

The Regional Characteristics and Cross-Cultural Communication of Bronze Drum Culture in Western Guangdong

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Abstract: The bronze drum culture of western Guangdong, a vibrant facet of traditional ethnic culture in southern China, carries a profound historical legacy and unmistakable regional identity. Rooted in the ancient traditions of the Baiyue people, this cultural symbol has evolved through centuries of multi-ethnic integration and local adaptation, forming a distinctive and enduring heritage. In recent years, growing awareness of intangible cultural heritage preservation has opened new avenues for the global transmission of this tradition. While challenges persist in adapting its expression to modern cultural contexts, opportunities have also emerged through digital media and cultural tourism. This study explores the unique regional features of western Guangdong's bronze drum culture and examines its mechanisms of cross-cultural dissemination, aiming to offer both theoretical insights and practical strategies for its living inheritance and international communication.

As one of the birthplaces of Lingnan culture, western Guangdong has long nurtured a richly intertwined cultural landscape shaped by multiple ethnic groups, with the bronze drum standing as a powerful symbol of this convergence. More than an artifact, the bronze drum serves as a vessel of historical memory and a living participant in local customs, religious rituals, and social life—bearing the weight of collective identity and spiritual resonance. However, as modernization accelerates, the space for traditional practices to survive has been steadily shrinking, and the adaptability of bronze drum culture in contemporary media environments has come under scrutiny. In a world marked by rapid shifts in communication platforms and intensified global cultural exchanges, re-examining the regional essence and cross-cultural pathways of this heritage is not only timely but imperative—both for its preservation and its potential to inspire renewed understanding across cultures.

1. The Origins and Cultural Functions of Bronze Drum Culture in Western Guangdong

(1) Origins and Evolution of the Bronze Drum

The bronze drum stands as one of the most iconic symbols of ancient ethnic cultures in southern China, with its roots tracing back to the late Warring States period and the Western Han dynasty. Originally thriving in the territories inhabited by the Baiyue people, early bronze drums were

primarily utilitarian—used for wartime signaling, hunting communication, and summoning during tribal gatherings[1]. Over time, their purpose evolved, transforming into sacred ritual instruments and emblems of authority. Archaeological discoveries from sites such as Hepu in Guangxi and Jinning in Yunnan reveal bronze drums of grand scale, adorned with intricate patterns and exquisite craftsmanship—clear indicators of their elevated ceremonial status.

In western Guangdong, the bronze drum culture developed along a distinct trajectory. Drawing upon the foundational traditions of southern China, it gradually forged its own local character—visible in the totemic motifs etched on the drum surface, in the metallurgical techniques of drum casting, and in the unique rhythmic expressions and ceremonial uses. Unlike its counterparts in Yunnan or Guizhou, the bronze drum in western Guangdong shed its original association with militaristic and political authority. Instead, it found new meaning in belief systems, seasonal festivals, and collective identity—mirroring the region’s social evolution and the shifting spiritual needs of its people.

(2) The Formation of Bronze Drum Culture in Western Guangdong

The emergence of bronze drum culture in this region cannot be separated from its intricate geographic and human landscape. Western Guangdong—mountainous, multi-ethnic, and rich in cultural intermingling—has long been home to the Zhuang, Han, Yao, and Li peoples, among others. The ancient Baiyue legacy provided the cultural bedrock, while successive waves of Han Chinese influence introduced new structures of social organization and ceremonial practice. In this fusion of traditions, the bronze drum evolved into a vital cultural medium—bridging ancestral worship, clan systems, and grassroots religious customs.

Historical records and ethnographic research reveal the symbolic power of the bronze drum in interethnic interaction. It serves as both a cultural conduit and a marker of identity. During festivals like the Yao’s “Returning to the Mountain” ceremony or the Zhuang’s “Song Fair,” the drum announces more than the start of rituals—it gives voice to a shared cultural belonging. Remarkably, rather than being diluted by these interactions, the bronze drum grew more deeply rooted in the local fabric, undergoing a transformation from sacred relic to living folklore. Its function expanded, its expression diversified, and it became a uniquely western Guangdong emblem—simultaneously local and inclusive.

(3) The Role of the Bronze Drum in Ethnic Daily Life

In western Guangdong, the bronze drum is not merely a cultural relic locked away in history—it is a living tradition, vibrant with meaning and utility. It plays an active role in the rhythms of daily and communal life. Whether sounding through the solemnity of weddings and funerals, echoing in ceremonies for rain and harvest, or resonating in ancestral rites, the drum serves as a medium of prayer, exorcism, and spiritual invocation. Its powerful cadence and collective rhythm make it an indispensable instrument of emotional expression and communal unity.

Each ethnic group may interpret the drum differently, yet they are united in reverence—for ancestors, for nature, and for the divine. Among the Yao, the bronze drum is considered the “voice of the ancestors,” requiring purification rituals and incense offerings before it is played. In Han village temples, it is revered as a talisman to ward off evil and attract fortune. These diverse cultural practices reveal that the bronze drum holds more than sound and rhythm—it embodies the spiritual memory and emotional core of the people. Through its enduring ritual presence and symbolic power, the bronze drum continues to pulse with life, echoing the heartbeat of the region even as times change.

2. Regional Characteristics of the Bronze Drum Culture in Western Guangdong

(1) Geographic Environment and Cultural Distribution

Nestled between the rolling hills of Lingnan and the coastlines of the Beibu Gulf, western Guangdong is shaped by a rugged terrain of mountains and intersecting river systems. This relatively enclosed landscape has fostered a naturally diverse yet culturally self-contained environment, where multiple ethnic groups have coexisted and evolved unique traditions over centuries[2]. The widespread presence of bronze drum culture in this region is deeply intertwined with its physical geography, historical settlement patterns, and migratory routes.

According to local chronicles and cultural heritage surveys, bronze drum traditions are especially prominent in cities like Maoming, Yunfu, and Yangjiang, with counties such as Gaozhou, Xinyi, Huazhou, and Luoding standing out as cultural strongholds. In towns like Yuntan (Gaozhou) and Qianpai (Xinyi), bronze drum-based rituals and festivals are still practiced today, their frequency and vibrancy a testament to the cultural roots that run deep in these communities.

This spatial distribution also highlights the bronze drum's close relationship with the natural environment and village structure. In mountainous and hilly zones, settlements are often organized along clan or ethnic lines, forming tightly knit cultural ecologies centered around ancestral rituals and communal values. Within these settings, the bronze drum becomes more than a ceremonial object—it is a vital instrument of intra-community connection and emotional resonance. This geography-bound cultural clustering lends the bronze drum a highly localized and recognizable identity, making it a powerful marker of western Guangdong's cultural distinctiveness.

(2) Cultural Interplay Amid Ethnic Integration

Western Guangdong sits at the confluence of the Nanling cultural sphere and the southern extensions of central Chinese civilization, making it a historical crossroads of ethnic convergence. Over time, the region has cultivated a rich mosaic of cohabiting ethnic groups, diverse languages, and fluid cultural exchanges. Within this milieu, bronze drum culture has absorbed and blended ritual practices and aesthetic sensibilities from the Zhuang, Yao, Han, and others—resulting in a form that is hybrid in nature yet unmistakably rooted in the local soil.

Each ethnic group brings its own interpretation and usage of the bronze drum. Among the Yao, it is revered as sacred and deeply mystical, requiring purification rituals before performance. In contrast, Han folk traditions often treat the drum as a functional tool to drive away evil spirits, leaning toward a more pragmatic and folkloric application. These differences illustrate not just variance but active cultural dialogue.

Such interplay extends beyond mere usage—it permeates the rhythmic patterns, symbolic motifs, and oral traditions associated with the drum. In villages where ethnic boundaries blur, a single drum may serve different ceremonial roles across multiple festivals, performed by individuals from various ethnic backgrounds. This fluid sharing strengthens local bonds and fosters a collective sense of identity. Through this dynamic process of exchange and reinterpretation, the bronze drum has transformed from a symbol of a singular ethnic tradition into a shared emblem of regional cultural consensus.

(3) Linguistic and Ritual Variations in Local Contexts

The local character of bronze drum culture is also evident in the language used to describe it, the styles of performance, and the ritualistic expressions that surround it. Across different counties in western Guangdong, people refer to the bronze drum using terms that reflect regional understandings and cultural emphasis. In Xinyi, for instance, it's often called “tongluo” (copper gong) or “tongpan” (copper plate), underscoring its sonic qualities. Meanwhile, in Gaozhou and Huazhou, terms like “shengu” (divine drum) or “zugu” (ancestral drum) are more common, revealing the object's sanctity and its ties to lineage.

Folktales and legends further enrich these distinctions. In Yangchun, tales of bronze drums subduing demons highlight their supernatural aura, while in Luoding, they are revered as sacred heirlooms symbolizing family honor. These cultural narratives are mirrored in ritual

language—incantations, chants, and prayers uttered before drumming often carry regional dialects and distinct cultural codes. The result is a richly textured landscape in which bronze drum culture not only functions as performance but also as a deeply embedded linguistic and emotional artifact, giving it both authenticity and stickiness in its cultural transmission.

(4) Localization of Bronze Drum Craftsmanship and Musical Style

The artistic and musical dimensions of bronze drum culture in western Guangdong have undergone significant local adaptation over time. Compared to regions like northern Guangxi or southeastern Yunnan, drums in this area are typically smaller in size but no less symbolically potent. Common decorative motifs such as suns, frogs, and birds appear in simplified, yet deliberate arrangements—imbued with themes of nature worship and fertility reverence[3]. In terms of material, some artisans still adhere to traditional alloy formulas, valuing acoustic depth and tonal clarity. Despite the rise of machine production, a handful of villages continue to uphold handcrafted methods passed down through generations.

Musically, the bronze drum is often performed in ensemble with local instruments like the *suona* (a type of horn) and cymbals, creating a lively and layered soundscape. The rhythms are swift and precise, frequently mimicking natural sounds—thunder, rainfall, the rustle of dance—all designed to invoke spirits, entertain deities, or uplift audiences. In some areas, this has evolved into the “bronze drum dance,” a vibrant fusion of percussion and movement that enhances both the theatrical and spiritual experience.

These locally tailored musical and performative elements reflect not just preservation, but innovation. They respond to the aesthetic tastes of contemporary audiences while staying rooted in tradition—offering a compelling example of how a centuries-old heritage can pulse with renewed vitality in the present day.

3. Cross-Cultural Communication Pathways of Bronze Drum Culture in Western Guangdong

(1) Cultural Transmission through Traditional Festivals and Ceremonial Performances

In western Guangdong, traditional ethnic festivals serve as the beating heart of bronze drum culture’s outward transmission. These festivals are not only vital cultural spaces for ritual practice, but also dynamic platforms through which the bronze drum finds recognition and resonance in broader, multicultural contexts. Events such as the Zhuang people’s “San Yue San,” the Yao’s “Panwang Festival,” and various local temple fairs feature bronze drum performances as ceremonial highlights—imbued with powerful symbolic meanings that transcend the ritual itself.

These festivals regularly draw large crowds, including tourists, researchers, and media outlets. The public performances and interactive elements allow the bronze drum to extend its reach beyond the immediate community[4]. For instance, Xinyi’s “Yao Bronze Drum Parade” combines local folk customs with traditional drumming rituals to create immersive cultural showcases that blend music, dance, and ethnic costume. The drummers, dressed in full traditional regalia, parade through villages and perform in public squares, transforming the event into a living cultural spectacle. This cyclical model of “festival–performance–dissemination” allows bronze drum culture to extend its symbolic value across diverse settings, reinforcing regional identity while exporting it to a wider audience.

(2) Cross-Boundary Communication via Digital Media and Emerging Platforms

The rise of digital technology has dramatically expanded the horizons for bronze drum culture, enabling it to break free from geographical limitations and engage with audiences across borders. Cultural heritage institutions in western Guangdong have increasingly integrated bronze drum traditions into digital promotion strategies, leveraging short video apps, live-streaming platforms, and e-commerce channels to produce and distribute diverse cultural content.

Bronze drums have thus evolved from mere ritual tools into dynamic digital artifacts—transformed into video clips, sound samples, cultural symbols, and narrative threads that permeate the digital landscape. A notable example is a bronze drum master in Gaozhou who shares drumming techniques and ceremonial stories on Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok), amassing hundreds of thousands of views. This exposure has not only elevated local cultural visibility but also inspired younger generations to engage directly with the tradition.

Meanwhile, platforms like the Guangdong Intangible Cultural Heritage Digital Archive have launched themed documentaries, VR exhibition halls, and interactive drum sound libraries—bringing bronze drum culture into classrooms and public cultural spaces. This multi-channel ecosystem has reshaped the traditional one-way transmission model into a collaborative triad: cultural creators, digital platforms, and engaged audiences co-constructing the culture’s new media presence. In this shared framework, bronze drum culture gains a sustainable foundation for cross-regional and cross-cultural exchange.

(3) Systematic Promotion through Education and Academic Collaboration

Institutions of education and research have also emerged as critical engines for the deep dissemination of bronze drum culture. Several universities in western Guangdong have integrated bronze drum studies into courses on ethnic music and folk traditions, combining theoretical instruction with hands-on training and fieldwork[5]. These programs strengthen cultural awareness and participation among students, planting the seeds for future custodians and advocates of this living heritage.

Beyond local initiatives, international academic collaborations are helping bronze drum culture cross national borders. In one example, the Guangdong Center for Ethnic Culture Studies partnered with Chinese education institutions in Malaysia to launch the “Lingnan Drum Music Research Program.” The project organized a series of themed lectures, cultural exchange tours, and archival exchanges, successfully staging “Bronze Drum Culture of Western Guangdong” exhibitions in cities such as Malacca and Kuala Lumpur. These events deepened the connection between overseas Chinese communities and Lingnan intangible heritage.

At the primary and secondary education level, efforts are underway to introduce bronze drum culture into school curricula. Extracurricular clubs, traditional instrument classes, and cultural knowledge competitions help students engage directly with the heritage—through playing, storytelling, and cultural exploration. This generational transmission model not only ensures continuity but also cultivates a future audience and potential cultural transmitters, embedding bronze drum culture in both memory and identity.

(4) Integrated Dissemination through Cultural Tourism

Integrating bronze drum culture with local tourism development has become a pragmatic and effective path for cross-cultural communication. Across western Guangdong, a growing “culture + tourism” movement is embedding bronze drum experiences into rural tourism, educational tours, and cultural festivals—transforming abstract heritage into tangible, interactive, and marketable experiences.

One exemplary initiative is the creation of a “Bronze Drum Cultural Eco-Village” in Gaozhou, where visitors can immerse themselves in live drum performances, traditional craft workshops, hands-on drumming lessons, and heritage exhibitions. This experiential tourism model enhances both cultural visibility and local economic vitality, creating a win-win synergy between tradition and modern development.

In tandem, cultural and tourism authorities are developing a wide range of bronze drum-themed creative products—clothing, jewelry, ornaments, toys—that reinterpret traditional elements into portable, relatable, and saleable formats. Drum-patterned T-shirts, miniature bronze drum replicas, and rhythmic toy sets have gained popularity on e-commerce platforms, expanding the culture’s

everyday relevance and market appeal.

Some regions have also combined bronze drum traditions with educational travel programs, launching “One-Day Intangible Heritage Experiences” and “Drum Culture Immersion Tours” aimed at students, families, and international tourists. In these journeys, participants become more than spectators—they engage as learners, practitioners, and storytellers. Through this interaction, bronze drum culture sheds its static museum image and steps into the public domain as a living, evolving cultural resource.

Conclusion: As a cultural crystallization of the multi-ethnic history of western Guangdong, bronze drum culture embodies remarkable resilience and an enduring capacity to adapt across eras. In the context of rapid globalization and digital transformation, the bronze drum has evolved far beyond a ritual artifact—it now stands as a dynamic cultural resource, rich with potential for storytelling, reinterpretation, and cross-cultural exchange. Its deeply rooted regional identity lends it a distinctive cultural allure and provides a vivid framework for communicating its essence to the world. This unique local character not only enhances its aesthetic and symbolic appeal but also strengthens its ability to stand out in the global cultural landscape. To ensure the continued vitality of bronze drum culture, it is essential to ground its transmission in respect for its original context—while embracing modern communication tools and forging diverse collaborative networks. Only by bridging tradition with innovation, and heritage with contemporary engagement, can bronze drum culture continue to thrive, resonate, and shine in an ever-expanding cultural space.

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