as General Fubo tasking him with pacifying 'the Zheng Sisters' Uprising' (in present-day Vietnam, which was once part of the Eastern Han territory). After arriving in Lingnan, Ma Yuan undertook many initiatives that benefited the local people, such as improving transportation, constructing irrigation systems, and enhancing productivity, earning him the support and affection of the populace. In his honor, many temples were built, and several places were named after him. Since the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE), there has been a historical precedent for referring to these large bronze drums as 'Fubo Drums'. The inclusion of horses on these valuable bronze drums symbolizes the people's remembrance of General Ma Yuan, their admiration for martial prowess, and their pursuit of victory through horsemanship in warfare.

3.2 Bird Motifs

Bird motifs also appear on the face of Lengshuichong drums and under the handle of Lingshan drums, with one instance found on the face of a Beiliu drum.

The bird sculptures on the Lengshuichong drums often depicted singly or in pairs, with a maximum of five birds in a group. These birds are typically represented as upright waterfowl, smaller than the frogs, with slightly elongated necks and heads that droop downward. Some feature engravings of feather patterns and rice ears on their backs, presenting a relatively realistic appearance. On a drum unearthed from Fenglin Village, Luobo Town, Wuming District, two small birds rest on the back of a frog, significantly smaller than the frog itself, which clearly does not reflect reality but instead indicates the differing symbolic sculptures of the two totems in the minds of

[16] Chen 1997: 76.

Figure 11: Bird sculpture on a Lingshan drum foot.

the creators. A bronze drum discovered from Baifenping in Tonghe Town, Pingnan County, showcases a lively scene with a sculpture group of three oxen – two walking side by side in the front and one behind, with a rider on the back of the latter, suggesting a scene of returning from grazing. Opposite the oxen sculpture is a set of birds, with five birds arranged in a 'two-one-two' formation facing the same direction. These decorations differ from the more mysterious motifs, presenting an everyday scene. Another unique bird motif can be found on a drum from Xinyan Village, Jintian Town, Guiping City, which features a large bird and a child holding a small bird. The large bird is as tall as the child, which is obviously not realistic. Some interpret this as a playful depiction of a 'child playing with geese', while others view it as a form of totem worship, reflecting a reverence for birds.

More than 70 Lingshan drums have been discovered, of which over 25 feature bird sculptures, accounting for about one-third of the total. This highlights the unique significance of birds to this ethnic group. The bird sculptures on Lingshan drums are more varied than those on the Lengshuichong drums, which display a more fixed form. They are typically located under the handles, with either one bird or two side by side. These birds are also waterfowl, some standing upright while others are reclining, and they are relatively small, exhibiting a realistic representation (Figure 11).

Bird motifs, like frogs, are often regarded as symbols of totem worship. The Zhuang people believe that birds possess the ability to communicate with celestial beings, leading to numerous myths surrounding bird totem worship. Stories of human-bird unions, such as *The Hundred Birds Garment*,[17] have long been popular in areas inhabited by the Zhuang and have evolved into various versions over time, remaining enduringly relevant. There is also the legend of *Cuckoo*,[18] in which people believe that birds can bring abundance to the land. The feathered men and flying heron patterns on bronze drums encircle the sun, symbolizing the people's imagination of the heavenly realm and are a direct reflection of bird totem worship. As the representation of birds transitioned from engravings to sculptures on the bronze drums, the images became more realistic, depicting common water birds from daily life. This shift diminished their sacredness, introducing a more relatable charm.

3.3 Cattle Motifs

The cattle motifs on large bronze drums are typically represented as sturdy water buffaloes with prominently curved horns, though some depict the peaked bull with bulging shoulders. These motifs can appear alone or in combination with farming tools, riders, fences, and granaries, illustrat-

[17] Collection of Chinese Folktales: Guangxi Volume: 468.
[18] Collection of Chinese Folktales: Guangxi Volume: 306.

ing scenes of labor and herding. They share similar themes with the riding sculptures, being less totemic but reflecting a broader vision of a prosperous and fulfilling life.

Figure 12: 'Ox Pulling a Plough' sculpture.

The cattle motifs on the faces of Lengshuichong drums depict scenes of plowing and harvesting. For instance, the drum excavated from Babao Village in Guancheng Town, Pingnan County, features a sculpture of an ox alongside a granary, which is built in the stilt style typical of regions with abundant rainfall. On the face of Zugu No. 103, there are two groups of opposing oxen pulling a plow (Figure 12). Each ox has a batten on each side of their shoulders, dragging a large plow behind them; one has two small birds perched on its back, possibly pecking at lice, reflecting a scene from field life. There is also a depiction of grazing; for example, a drum unearthed from Luohan Village, Zhongping Town, Xiangzhou, features a trio of oxen, the first two of which have entered a square fence, with the third closely following – apparently returning home after grazing (Figure 13). Most herds consist of three oxen, symbolizing abundance. In ancient China, the number three was commonly used to signify a multitude. For example, the pre-Qin classic *Guo Yu* states, "Three animals form a group, and three people form a multitude" (兽三为群, 人三为众).[19] Moreover, the drum from Mawang Village, Dapo Town, Cangwu County, is particularly notable, with four packed bulls taking the place of frogs. The bulls stand upright at the most important position of the drum face, suggesting that in the mind of the foundry, bulls and frogs hold equal importance, and that these bulls differ from the standard typical cattle images, embodying a unique and mysterious form. The bull statues on this drum likely serve as a totemic symbol.

Figure 13: 'Oxen Returning to the Fence' sculpture.

The cattle sculptures on Lingshan drums are all located on the inner wall of the drum cavity, with their shapes resembling those on Lengshuichong drums. Most represent sturdy working oxen with curved horns, representing the most common water buffalo in southern regions during that period. Drums featuring cattle sculptures on the inner wall often display bird sculptures on the exterior, highlighting the connection between cattle and birds in the local populace's perception.

Cattle are indispensable tools and companions in people's lives. Since prehistoric times, they have played a crucial role in human existence, becoming increasingly important as economies developed. Cattle motifs are frequently found on shell containers (containers used by the ancient people of Yunnan for storing currency) and Shizhaishan type bronze drums in Yunnan. There are two main types of cattle image on these shell containers: one depicts herding oxen used in farming, and the other represents the 'sacred bulls' coexisting with creatures like tigers and birds. The sa-

[19] Chen 1998: 60.

Figure 14: Cattle image on Shizhaishan type drum.

cred bulls have long, curved horns, large ears, and a robust physique, exuding a sense of spirituality. These two different types of sculptures indicate the equally important role of cattle in both daily life and belief systems. Additionally, many images of cattle are carved onto the bodies of Shizhaishan type bronze drums (c. 453 BCE–25 CE), distinguishing between males and females. Some bulls are depicted with prominent reproductive organs, reflecting fertility worship concepts. Some scholars suggest that the transition of cattle motifs from flat engravings on the waist of Shizhaishan drums to three-dimensional representations on large bronze drums indicates a heightened significance of the cattle totem.[20] However, the cattle designs on the Shizhaishan drums already held substantial importance; for instance, the Hezhou Longzhong drum features ten large square sections, each adorned with a standing bull, while the Longlin Bianya drum consists of six sections, each also decorated with a cattle motif. Numerous similar examples illustrate the vital significance of cattle motifs to the Shizhaishan drums and their associated communities (Figure 14). After the Han dynasty, the Shizhaishan drums, which originated in Yunnan, gradually declined, while the eastern 'frog drum' emerged as the dominant style. The Li people of Lingnan created dense halos using abstract motifs, such as feathered men and soaring herons, combined with layered geometric patterns, transforming concrete and poetic images into small sculptures. In contrast to the cattle images on the Shizhaishan drums, the cattle depicted on the larger bronze drums are vibrant and imbued with a sense of daily life, generally appearing smaller than the frog motifs. Rather than indicating an elevation in the status of the cattle totem, this transition from engravings to three-dimensional forms may suggest a decline in the sacredness of cattle since the emergence of frog motifs, or it may reflect the idea that, in the eyes of the Li people, cattle do not possess the same totemic significance as frogs.

3.4 Tiger and Goat Motifs

Tiger sculptures are primarily found on Lingshan and Beiliu drums, with approximately five known examples. Most are adorned with Si Chu coins pattern, a typical characteristic of these two types of bronze drums. The placement of tiger motifs on the drums is identical to that of horse motifs; both are located beneath one of the handles, with the tiger's head oriented downward. When the drum is hung, the tiger's head aligns with the sound direction, creating the illusion that the drum's sound is akin to the roar of a tiger. The most lifelike example is the tiger sculpture on a drum in Liantangping, Yulin City, where the tiger stands erect at the drum's base with a large head, round eyes, and a long, upright tail, appearing to roar forward (Figure 15). And the most unique example is found on the drum from Guibi Village in Hengzhou City, which features a flying tiger figure with a human passenger. This figure resembles a robust quadruped with a large head, round eyes, and

[20] Chen 1998: 62.

upright ears, flanked by wide wings. One of the wings supports two seated people, positioned with their hands clasped and legs crossed. Scholars generally regard this creature as a 'flying tiger',[21] and despite some distortion in its form, it retains a recognizable resemblance. The figure with tiger wings and hands clasped together may have been specifically designed by the caster to express its divine nature.

Figure 15: Tiger sculpture on a drum foot.

Tiger motifs have long symbolized authority in bronze vessel decorations. During the Shang and Zhou dynasties (c. 1600–256 BCE), tiger sculptures were frequently adorned with bells, such as the two 'four-tiger' bells housed in the Palace Museum in Beijing and the Shanghai Museum. Each of these bells features two standing tigers with long, curled tails positioned at the edges, appearing to roar downward. Ancient Dian people (the ethnic groups that inhabited the Yunnan region in ancient times) also commonly used three-dimensional or engraved tiger motifs to decorate shell containers, with the tiger's image closely resembling that found on the bronze drums – both depict a standing figure with a robust build and an upright tail. The *Geography* section of the *Sui Shu* (隋书) states: "Those who possess [bronze] drums are called *Du Lao*, which commanded great respect within the community."[22] The Lingshan and Beiliu bronze drums are large and required substantial human and financial resources to produce in ancient societies, where bronze was a valuable commodity and productivity was low. The combination of these drums with roaring tiger motifs serves as a symbol of authority and wealth. Like the dragon and taotie (饕餮, a ferocious and gluttonous beast from ancient Chinese mythology) motifs of the Central Plains, tiger decorations are considered celestial symbols and powerful tools for warding off evil.[23]

There is currently only one example of sheep sculptures decorating a bronze drum, located on a Lingshan style drum unearthed in Baimu Village, Sanhai Township, Lingshan County. This features a pair of sheep standing side by side, each with small curved horns and rounded bodies. One sheep gazes straight ahead while the other turns its head back, creating a lively and interesting image. Sheep are one of the totems created by the Yue people (a term referring to the ancient coastal inhabitants of southern China) and are often seen as symbols of good fortune. The rarity of sheep motifs on drums likely due to the personal preference of the casters.

3.5 Aquatic Animal Motifs

Aquatic creatures are also a theme in the sculptures of bronze drums, featuring representations of snails, fish, turtles, and crabs. Most of these motifs are found on the faces of Lengshuichong drums, while the frogs on Lingshan drums may occasionally carry snails on their backs.

21 Li et al. 1991: 65; Shen 1995: 15; Luo 1997: 81.
22 Sui Shu: 888.
23 Luo 1997: 84.

Figure 16: 'Fish on a Post' sculpture.

Snail sculptures are found both on the backs of frogs and independently on the drum faces. The Xiadong drum unearthed in Guiping City features four frogs, two of which have a snail on their back. The Lingshan drum from Yong'an Village in Bobai County showcases six frogs on its face, five of which each have one snail, while one frog carries two snails. Field snails are among the most common creatures found in rice paddies and along riverbanks, often collected by local people to create delicious dishes. The joy of eating snails is matched by the fun of gathering them. Those who grew up near rice fields often have fond childhood memories of collecting snails together by the river. The use of snails as intricate decorations on the bronze drum may therefore reflect the affection that people have for these creatures.

Fish motifs are primarily found on the Lengshuichong type drum face and come in two forms: one type clings to a frog's back, being only the size of a snail, while the other is larger and features in diverse arrangements, some paired with human figures, others connected, and some with their tails tied to a pillar. On a drum from Dapuhua Village, Zhongping Town, Xiangzhou County, there are two fish, each tied at the tail and secured to a wooden post (Figure 16). A bronze drum in the Rietberg Museum in Zurich features two large fish with their tails connected, behind which stand two figures – one facing the fish's tail, hands clasped at the chest as if pulling something, and the other holding an object in the right hand, seemingly casting it toward a cauldron-shape vessel behind.[24] Fish are often revered as totems by ethnic groups reliant on fishing for their livelihoods, symbolizing abundance and good fortune. Praying for fish or tying them to a wooden posts reflect a desire for a bountiful catch and the retention of auspiciousness.

Turtle motifs are found exclusively on the faces of Lengshuichong drums. They are slightly smaller than frog motifs, with their shells adorned in elaborate decorations like spiral and grain patterns. Some turtle sculptures stand alone on the drum face, while others are depicted crouching on the backs of frogs, and some are combined with human figures. On the drum from Xiyi Village, Daxin Township, Pingnan County, two turtles stand between the frogs on the drum face, while each of the four frogs carries a small turtle on its back. The No. 3 drum unearthed in Shuangluo Village, Sanli Town, features a scene of interaction between a turtle and a child: the turtle walks in front, with a child with double buns following, grasping the turtle's left hind leg with both hands, as if being dragged by or pushing the turtle (Figure 17). This set of statues is quite intriguing and showcases the interactions between humans and sacred beings. The turtle's larger body size compared to the child signifies a departure from reality, embodying artistic interpretation and mythical significance.

[24] According to Huang 1989, this bronze drum is of the Lengshuichong type and dates from the Eastern Han to the Northern Song period; however, it remains unknown how it came to be in Switzerland.

There is also a crab sculpture, located on a drum's face at Sun Yat-sen University, where a crab has replaced a frog in the fourth position. The crab, associated with the autumn harvest, subtly conveys a prayer for abundance.[25]

Figure 17: 'Child and Turtle' sculpture.

3.6 Other Types of Sculptures

There are also some sculptures with special meanings and unique aesthetic qualities from the foundry on certain Lengshuichong drums. On a bronze drum unearthed at Chedu Wharf in Wuxuan County, there are two groups of 'Frog Fighting Platform' sculptures, one of which is incomplete. The platform is square, supported by four columns, with a large frog in each corner facing each other in a stance poised for combat, while several onlookers are positioned nearby. Additionally, a drum housed in the Guangzhou Museum depicts a 'Drum Performance' scene, featuring a square platform between the frogs, on which four side-placed bronze drums are arranged, with one figure depicted as striking a drum. Furthermore, a plant sculpture is featured on a bronze drum unearthed in Hekou Village, Shizui Town, Guiping City. Three flower trees stand in a row, each with a thick trunk, and at the top, there appears to be a blooming flower.

4 Cultural Composition and Significance of Bronze Drum Sculpture

The three types of large bronze drums are distinct yet share commonalities. They all feature a similarly massive size, though with subtle differences in their details. Each type favors decorative figures, particularly frogs, as primary motifs, but they have unique concepts regarding other sculptures – such as the types of animals preferred, their forms (standing or lying down, solitary or in groups), and their placements (on the drum face or body) – reflecting the diverse aesthetics and thought processes of different ethnic groups.

The diverse imagery of the decorative elements on the bronze drum stems from the fusion of multiple regional cultures, while the interplay of realism and abstraction in these designs embodies the creators' reflections on the universe, nature, and their relationship with humanity, as well as their aspirations for life.

4.1 Integration of Diverse Cultures

The decorative figures on bronze drums reflect the cultural exchange and integration in the Lingnan region. While local culture played a decisive role in shaping these figures, the variety and imagery of the sculptures suggest the influence of other cultures as well.

[25] Wu et al. 2018: 279.

4.1.1 Lingnan Yue Cultural Factors

Frogs, turtles, snails and fish are common freshwater species in the Guangxi region. The use of frog figures, in particular, appearing on large bronze drums but being absent from other bronze artifacts, can be considered a unique feature rooted in the local culture of the Lingnan area.

4.1.2 Central Plains Han Cultural Factors

Since the Qin and Han dynasties, when centralized power was consolidated, the Lingnan region gradually came under the control of the Central Plains authorities and became increasingly influenced by Han culture. During the Han Dynasty, the use of oxen for riding and plowing became widespread in the Central Plains and was introduced to Guangxi, where it became an essential tool for agriculture. This influence is evident in the frequent depiction of cattle on bronze drum decorations, reflecting the impact of Han culture.

4.1.3 Dian (Yunnan) Cultural Factors

Lengshuichong type bronze drums are a hybrid of Yunnan and Guangxi styles, inherited some features of Dian style bronze drums (early types of bronze drums, such as the Wanjiaba type and the Shizhaishan type), and have influenced Lingshan and Beiliu type drums. For instance, the tiger motifs and the solitary bull statues bear a strong resemblance to the images on shell containers from Dian people, highlighting the connection between Lengshuichong and Yunnan style bronze drums.

4.2 Multiple Intrinsic Meanings of Sculptures

The sculptures on bronze drums carry rich meanings, some of which are totemic while others are more grounded in reality. In the early days of the bronze drum's emergence, due to low productivity, the production of a bronze drum was a laborious task, elevating its status to the highest level in people's minds. As a result, the decorative figures must have been imbued with a sense of sanctity. However, as productivity improved and bronze drums became more common, their mystique in people's minds gradually diminished, and the sculptures became increasingly realistic in nature.

4.2.1 Totem worship

Totem worship is a primary aspect of the cultural significance of bronze drums. Frogs, birds, turtles, tigers, and even some cattle figures might be considered elements of totem worship. Such potential totems are typically large in size and solitary on a drum, rarely depicted alongside humans or production tools, contributing to a serene sense of mystery. Frogs and turtles are often adorned with elaborate ribbons, circular swirls, wheat, and other decorations, elevating these standing figures to a sacred status beyond reality. Bird statues also bear patterns, but are more modest in comparison, reflecting more everyday, life-oriented scenes.

4.2.2 Hopes for Abundance and Prosperity

In an agricultural society, particularly in times of frequent warfare, a bountiful harvest and a sufficient supply of horses were crucial for a stable life. The Lingnan people cast oxen ploughing, herding, and horseback riding on bronze drums, symbolizing their deep hopes for a prosperous life. For the powerful clans who owned these drums, such imagery also served as a display of their wealth and status.

4.2.3 Reverence for a Martial Spirit

The minorities in remote regions have long been known for their warlike tendencies, with numerous historical accounts describing the Yue people as brave and fierce in battle, such as "the Yue people are inclined to attack each other" (粤人之俗, 好相攻击)[26] and "the southwest ethnic minorities have always been fierce" (夷獠劲悍, 历世不宾)[27]. They were innately resilient, a trait essential for their survival in challenging environments. The Li and Liao people of the Lingnan region were no exception. They adorned bronze drums with robust frog figures, equestrian figures, and frog fighting platforms, symbolizing their reverence for martial spirit. Furthermore, since Ma Yuan quashed a rebellion in Guangxi during the Han Dynasty, the admiration for Ma Yuan has fueled the popularity of his equestrian culture, further embedding warrior ethos in the hearts of the people.

4.2.4 Hopes for Offspring

As previously mentioned, in agrarian societies, the working population within families was essential for survival. Given the underdeveloped medical conditions in ancient times and the frequent occurrences of childhood mortality, the emphasis on producing offspring was of great significance to ancient peoples. Many early artworks depicted exposed breasts and male genitalia, expressing a cult of fertility and aspirations for reproduction, as seen in the bull engravings on the Shizhaishan bronze drums. By the medieval period (from the Han to Tang dynasties), such expressions diminished, giving way to more subtle animal imagery, such as frogs and snails, which symbolized fertility.

5 Conclusion

Small sculptures form a unique decorative feature of the Lingnan bronze drums, representing the distinctive style of Lingnan art. These ornaments embody both totemic and realistic elements, but overall, their style leans toward realism. This reflects the transformation of the bronze drum from a mysterious, heavy ritual instrument to a more everyday ethnic percussion instrument. Due to the remote terrain of ancient Lingnan and the lack of extensive written records compared to the Central Plains, our understanding of Lingnan culture relies largely on oral folklore, making it difficult to grasp its full picture. The bronze drum sculptures provide a channel for insight; their re-

[26] Han Shu: 17.
[27] Jin Shu: 377.

alism allows contemporary viewers to glimpse the lifestyles and beliefs of ancient Lingnan and, to some extent, corroborates folk tales. Although it is tempting and sometimes convincing to infer the thoughts and meanings behind the sculptures from such enduring legends, it must be acknowledged that such interpretations cannot be expected fully to replicate the true thoughts of the ancients. Therefore, much room remains for future exploration.

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