

Analysis of the Artistic Characteristics of Type III Large Bronze Drums in Guangxi

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ABSTRACT

In Guangxi, three types of bronze drums have been categorized based on the nomenclature of standard instruments named after their places of discovery: the Lengshuichong type, the Beiliu type, and the Lingshan type. This period also marks the zenith of bronze drum development, often referred to as the era of divine and significant instruments. An analysis of the artistic characteristics of these three types of large bronze drums from Guangxi offers insights into the ancient primitive beliefs of the Zhuang and Dong ethnic groups' ancestors. Through the examination of the decorations and shapes of these three types of large bronze drums, one can appreciate the aesthetic beauty of the changing shapes of the drums and the aesthetic connotations of the bronze drum culture, which embody the concepts of meaning, imagery, auspiciousness, and beauty. This includes the devout beliefs in worshipping heaven and earth through bronze drums, the connection between humans and nature, and the cosmological understanding of the universe.

KEYWORDS

Bronze Drums of Guangxi; Bronze Drum Culture; Artistic Characteristics; Divine and Significant Instruments; Cosmological Concepts.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the field of Guangxi bronze drum research, the classification method of naming unearthed bronze drums after their discovery sites has gradually become a consensus in the academic community. The discovery of three types of bronze drums, namely, the Lengshuichong type, the Beiliu type, and the Lingshan type, has not only enriched our understanding of the diversity of bronze drums but also marked an important phase in the development history of bronze drums—the era of divine and significant instruments. This period saw the pinnacle of craftsmanship and scale in bronze drum production, attracting widespread scholarly attention to its artistic and cultural values. Through an in-depth analysis of the artistic characteristics of these three types of bronze drums, scholars aim to interpret the ancient beliefs, aesthetic concepts, and cosmological understanding of the ancestors of the Zhuang and Dong ethnic groups[1].

The decorations and designs of these bronze drums not only showcase the creators' pursuit and expression of beauty but also reflect the ancient people's profound understanding of the natural world and cosmic order[2]. The patterns on the bronze drums are varied, ranging from simple geometric shapes to complex depictions of humans, animals, and astronomical phenomena, serving both decorative purposes and deep symbolic meanings that reflect the ancient worldview and religious beliefs. Particularly, the use of bronze drums in worshipping heaven and earth, expressing reverence for nature, and depicting the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, provides us with important windows into the study of ancient social culture and religious beliefs[3].

Current research is attempting to employ interdisciplinary approaches, integrating theories and techniques from archaeology, ethnology, art history, and religious studies, to further explore the cultural significance and social functions of Guangxi bronze drums. With the application of new discoveries and research methodologies, the understanding of Guangxi bronze drums, as well as the broader Southeast Asian bronze drum culture, is becoming increasingly profound. This not only helps in appreciating the value of bronze drums as a cultural heritage but also facilitates a better understanding of cultural exchanges and the social development processes in ancient Southeast Asia[4].

2. ORIGINS OF GUANGXI BRONZE DRUM CULTURE

In ancient times, the ethnic groups in southern China were collectively known as the "Hundred Yue," which scholars later divided into four tribes based on regional dialects and different living customs: the Nan Yue, Wu Yue, Xi Ou, and Luo Yue. The Xi Ou and Luo Yue ethnic groups were distributed within the territory of Guangxi, where the Zhuang-Dong linguistic group, mainly consisting of the Zhuang people, still retains the cultural customs and characteristics of their ancestors, including the practice of drumming to pray for a bountiful year.

The bronze drum is a unique cultural treasure of the southwestern ethnic groups, embodying the rich and unique religious and cultural art of the ancient tribes of the southwestern frontier. The development and evolution of ancient bronze drums also reflect the cultural and historical changes of the ethnic minorities in the southwest. According to records, the earliest bronze drums were excavated in Xiangyun and Chuxiong areas of Yunnan. Some scholars believe that early bronze drums were used as cooking utensils: the drum surfaces were undecorated, and when unearthed, they were found inverted with the drum feet facing up and the surfaces covered in thick soot. The ethnic groups on the Yunnan frontier once used a type of deep-bellied, narrow-necked bronze cauldron as a daily cooking utensil. Thus, the bronze drum was equivalent to a bronze cauldron, or a cooking utensil. However, other scholars argue that categorizing ancient bronze drums merely as cooking utensils neglects the broader context of the Bronze Age and its religious background. With ethnic migrations and the exchange of tribal civilizations, the distribution area of bronze drums continuously expanded to southern China, including Guangxi, Guangdong, Sichuan, Guizhou, Hunan, Hainan, and many countries in Southeast Asia, with the Guangxi region being the most important distribution area.

2.1. Guangxi Bronze Drums and Zhuang Ethnic Folklore Concepts

Understanding the bronze drums is tantamount to understanding the entire Zhuang ethnicity, as grasping the ancient primitive beliefs, customs, and religious rites of the ancestors of the Zhuang-Dong linguistic group equates to comprehending the origins of bronze drum culture.

The ancestors in the Guangxi region lived in a humid and rainy area, where the water and grass were abundant, and rice grew prolifically, forming a unique rice cultivation culture. Primitive human life and survival depended on nature and the heavens and earth, and the life of the Luo Yue ancestors in Guangxi was also inseparable from rice. The Zhuang dialect word for "field" is "na," reflecting the unique manifestation of rice culture in the Zhuang regions. Influenced by the rice culture, the national psychology of the Zhuang people was profoundly affected, developing a special affection for rice and nature. At this point, the worship of nature became evident. With the low level of productivity in primitive society, humans could not resist natural disasters and, out of fear or devoutness, the ancestors prayed for favorable weather and a bountiful rice harvest. They used drums as a medium to convey their wishes to the heavens. It is said, "The drum is akin to thunder." The ancestors believed that only by revering the Thunder God could they be protected. They cast cloud and thunder patterns on the bronze drums, and when struck, the drum sound, deep and dull like rolling thunder, was meant to invoke rain. Amidst this worship and awe of nature, the Zhuang people developed totem worship, where primitive humans imagined themselves to have extraordinary blood relations with things or

creatures in the natural world, viewing them as protective deities of the ethnic group. The surfaces and bodies of the bronze drums are tangible manifestations of ethnic culture. With rice, there was a need for cooking utensils to hold it, and with beliefs and worship, there was a need for ritual instruments to offer sacrifices to gods and ancestors. Bronze drums embody rice culture, yet rice culture and bronze drum culture are mutually reinforcing and promotive. Bronze drums are an externalization of rice culture, which in turn enriches bronze drum culture[5].

2.2. Guangxi Bronze Drums and Zhuang Cosmological Concepts

In the creation myth of the Zhuang ethnicity, the universe was originally a chaotic fog until a naked bee flew in and bit into the fog, transforming it into an egg. Inside the egg were three things similar to yolks, which dispersed the chaos and became the sky, the earth, and the ocean. The ancient Zhuang people's understanding of the universe coincidentally aligns with Taoist cosmology, as stated in the "Tao Te Ching": "The Tao produces one, one produces two, two produce three, three produce all things." Everything began as fundamental and unified before evolving into complexity and diversity, and then into all things in the universe. This concept was also embodied in the bronze drums, filled with the wisdom of nature and life.

Under the Zhuang people's ideological concept, the structure of the bronze drum greatly resembles the structure of the universe. The center of the drumhead features an everlasting sun pattern. The drumhead represents the sky, the drum body symbolizes the four corners of the earth, and the drum foot represents the underworld. According to analyses of the Lengshuichong style, Lingshan style, and Beiliu style bronze drums unearthed in Guangxi, apart from the sun pattern on the drumhead, there are also patterns of flying egrets and frogs, representing the ancestors' ideal depiction of the heavens; the chest, waist, and ears of the drum are often decorated with transformed boat patterns and feathered man patterns, depicting the natural environment of the human world; the drum foot features concentric leaf patterns and water wave patterns, imagining the underworld. It is evident that the Zhuang ancestors viewed the universe as a whole, with the entire bronze drum depicting their conception of the universe[6]. The decorations on the drum reflect the cosmological concepts of the Zhuang-Dong linguistic group, where humans are interconnected with the heavens and the earth, and all things in the world interact with humans.

2.3. Evolution of Bronze Drum Types

In a specific era and region, due to practicality and various functional uses, a certain number of vessels with similar shapes will emerge. The "I Ching" states, "That which is above form is called the Tao; that which is below form is called a tool." The "tool" of the bronze drum also carries the "Tao" of the Zhuang ancestors' understanding of the universe. The bronze drum is a representative vessel of the southern ethnic groups, which later developed to become a divine instrument integrating both ritual and legal uses. The common characteristics of southern bronze drums are: they are large and heavy, consisting of the drum chest, waist, foot, ears, and head. The drumhead extends beyond the neck, but only one side is the striking part, and the body serves as a resonator. Its appearance features various curved lines, with a smoothly tapering waist. Symmetrically cast on both sides of the drum body are a pair of drum ears, and the side profile of the drum body is generally the same; the sun pattern rays are fine and long, utilizing a large amount of intricate geometric patterns for decoration, complex and intricate.

From the types of bronze drums unearthed in the Guangxi region, there are eight types distributed, including Wanjiaba, Shizhaishan, Lengshuichong, Beiliu, Lingshan, Zunyi, Ximeng, and Majiang. Among them, the Lengshuichong, Beiliu, and Lingshan types named after the standard instruments' place of discovery in Guangxi share common features such as frogs standing along the edge, and they are significantly larger, with a face diameter usually over 50cm, distinguishing them from the other

five types of bronze drums. This period is also known as the era of divine and significant instruments[7].

2.3.1. Cold Water Flush Type Bronze Drum

The emergence of the Lengshuichong type bronze drums signifies the maturation of bronze drum technology and culture. Named after Lengshuichong in Heng Village, Teng County, Guangxi, these drums are characterized by their tall and slender build, with wide drumheads that are either flush with the edge or slightly extended. The diameter of the drumhead is greater than or equal to the drum chest, with the smallest waist diameter located at the middle, and the profile slightly concave: the height of the drum foot is almost equal to that of the chest. The drum ears are flat and adorned with braid patterns, and the perimeter of the drumhead features frog decorations, some interspersed with three-dimensional figures or animals such as riders, horses, waterfowl, and turtles.

2.3.2. Beiliu Type Bronze Drums

The ancestors living in the mountains of Yunkai absorbed the cultures of the Central Plains and Dian, blending them to create the unique Yue series bronze drums. The Beiliu and Lingshan type bronze drums are representatives of this Yue series. The Beiliu type, exemplified by bronze drums unearthed in Beiliu County, Guangxi, features a large build, with the drumhead diameter exceeding the drum chest. Some edges are bent downwards, extending out from the neck; the drum waist is concavely curved, with a gentle slope between the chest and waist marked by a groove; the foot is relatively high and extends outward, roughly level with the drum surface, separated by a protruding ridge; the drum ears are mostly round-neck ring ears. Typically, four frogs are sculpted standing on the drum surface, with unadorned frog bodies. According to records, most of the ancient large bronze drums with a face diameter of over 1m documented in China are of the Beiliu type.

2.3.3. Lingshan Type Bronze Drums

The Lingshan type bronze drums are similar in form to the Beiliu type, being large but more delicately fashioned. What sets the Lingshan type apart is its rounded drum chest with the largest diameter in the middle; the drum edge bends downward to form a hanging eave, and both the drum surface and body are divided into two sections by double strings, with the chest gradually tapering into the waist. Below the drum ears are sculptures of birds, cattle, sheep, riders, and other animals. The heads of these animal sculptures all face downwards, in the direction that the drum sound travels.

Due to the contiguous geographical distribution of these three types of large bronze drums and their long coexistence over time, they exhibit characteristics of gradual evolution, influencing and permeating each other in terms of shape and style. The Lengshuichong, Beiliu, and Lingshan types of large bronze drums unearthed in Guangxi also represent the zenith of southern bronze drum development, showcasing both distinct features and commonalities. For bronze drums, the transmission of traits is a fundamental pattern of development. The differences among them represent a process of sequential and gradual development. Under this relationship, their structures and shapes exhibit similarities, yet the similarities manifested by different decorations and shapes vary. The side curve of the bronze drum is the most obvious part of the change, visually displaying the different drum forms in the development and transmission process of bronze drums. By analyzing and comparing the side curves extracted from the three types of large bronze drums named after the standard instruments unearthed in the Guangxi region, it is possible to observe the development, changes, and transmission of forms among these three types of drums, as well as the Zhuang ancestors' practice of communicating with the heavens and the earth through drum rituals, and their simple cosmological views reflected through the form of the bronze drums[8].

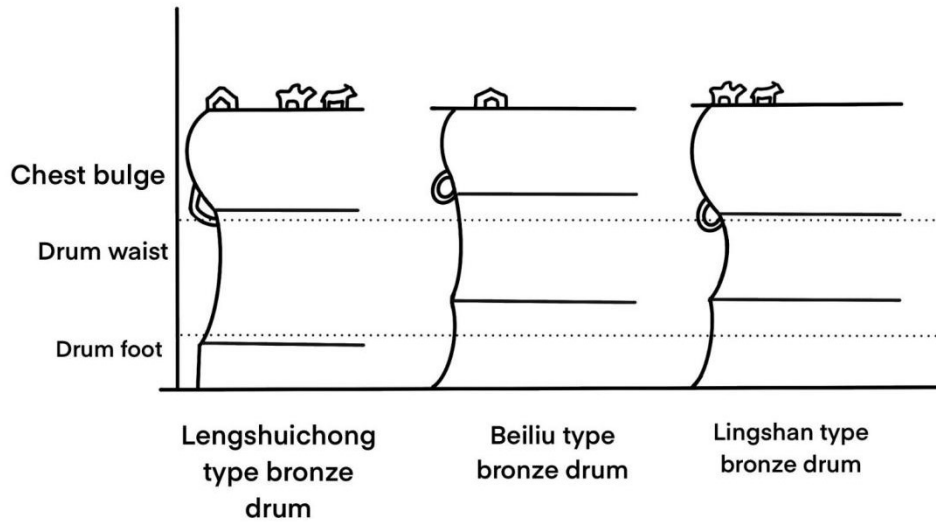


Figure 1. Comparison of the Shapes of Three Types of Large Bronze Drums

Table 1. Dimensions and Forms of the Three Types of Large Bronze Drums

typology	measured quantity	drum-high(cm)		Chest diameter of the drum(cm)		Range of Drum Height to Maximum Drum Breast Diameter Ratio
		realm	on average	realm	on average	
Lengshuichong type bronze drum	21	27-66	49	51.9-854	72.2	0.63-0.74
Beiliu type bronze drum	7	48.3-68	60	83.4-146	110.1	0.41-0.58
Lingshan type bronze drum	6	44-56.3	49.6	72.6-92.1	79.7	0.55-0.61

3. ARTISTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DECORATIVE PATTERNS ON GUANGXI BRONZE DRUMS

The entire body of the bronze drum is adorned with patterns, which are an important aspect of studying bronze drum art. These patterns are not merely for decorative purposes; they also convey the thoughts and consciousness of ancient ancestors, encompassing the production and life, religious customs, nature worship, and totem worship of the ancestors of the Zhuang-Dong linguistic group. The depiction methods include positive lines, negative lines, and relief decorations, showcasing the unique ethnic style, aesthetic consciousness, and cosmological concepts of the Guangxi region and the bronze drum era. The ancestors communicated with the deities by beating the drums, praying for rain and clear weather. The patterns on the bronze drums are visual representations of mythological texts and ideological consciousness, an overt manifestation of religious aesthetics, ultimately serving primitive religious activities. The themes of the decorative patterns on the bronze drums from the era of divine and significant instruments in Guangxi can be divided into four parts: animal and plant patterns, geometric patterns, human narrative patterns, and three-dimensional sculptures. The author

conducts a deep analysis based on the data organization of the frequency of decorative patterns on the three types of large bronze drums[9].

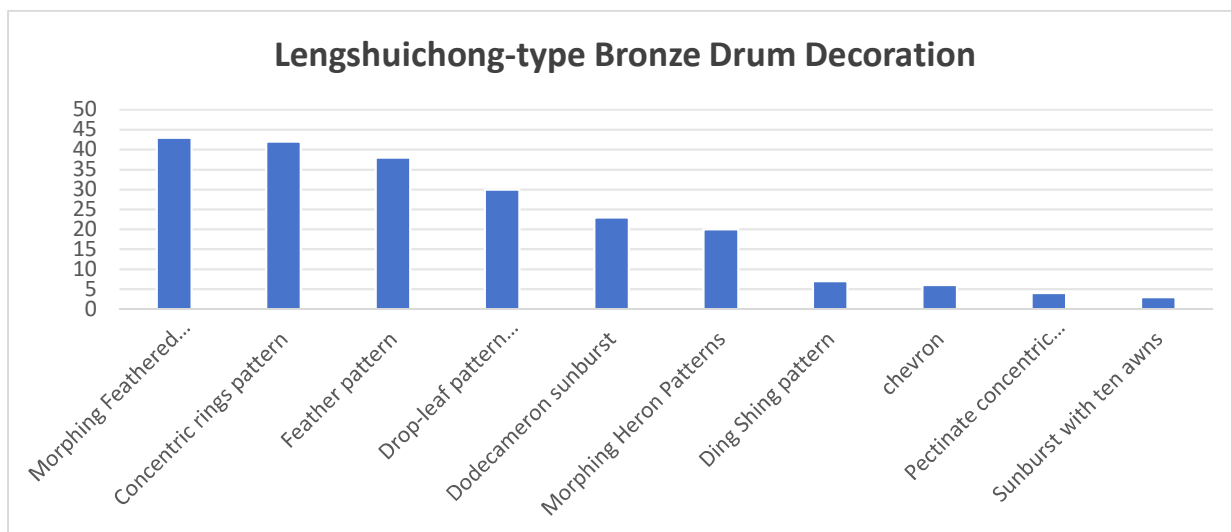


Figure 2. Cold Water Flush Type Bronze Drum Ornamentation

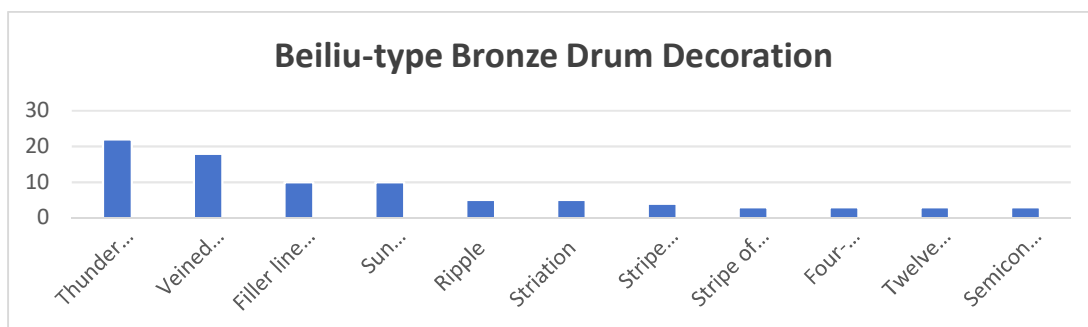


Figure 3. Decorative Patterns of Beiliu Type Bronze Drums

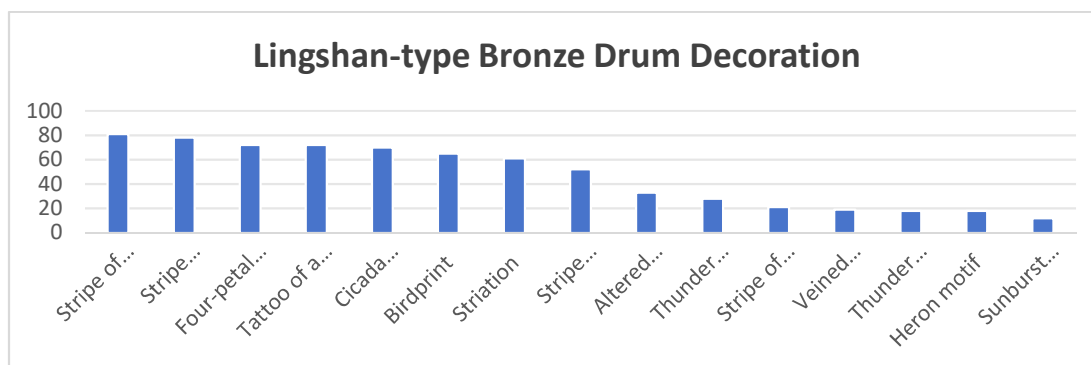


Figure 4. Decorative Patterns of Lingshan Type Bronze Drums

3.1. Geometric Patterns

Geometric patterns are the most prevalent decorations among the three types of large bronze drums unearthed and named in Guangxi, also representing the most diverse and richly varied thematic forms. Among them, the Beiliu type bronze drums, covered with cloud and thunder patterns, are known as the "Great Thunder Pattern Bronze Drums." The geometric lines on the drums mainly consist of straight lines, wavy lines, circular lines, and curves. Various lines form patterns such as sun and cloud-thunder motifs. From the Lengshuichong type to the Lingshan type, which marks the zenith of bronze drum development, the evolution of geometric patterns across these three types of drums is displayed, reflecting the primitive tribes' enduring shamanic culture and nature worship. For instance,

natural phenomena such as the sun, clouds, thunder, and water, which influenced the daily life and rice harvest of the ancestors, carried the hopeful wish for a bountiful grain yield[10]. As mentioned in "Guangdong Xinyu - Bronze Drums," "When thunder strikes, people beat it to worship the Thunder God, also calling it the Thunder Drum. Thunder is the drum of the heavens, striking and splitting all things. The drum imitates its sound, and metal releases its energy, thus the bronze drum is used as the Thunder Drum." It shows that the tribes in the Lingnan area have always considered thunder as the sound of the heavenly drum, and decorating the drum with cloud and thunder patterns also reflects respect for the God of Thunder. Some patterns demonstrate the influence of social life and production development on the lives or concepts of southern ethnic minorities, such as the coin patterns on Beiliu type bronze drums, symbolizing wealth and serving as a tool for the ruling class to flaunt. However, no matter how the patterns on the drums change, everything grows towards the sun, and farmers work by day and rest by night. With the sun rising, all things come to life, and the sun pattern remains consistently at the center of the drumhead, so all designs revolve around the sun pattern. Patterns like water wave, tooth, comb, and concentric circle motifs are more about expressing people's good wishes and certain sentiments rather than being motivated by natural or social activities.

3.2. Animal and Plant Patterns

Among the three categories of large bronze drums unearthed in Guangxi, the representative animal and plant patterns include the soaring heron pattern, quadri-lobed flower pattern, cicada pattern, rider pattern, standing bird pattern, insect pattern, and animal face pattern. The animal patterns are mainly related to the rice culture of the Zhuang-Dong language family's farming communities and depict scenes from nature. In the Zhuang people's view, feathers symbolize the divine. Unable to comprehend the principles behind the transmission of drum sounds, the Zhuang people associate drums with birds, believing that the propagation of drum sounds is carried out by flying birds. In both the imagery on bronze drums and Zhuang historical records, it is evident that Zhuang people often portray themselves as bird-like figures. The "feathered human pattern" on bronze drums uses bird feathers as headdresses, reflecting the Zhuang people's reverence for birds as totems. These images typically symbolize aspirations for a better life or represent the Zhuang people's totemic worship and fertility worship.

3.3. Narrative Patterns of Figures

Narrative patterns of figures vividly depict the production and lifestyle, clothing, customs, and ritual activities of the ancestors during a certain period. They represent more lifelike and realistic scenes on bronze drums, providing insights into the social customs of minority ethnic groups in the southern region at that time. The more representative narrative patterns of figures on the three categories of large bronze drums are the shape-changing boat pattern and the shape-changing feathered human pattern. Shape-changing patterns gradually evolved from initial patterns, continually incorporating the aesthetic preferences and stylistic features of various ethnic groups. The structure of bronze drums also represents the depiction of the world by the ancestors. The boat pattern and feathered human pattern adorn the position of the drum body, representing the boundary between earthly and underground life in the consciousness of Zhuang ancestors. In Zhuang mythology, after the death of the Zhuang sky god Buluotuo, humans worshiped and prayed to him, causing him to be reborn. Therefore, there are also rituals such as the dance of shamanic figures and the use of boats with feathered human figures to transport souls to the underworld. Viewing boats as a means of communication between the human and divine realms, the ancestors cleared the way for the souls through shamanic rituals with bronze drums, achieving the goal of the soul ascending to heaven.

3.4. Three-Dimensional Sculptures

During the period of sacred and precious artifacts, the three-dimensional sculptures on bronze drums mainly depict standing frogs. The frog sculptures on Beiliu-type bronze drums are mainly single frogs or groups of crouching frogs. As they developed into the Leishuichong type, frog sculptures evolved into groups of crouching frogs and observing frogs, occasionally accompanied by bird sculptures, horse sculptures, cow sculptures, turtle sculptures, and riding sculptures. Late-stage Lingshan-type bronze drums show a declining trend, with groups of crouching frogs reduced to single crouching frogs; negative spiral frog sculptures replaced observing frog sculptures. The standing sculptures on the drum surface generally correspond to the frog sculptures. Different patterns adorn the bodies of these frogs. For example, the frog bodies on Leishuichong bronze drums are decorated with ears of grain, symbolizing a bountiful rice harvest. The concentric circle patterns on Lingshan-type bronze drum frogs represent the image of "eggs," symbolizing the origin of life. Additionally, the buttocks of the frog sculptures are deliberately exaggerated, simulating scenes of frog copulation. In Zhuang mythology, frogs are messengers of the thunder god, possessing the ability to control the weather. When rain is needed for rice farming, humans appeal to frogs, who then convey their wishes to the heavens; the thunder god then sends rain to the earth. Tang Dynasty's Liu Xun wrote in "Records of Unusual Events in the Lingnan Region": "Frogs cast on bronze drums are the essence of the drums, referring to the most divine of spirits." This reflects the Zhuang people's characteristics of fertility worship and totem worship. In the Zhuang people's view, horses are usually ridden by deities and serve as important means of transportation between realms. Bird sculptures, horse sculptures, cow sculptures, turtle sculptures, etc., are all common natural objects in daily life. It can be affirmed that the standing sculptures on bronze drums also have legends and origins, reflecting the Zhuang people's endless reverence for tribal life and nature, and their ancestors' infinite admiration[11].

4. HARMONY BETWEEN ORNAMENTATION AND STRUCTURE OF GUANGXI BRONZE DRUMS

The ornamentation and structure of bronze drums together form the modular material foundation of bronze drum decoration. The traditional layout of bronze drums is centered around the sun pattern, extending outward in concentric circles, with patterns arranged in circles, presenting a regular and symmetrical stability. The concentric circles on the drum surface conform to the drum's "round" shape, unifying the overall image and imparting a sense of seamless beauty.

The earliest bronze drums served practical purposes as vessels for human production and life necessities, initially devoid of ornamentation. Their shapes resembled cooking utensils (bronze cauldrons), leading some scholars to suggest a direct evolution from bronze cauldrons. The Wanjiaba type bronze drum, representing the primitive shamanistic period, is the earliest type excavated. As people's spiritual pursuits evolved, the practical functions of bronze drums diminished, and with the elevation of shamanistic activities and religious beliefs, bronze drums transitioned from "tools" to "philosophy," assuming more responsibilities in people's cosmology, natural outlook, and understanding of life. The Book of Changes states, "The Dao that can be told is not the eternal Dao; the name that can be named is not the eternal name." From the primitive shamanistic period to the peak period, known as the era of divine artifacts, every pattern and curve on bronze drums symbolizes different meanings. The "Dao" of an object refers to its creator's ideology, while the "tool" refers to the form of the object itself. In the concept of the Zhuang ethnic group's ancestors, the bronze drum represents a complete universe, with the drum surface, body, and ears corresponding to the Zhuang people's inner "three realms": the upper realm, middle realm, and lower realm. The composition of ornamentation and its position on the structure is not merely for decorative purposes but holds deeper significance. Through research on existing bronze drums, it can be observed that the sun pattern on the drum surface remains consistent, while the positions of boat motifs, frog decorations, bird sculptures, and horse sculptures remain largely unchanged. Surrounding the sun pattern on the drum

surface are cloud patterns and lightning patterns, with soaring egret motifs flying around the sun. The upper realm is presided over by the god of thunder, with the frog being the god's messenger, thus frog sculptures also appear on the drum surface. The middle realm, represented by the drum body, is the habitat of humans and animals, depicted through motifs of winged humans, insects, and birds, common natural elements. The lower realm is often adorned with water wave patterns to distinguish it from the drum body[12]. The layout of bronze drum ornamentation and structure collectively embodies the simple cosmology of the Zhuang people, creating a sense of changing beauty, symmetry, and balance.

5. CONCLUSION

The bronze drums of Guangxi represent the "living fossils" of Guangxi culture, with the three types of large bronze drums being the focus of bronze drum culture research. Their ornamentation and structure have undergone comprehensive development, providing a more complete interpretation than ever before. Through investigation and research into the Wanjiaba, Beiliu, and Lingshan types of bronze drums from the divine artifact era in Guangxi, several key findings emerge.

The Wanjiaba, Beiliu, and Lingshan types of bronze drums differ primarily in their size compared to other bronze drum forms. During this period, bronze drums not only represented the "divine artifacts" of the primitive shamanistic period but also served as "precious artifacts" for the ruling class to display their status and wealth.

The sculptural art on the three types of bronze drums, particularly the frog motifs, deserves attention. Each drum surface is adorned with standing motifs, and each arrangement and combination is uniquely crafted. This is partly due to the significant role of frogs in Zhuang mythology, believed to be messengers of the thunder god. Additionally, frogs symbolize strong reproductive abilities, especially the squatting frog sculptures, which represent fertility worship and the perpetuation of the tribe.

While there are subtle differences between the bronze drums of Guangxi and those of other regions, such as variations in the curvature and straightness of the drum surface and base, as well as variations in the curvature at the junctions of the chest, waist, and base, the central decoration of the sun, representing the source of all things, remains consistent. Positioned at the center of the drum surface, the sun's radiance guided ancient peoples in driving away beasts, worshiping heaven and earth, and offering reverence. It delineated the functions and occasions of human ritual dances and music, showcasing the glory and beliefs of ethnic groups, and leading the spiritual world of their communities.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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