

A Study on the Relationship Between the Bronze Drum Patterns of Wanjiaba and Contemporary Yi Patterns in Chuxiong

Haolin Xiong and Jirawat Vongphantuset

Silpakorn University, Thailand

Corresponding Author, E-mail: haolin_x@su.ac.th

Abstract

Chuxiong's contemporary visual culture is distinguished by its rich diversity and the seamless integration of traditional Chinese cultural elements, ethnic minority influences, and modern aesthetics. This fusion creates a distinctive and dynamic artistic expression. Within this multicultural blend, Yi culture and bronze patterns play a significant role in shaping contemporary visual culture of Chuxiong.

This study conducts research on the contemporary use and display of Wanjiaba bronze patterns and Yi patterns through methods such as field research, literature review and collection, comparative analysis, and interview surveys. It assesses their proper application, identifies any alterations made, and explores their relevance to contemporary art and cultural heritage. By pinpointing areas where patterns may be confused or misused, the research aims to enhance the effective propagation and exhibition of these designs, thereby supporting cultural development and the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage in the Chuxiong region. The research findings indicate that some ancient patterns are no longer in use, while others have been inherited by the ancient Yi people and integrated into Yi culture. These patterns appear in modern visual culture in a different form, yet many local residents are largely unaware of the connection between Wanjiaba bronze drum patterns and contemporary patterns.

Keywords: Wanjiaba; Bronze Drum Culture; Yi Patterns; Visual Culture

Introduction

The Danish archaeologist G.J. Thomsen introduced the concept of the Bronze Age in 1816 as a way to categorize museum collections. Since then, this idea has been widely adopted by European archaeologists and has gained acceptance among Chinese scholars as well (Catherine, 2016.). In Chinese scholarship, the concept of the Bronze Age highlights the significance of bronze artifacts in the material culture of society (China's bronze culture emerged approximately 5,000 years ago in the basins of the Yellow River, Yangtze River, and Pearl River. This cultural era concluded around the 5th century B.C., marking a span of roughly 1,500 years. This period aligns with the timeline of the rise, development, and eventual decline of the Chinese slave state.)(Li & Huang, 2008) .

Chuxiong is located in central Yunnan Province, on the western part of the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau and the central Yunnan Plateau. Bordered by Kunming to the east and Dali to the west, Chuxiong has developed a unique local culture influenced by both Han culture and the traditions of ethnic minorities, particularly the Yi people (The contemporary geographical designations corresponding to the ancient regions of Dian and Erhai are discussed in subsequent sections.). The cultural blend in the region is a result of historical intermingling and mutual influence between the Han and minority cultures.

* Received: May 10 2024; Revised: June 7 2024; Accepted: June 11 2024

Chuxiong has revealed five significant Bronze Age archaeological sites, with the most prominent being Wanjiaba and Zhangjiatun. The Wanjiaba Ancient Tomb Cluster site has uncovered over 1,000 bronze artifacts, notably including the oldest known bronze drum, the Wanjiaba-type bronze drum, also referred to as the Prehegr-type bronze drum (Peng, 2016). Chuxiong is recognized by Chinese scholars as a core area within the Bronze Drum Cultural Circle, and the region's various other types of bronze artifacts play a crucial role in exploring the origins, development, and evolution of bronze culture in China and East Asia.

Although Chuxiong possesses several Stone Age sites, their influence on the region's visual culture is limited. This may be due to most Stone Age artifacts being found in fragmented condition and generally lacking intricate decorations.

While there is a gap in historical records between the bronze drum culture and contemporary culture, researchers studying Chuxiong Yi visual culture have noted some similarities in themes, compositions, and shapes between bronze drum patterns and modern Yi patterns. Whether Yi patterns can be seen as symbols of the continuation of bronze drum culture in the Chuxiong region has become the central question of this research.

Research Objectives

This study aims to investigate the relationship between the Wanjiaba bronze drum patterns and contemporary Yi patterns in the Chuxiong region. The specific objectives include:

1. This study organizes the types and uses of Wanjiaba bronze drum patterns, analyzing their themes, compositions, and forms.
2. It conducts research on contemporary visual culture in Chuxiong, exploring the composition of regional culture and cultural symbols, and analyzing the sources of cultural symbols.
3. Explore the relationship between the Wanjiaba bronze drum patterns and contemporary Yi patterns, investigating contemporary people's understanding of this connection to provide a new perspective for studying the diversity and complexity of Chuxiong culture.

Research Methodology

The research methods employed in this thesis encompass field research, literature review and collection, comparative analysis, and interview surveys. In the initial stage, comprehensive field research was conducted, involving in-depth observation and documentation of the physical characteristics of the Chuxiong Wanjiaba bronzes to ascertain intricate patterns and styles. Simultaneously, the study collected data on the contemporary use of Yi patterns in Chuxiong.

In the second stage, a comparative analysis was carried out between the patterns of bronze vessels from different regions, particularly focusing on similarities and distinctions in form and decoration between the another region and Chuxiong.

In the final stage, the research involved interviews and surveys with local artisans, artists, and scholars to gather their perspectives and experiences regarding the transmission of Wanjiaba bronze craftsmanship in Chuxiong.

Research Scope

The study of Chinese bronzes boasts a rich history and spans a wide range of topics, with numerous international scholars and archaeologists investigating the origins, stylistic features, and interregional connections through archaeological digs, artifact analysis, and scholarly publications. Among these scholars, Professor Dame Jessica Rawson stands out for her substantial contributions, particularly her works synthesizing the history, production techniques, and patterns of Chinese bronzes. Rawson's research examines the role of bronzes in ancient Chinese society, providing a nuanced understanding of their cultural and historical significance and offering a multifaceted perspective on the development and evolution of ancient Chinese bronze culture.

Professor Rawson has also focused on the bronzes from the Yunnan region of China, particularly in her work, *The Chinese Bronzes of Yunnan* (1983), highlighting the regional specificity of the culture. Yunnan's bronze-related research emphasizes the central Yunnan region, notably the ancient Dian state (Kunming) and the Erhai region (Dali), where archaeological research on bronzes is particularly prominent (Ambra, 2014). Interdisciplinary approaches combining archaeology with methods from disciplines such as fine arts, ethnology, and cultural studies have gained traction, offering in-depth insights into the characteristics and transformations of bronzes across different periods and regions. Most studies focus on the cultural exchanges and evolutions in these areas.

Research on Chuxiong bronzes centers largely on archaeological findings. Scholars have examined the forms, structures, and production techniques of Chuxiong bronzes, with a significant emphasis on the Wanjiaba bronze drums due to their relevance to the origins of bronze drums (Some Vietnamese scholars argue that the Wanjiaba type is a derivative of the Dong Son bronze drum from Vietnam rather than originating in Yunnan, China.) (Wang, 1990) . A smaller body of research has delved into the contemporary transmission and cultural preservation of Chuxiong bronzes. While such studies have addressed the preservation of this cultural heritage, they have not yet adequately explored the transmission of related skills or the appropriate incorporation of traditional elements into modern culture.

With the recent emphasis on multiculturalism and ethnic traditions, scholars are increasingly focused on how minority visual cultures are reproduced, disseminated, and manifested amid contemporary cross-cultural intermingling. Nevertheless, in-depth exploration of bronze culture remains a largely uncharted area. Overall, research specifically examining the Wanjiaba bronze patterns in Chuxiong and their contemporary inheritance is still relatively limited.

Research Findings

1. Chuxiong Bronze Culture

Bronze drum culture is emblematic of Chuxiong's ancient cultural identity and represents a cultural treasure shared among Chinese and Southeast Asian peoples.

The creation, development, and dissemination of the China-Southeast Asia bronze drum culture have been facilitated by cultural exchanges and mutual appreciation among ancient regional cultures such as the Luo and Yue cultures in China, the Dian culture, the Dong Son culture in Vietnam, and the Khmer culture in Cambodia. These interactions have played a crucial role in the evolution of ancient bronze drum culture throughout the region.

These ongoing exchanges and mutual understanding have shaped the entire trajectory of ancient China-Southeast Asia bronze drum culture and continue to serve as a foundation for the modern preservation and advancement of this cultural heritage.

Currently, the primary remains of bronze culture discovered in Chuxiong include the Wanjiaba Ancient Tomb Group, the Zhangjiatun Ancient Tomb Group, the Yaoan Ancient Tomb Group, and the Ancient Tomb Site in Jiangbian Township, Yuanmou County.

The Wanjiaba Ancient Tomb Group is a notable site within Chuxiong Prefecture that has undergone systematic excavation. It comprises 79 vertical shaft tombs and has yielded a total of 1,245 burials. Additionally, many of the bronzes unearthed sporadically in other parts of Chuxiong share similarities with those found at Wanjiaba, making the ancient tomb group representative of Chuxiong's bronze artifacts.

An examination of archaeological data reveals that Chuxiong Prefecture's bronze culture has been influenced by sarcophagus culture from northern Sichuan as well as from the northwestern regions of Dali and Lijiang. However, these influences are not directly reflected in the bronze patterns of Chuxiong and are therefore not discussed here.

At the Wanjiaba site, 102 bronze artifacts were unearthed. Based on the types of burial artifacts found in the tombs, the excavators categorized the tombs into two main types.

Class I tombs date from the Western Zhou Dynasty to the early Spring and Autumn Period and predominantly exhibit characteristics of Erhai bronze culture. Class II tombs date from the late Spring and Autumn Period to the Warring States Period and mainly reflect the characteristics of Dianchi bronze culture, with later tombs displaying more pronounced elements of Dianchi bronze culture. This progression indicates the growth and integration of various ethnic groups within the region. Consequently, Chinese scholars generally regard Chuxiong as a transition zone between Erhai and Dianchi bronze cultures, with most bronzes produced in the area incorporating aspects of both cultural traditions.

Table 1. Geometric Patterns on Bronzes of Wanjiaba

Pattern Name	Icon	Artifacts
Sun		Surface of the bronze drum
Cloud 1		Edge of bronze drum
Cloud 2		Inside of bronze drum
Web		Inside of bronze drum Surface of bronze kettle
Chord		Surface of bronze Sword
Forkhead-shaped		Edge of bronze drum
Triangles		Bronze Weapon Plaque Decoration

Source: Provided by Chuxiong Museum

Table 2 Animal patterns on Bronzes of Wanjiaba

Pattern Name	Icon	Artifacts
Four-legged reptile		Inside of bronze drum
Double snake		Surface of bronze Sword
Peacock feather		Surface of bronze Sword
Ox head		Surface of hoe
Bear stereoscopic		Bronze Weapon Plaque Decoration

Source: Provided by Chuxiong Museum

2. Contemporary Chuxiong Visual Culture

In the traditional culture of the Yi people, sun patterns and elements such as totems and patterns related to the sun have an important position (Yang & Yang, 2016), and tracing back this totem, it was first decorated on the surface of the bronze drums of Wanjiaba. Most Chinese scholars agree that there is a close connection between the sun patterns on the bronze drums of Wanjiaba and the sun totems, patterns and other elements of the Yi culture, and that through comparative analyses of the morphology, arrangement, variants and other features of the sun patterns on the bronze drums of Wanjiaba, it is possible to explore the visual and morphological similarities between them and the traditional patterns of the Yi people.

The sun patterns, which is the central pattern of the bronze drums of Wanjiaba, also appears on several important rock paintings in southwestern China. In both southern China and Southeast Asia, bronze drums were an important physical medium for performing rituals related to sun patterns (Li & Huang, 2008). Chinese academics have always had different

opinions about the bronzes in the Yunnan region. The author believes that in the Yunnan, Guizhou and Guangxi regions at that time, there were many ethnic groups living in mixed communities, and these civilisations were not the result of the development of a single culture, as evidenced by the smelting technology and production process of bronze, as well as the circulation and evolution of the sun patterns in the southwestern region, which have experienced the fusion of multiple civilisations and have a strong inclusiveness.

Since ancient times, Yunnan has inevitably seen the fusion of ethnic groups and their cultures because of the mixing of ethnic groups. In fact, Yunnan is still a paradise where many ethnic groups live in harmony, and many ethnic minorities have preserved their architectural styles, clothing and decorations, as well as their living customs, which can be vaguely seen thousands of years ago. Even in the symbols of today's embroidery patterns, the use of the same pattern or the preference for certain colour combinations by several ethnic groups suggests the genetic lineage of the ethnic groups.

Nowadays, cultural tourism in the Yi region is gradually emerging, attracting tourists to experience and understand the Yi culture. This trend has led to a greater emphasis on the expression of Yi visual culture in urban environments to attract more tourists, and at the same time to allow local residents to engage and experience their culture more deeply. Some modern Yi visual culture works also reflect the impact of social change on traditional lifestyles.

Overall, modern Chuxiong visual culture takes bronze patterns as its source, and on the basis of traditional Yi cultural elements, it continues to innovate and integrate traditional patterns, symbols and colours into modern creations to create unique and contemporary works.

3. Wanjiaba Bronze Patterns in Modern Decoration

Bronze patterns have been closely integrated with Yi culture during the long cultural flow. Nowadays, the bronze patterns appearing in Chuxiong, except for individual bronze drum shapes, are basically regarded as Yi patterns by default, and usually use Yi colours. In this section, the author will choose typical and high public visibility cases to be analysed.

Although oxen appear on a large number of bronzes from the Yunnan region, no completed sculpture in the form of an ox has been unearthed in the Chuxiong region. The upper part of this bronze ox sculpture (Figure 1) is taken from ancient Yunnan bronzes, the lower half takes the form of a bronze drum from Wanjiaba, with new decorative patterns on the sides that fit the theme, and traditional cloud patterns on the rim.



Figure 1 Bronze Bull Sculpture in the Middle of the Road in Chuxiong City Centre (Source: Photo by researchers, 2023)

The sculpture (Figure 2) in the shape of a tiger belongs to the symbols of Yi culture, in the Ten-months solar calendar Park of Chuxiong, a famous attraction in Chuxiong, a combination of a tiger and a bronze drum of Wanjiaba was once used. The tiger sits crouching on a large drum, with its left foot stepping on a smaller-sized drum.



Figure 2 Bronze Tigers Sculpture in Park of Chuxiong (Source: Photo by researchers, 2008)

This is a bronze drum sculpture (Figure 3) at the entrance of a famous park in Chuxiong, but using the bronze drum pattern from the Guangxi region of China. This pattern, as one of the unique patterns of the Zhuang people in Guangxi, has a circle of flying birds surrounding the sun patterns, which is related to the Brahma legend in the Guangxi region. This pattern was incorrectly used on this sculpture. A correct example is the sculpture (Figure 4) at the Wanjiaba ruins, where an ancient man shoulders a correctly formed bronze drum and wears his weapon, a bronze sword, at his waist.



Figure3 Bronze Drum Sculpture in Park of Chuxiong (Source: Photo by researchers, 2023)



Figure 4 Sculpture at the Wanjiaba Ruins (Source: Photo by researchers, 2023)

From these author's photos of Chuxiong street decorations (figure 5), it is obvious that these decorations come from the Wanjiaba Bronze Patterns, the sun patterns have evolved into a pattern consisting of black, red and yellow, with the addition of the Yi Fire Totem to the sun patterns. The two cloud patterns appear to merge, and like the triangular patterns, they become common decorations. The bull's head changed from a flat surface to a three-dimensional one, and was used as a decoration for the beams of houses.



Figure 5 Chuxiong Street (Source: Photo by researchers, 2023)

The author's research on the famous attractions in Chuxiong in the minds of 2,055 locals, a total of 20 attractions were mentioned, and the bronze-related Chuxiong State Museum ranked 5th, being mentioned 1,291 times. The Wanjiaba ruins were mentioned only 67 times, ranking the 20th.

A questionnaire survey of 600 Chuxiong locals on the understanding of local patterns was conducted again through the network, and the results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Local Familiarity with the Pattern

Pattern Name	Mentioned (%)	Explained meaning(%)	Artifacts
Sun	319 (53.2%)	312 (52%)	4th
Ox head	278 (46.3%)	91 (15.2%)	5th
Bronze drum	272 (45.3%)	272 (45.3%)	6th
Cloud	39 (6.5%)	27 (4.5%)	9th
Web	16 (2.6%)	4 (0.6%)	21th

Soure: (Nassaji, 2015)

After the above survey it is concluded that the inheritance and protection of local patterns in Chuxiong is relatively good. However, local people only have a certain understanding of the Wanjiaba Bronze Drums, and relatively little understanding of the Sun Pattern, Ox Pattern and Rolling Clouds Pattern, and only some of the interviewees were able to correctly state their meanings. In addition, only a few interviewees were able to directly associate the sun pattern, ox pattern, and scrolling cloud pattern with the Wanjiaba bronze. Overall, the inheritance of local patterns in Chuxiong is better, but the connection with the Wanjiaba Bronzes is not obvious. Locals are less aware of the important history and cultural status of the Wanjiaba Bronze.

Discussion

The double-snake pattern, the forked-head line, and the bear pattern in the Wanjiaba Bronze Patterns are no longer used in the Chuxiong area today, while the sun pattern and others became the predecessors of the Yi traditional patterns, which were popular in this area along with the Yi culture.

Most of the Yi creators agree with the idea that the inheritance of the Wanjiaba bronze pattern is now mainly reflected in the use of Yi lacquerware (Figure 6) and the popularisation of museums. Chuxiong Yi lacquerware is the most widely used and inherited and even improved carrier today. The production of lacquerware has strict requirements for craftsmen and patterns, especially for some implements that are still used by folk religion. Because of its combination of artistry and practicality, lacquerware has become the main way of passing down the Wanjiaba Bronze Patterns in contemporary times, and also the most suitable carrier. However, most people are not aware of the origin of the use of patterns on lacquer ware, and publicity should be strengthened.



In addition, through the promotion and popularisation of the museum, the Wanjiaba bronze pattern has been more widely publicised and passed on. The exhibitions and educational activities organised by the museum provide an important platform for contemporary transmission and enable more people to understand and value this traditional culture. Therefore, the use of lacquer ware and the popularisation of museums play a crucial role in the contemporary transmission of the Wujiaba Bronze Patterns.

Recommendations

The design of patterns in areas such as street decoration and Yi clothing in the Chuxiong region reflects the continuation and evolution of ancient decorative styles. Discusses the design patterns in the Chuxiong region, specifically in street decoration and Yi clothing. It highlights the interplay between ancient and modern elements, emphasizing the importance of preserving traditional culture while infusing it with new life. The evolution of patterns, particularly in the context of animal sculptures mimicking Middle Kingdom bronzes, is seen as a way to symbolize and assert the significance of the bronze culture within Yi culture in contemporary society.

However, the simplification of original patterns has increasingly been supplanted by overly elaborate decorative elements, resulting in a crowded and disorganized appearance. This transformation from abstract to more figurative forms may compromise the inherent subtlety

and connotations of the original designs. Moreover, the transition from two-dimensional to three-dimensional patterns could impede their practical utility.

To address these concerns, the study suggests several approaches. Firstly, it advocates for the enhancement of research and protection of Wanjiaba's bronze patterns in Chuxiong to facilitate their integration into contemporary art and design. Secondly, it emphasizes the need for clear standards and guidance in the contemporary transmission of these patterns to avoid excessive adaptation and mixing. Finally, the study calls for improved aesthetic oversight to safeguard the unique regional characteristics and historical-cultural significance of these patterns.

In conclusion, the recommendations focus on advancing research, conservation, and promotion of traditional patterns, as well as establishing guidelines to balance the preservation of original simplicity with the integration of modern elements in design and heritage practices.

References

Ambra, C. (2014). *Trails of bronze drums across early Southeast Asia: Exchange routes and connected cultural spheres*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Catherine, C. (2016). *The people between the rivers: The rise and fall of a bronze drum culture, 200–750 CE*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Li, K., & Huang, D. (2008). *Ancient bronze drums of China and Southeast Asia*. Yunnan Fine Arts Press.

Nassaji, H. (2015). Qualitative and descriptive research: Data type versus data analysis. *Language Teaching Research*. 19 (2), 129-132.

Peng, C. (2016). Evolutionary process of Tonggu cultural circle. *Guangxi Ethnic Research*. (1), 116-123.

Wang, D. (1990). Yunnan bronze culture and its relationship with the Dongshan culture of Vietnam and Ban Chiang culture of Thailand. *Archaeology*. (6), 531-543, 553.

Yang, F., & Yang, Y. (2016). Origin and evolution of the Yi culture of Chuxiong. *Journal of Chuxiong Normal College*. (10), 57-70.