



Why Are Bronze Drums Buried?

Mo Tradition and Zhuang People – China

Before the first human being emerged, the universe was divided into three parts: the upper part, which became heaven; the middle part, which became earth; and the lower part, which became water. And the three primordial brothers took possession of the three pieces into which the world had been divided.

Duzbiaj, the eldest, lord of thunder, kept the sky.

Duzngieg, the second, the dragon king, kept the water.

And finally, Baeuqloegdoz, the youngest, was left with the land, accompanied by his wife Mehmiok, the mother of wisdom. Together they would beget the Zhuang, who would become the flowers of Mehmiok's garden.

Time passed by and the Zhuang began to suffer hardship whenever Duzngieg refused to give up his water, causing a drought, or poured it on the land furiously, causing floods. So the Zhuang turned to their primordial ancestor, Baeuqloegdoz, for advice. Baeuqloegdoz, the old man of the mountains, thought that this would be a good opportunity for his descendants to learn the mechanisms of heaven, earth and water, and suggested that they observe the frogs, daughters of his brother Duzbiaj, lord of thunder.

They did this for a while, until they discovered that it was the frogs who called the rains with their croaking whenever they needed to renew the water, so they went to ask the frogs to teach them how to croak like they did.

‘No matter how much we teach you to croak, you will not be able to draw the rains as we do,’ the frogs replied, ‘for if our song draws thunder and rain from the sky, it is because we are the daughters of Duzbiaj, the lord of the sky, who knows our voice.’

The Zhuang were disappointed with that answer, but then one of them had an idea.

‘And could you not be the messengers between earth and heaven to ask Duzbiaj what we Zhuang could do to request rain from him as well?’

And frogs, who have always been kind-hearted, agreed to the Zhuang’s request. Not long after, the lord of thunder answered them, saying:

‘I will give them a voice with which they can call to me whenever their throats and their fields need water.’

And Duzbiaj took a star from the sky and turned it into a bronze drum, in the image and likeness of his own drum, the Sun.

That was the first bronze drum of the Zhuang People, to whom he would give instructions, through his daughters the frogs, that, when they needed the rains in their mountains, they should turn their hearts to the southeast and beat the bronze drum. Duzbiaj would listen to the song of the drum, a living entity born of their imagination, and send them the nourishing waters.

And he told them that they too could forge bronze drums, as many as there are stars in the sky, as long as they conformed to the proportions, shapes and materials of that first drum. If they did so, their bronze drums would also have a life of their own, for the drums were all direct children of the imagination of the thunder-lord Duzbiaj.

So, over the centuries, the Zhuang became skilled masters of forging bronze drums and, following Duzbiaj's instructions, they made as many drums as there are stars in the sky, decorating each and every one of them with a star in the centre of its drumhead.

Time passed, and the Zhuang settled in a paradisiacal setting, next to a mountain spring flowing from a cave. The spring came directly from the sky, and that made its water extraordinarily pure.

The Zhuang called this spring the Spring of the White Geese after the pair of birds that swam in its waters, which they considered to be the keepers of the spring: wherever the geese were, there the spring would be. For this reason, the Zhuang looked after them, and not only looked after them, but also admired and contemplated them. Thanks to the geese, life flooded the lands of the Zhuang, for from the waters of their spring grew the trees and fruits on which they fed, the herbs that fattened their livestock, and even the flowers that brightened their souls each morning at sunrise. And, with their waters, the Zhuang refreshed their throats when, tired, they took a break during the day's farming work.

Alas, the *duwu* happened to pass by, who, in his wickedness, could not consent to such bliss among the Zhuang. Knowing that it depended on the geese, the *duwu* climbed up to the cave one night and, opening his fetid mouth, breathed his poisonous fumes into the cave, where the geese were nesting. The terrified geese slipped through the crevices of the cave and disappeared into the bowels of the mountain.

The following morning, the Zhuang awoke to find that the water had stopped flowing from the cave. The geese had disappeared and, in their place, a disgusting, stinking creature occupied their nest.

For a long time, the Zhuang suffered from the evil presence of the *duwu* in the cave, and there were some villagers who, in an attempt to dislodge the detestable being, went armed into his grottoes ... never to come out. The *duwu*, with the deadly gas of his breath, would not leave alive anyone who confronted him.

Finally, the Zhuang sought advice from the ancestor of their ancestors, the old man of the mountains, Baeuqloegdoz, who, as he had done in the past, referred them back to the frogs.

'Has it ever occurred to you that they too must be suffering from water scarcity?' he asked. 'Talk to them. I'm sure they can help you.'

And the Zhuang did so.

‘Many of us have died in all these years of drought,’ said the frogs, ‘but we didn’t know that the lack of water was due to the geese fleeing because of the duwu. We will ask our father Duzbiaj.’

And the frogs did so.

And Duzbiaj told them that he would send help soon.

Taking a star from the sky, the lord of thunder forged a new bronze drum, a distinct and special drum which he called Aran, and laid it at night at the foot of the mountain, on the side of which the cave opened. The next day, the drum was transformed into a young warrior, handsome and strong.

Armed with his broad sword, a bow and a handful of arrows, Aran immediately rode up to the cave on two bronze drums, but found that the entrance to the cavern was closed with a stone door. Banging his bronze drums, Aran smashed down the door, as well as the other stone doors he encountered along the way. He also found on his journey the bones of the Zhuang who had previously tried to dislodge the perfidious creature, and he mourned their sad end. But he pressed on, overcoming obstacles until he finally met the duwu face to face.

The beast opened his mouth and, showing his red, disgusting tongue, spat his poisonous gas at the young man, but the bronze drums spewed forth a blazing fire which consumed the gas. Aran's response was as swift as his drums, for, in the blink of an eye, he fired twelve arrows at the duwu, who, sorely wounded, redoubled his rage. He lunged at Aran with terrible force, but the young man responded by unsheathing his sword and pointing it at his head. For fourteen days they fought, while the gas from the duwu’s mouth and the fire from the bronze drums melted the rock walls of the grotto, until finally the duwu fled, battered.

Aran was exhausted, but he knew he couldn’t stop, lest the duwu catch up with the geese again. So he walked through the labyrinth of mountain tunnels and crossed thirteen deep pools of water until he came to a stone forest. Fearing that he would get lost in the maze of twists and crossroads of the forest, Aran trusted his intuition and kept going until, at last, he found the geese’s tracks in a small cave.

Following the tracks for thirteen days, Aran finally found the pair of fearful white geese huddling in a stone nest.

Aran asked them to come back, telling them that the duwu had fled and would never return, but the geese told him that they were very frightened and would not return to the cave of the spring for anything in the world. And then Aran felt within himself the voice of his father, Duzbiaj: he was a bronze drum, and his song was not only able to reach the most unreachable heights of the sky, but also the deepest corners of hearts.

So Aran began to sing, and in his song he reminded them of the happiness they had felt during the years they had lived together with the Zhuang villagers, and told them of the Zhuang's suffering in their absence, of the death of some of them trying to free them, and of the future they might have if they lived together again.

Aran sang for thirteen days and thirteen nights, until, moved by Aran's voice and words, the geese rose up and said to him:

'We are willing to return with the Zhuang, but as far as there is someone to look after us in the cave, someone to keep us safe from future attacks by the duwu.'

'I can look after you,' Aran replied. 'Trust me, I can be the guardian of the spring.'

'But to be the guardian of the spring,' said the geese sadly, 'you would have to change into a rock and be buried forever in the mountain above the cave of the spring. You would feel trapped and alone!' they concluded sympathetically.

But Aran did not shrink from such a prospect.

'I am resolved to be the guardian of the spring,' he replied. 'Do not worry about me. I shall be fine, for I shall be able to see from the mountain the Zhuang harvesting their crops and to hear the laughter of their sons and daughters. I will be able to hear them singing again and to see them laughing at their feasts ... and I will be able to see them beating the bronze drums at their celebrations.'

Then he added with a sweet smile:

‘I will never feel lonely or stuck. In fact, from time to time, I will let myself be pulled from the ground to make my voice heard in the sky, to let my father Duzbiaj know that I am still alive and watching over you, to return again to the bowels of the mountain and continue to watch over your dream.’

Convinced at last, Aran helped the geese out of the small cavern and guided them back to the spring cave, returning with them to the region the life-giving waters.

And after celebrating the reunion with the geese and the Zhuang, dancing and singing with them, Aran returned to the cave, changed himself back into a bronze drum and buried himself in the mountain above the spring to become a rock and guard the spring of bliss of the Zhuang People forever.

This is why bronze drums are buried in Guangxi, and it is also why whoever finds and digs up a bronze drum can consider themselves the luckiest person in the world. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda and Xueping Luo (2024).

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Comments

The second part of this story, the one about the geese and the hero Aran, was edited by YANG Yerong and CEN Longye, having been selected by CHEN Ping (Yao, 2014).

As for the first part, it is a recreation of the adapters from the Mo tradition myths of the Zhuang people (Lu, 2023; Qian, 2013).

The bronze drum (tóng gǔ) is one of the most significant elements of Zhuang culture, although it is a cultural feature common to various ethnic groups in Southeast Asia, such as the Han, Yao, Miao, Yi, Shui and Buyi. Bronze drums date back between 2,000 and 2,500 years among the Zhuang, being a sacred symbol of authority and wealth originally used for religious and ceremonial purposes, even as a sacrificial vessel. Later, they would be used to convey messages, to

summon people to war, or even for everyday village activities in the Guangxi region (Hays, 2022; Huá Fū Bǐng, 2022).

Over the centuries the Zhuang bronze drums would adopt other uses and meanings, becoming a symbol of identity and cultural legacy of the Zhuang People, one of the largest ethnic groups in present-day China, with 18 million people. This would lead in many cases to consider the loss of these drums as a celestial sign of the loss of the right to rule or of the possession of the land.

However, the Zhuang bronze drums have, throughout their history and according to their myths, had an even deeper level, related to Zhuang spiritual beliefs in the Mo tradition. From here, these drums are really seen as living beings and part of nature, as totems, i.e. as vehicles of some kind of magical power (Hays, 2022). They can dissipate sorrow and pain, overcome obstacles and disasters, and bring about more favourable living conditions. Indeed,

Among the Zhuang people, there are folklores about bronze drums flying out during nights to fight with Duzngieg, the water god who brings floods and droughts to the earth. (Qian, 2013, p. 29)

This is a power that the Zhuang feel is enhanced when the drums are buried, as the second part of our story intends to explain both metaphorically and narratively. In this sense, the drums would fulfil a connecting role between heaven and earth and, above all, a link to the ancestors, which are very important in Zhuang spiritual beliefs. This makes them precious artifacts which have been passed down as treasures from generation to generation, both within families and in entire villages in the case of community bronze drums (Huá Fū Bǐng, 2022).

The custom of burying drums is undoubtedly very old, as there are records suggesting that very old drums were already being dug up during the Tang (618 to 907 CE) and Song (960 to 1279 CE) dynasties. Around 560 bronze drums with different designs and sizes have been unearthed alone in Guangxi, most of which have been found in areas inhabited by the Zhuang. The largest of these drums is 165 centimetres in diameter and weighs 300 kilos, while the smallest is 10 centimetres (Hays, 2022).

Sources

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Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 6d: Prevent pollution of any part of the environment and allow no build-up of radioactive, toxic, or other hazardous substances.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble - Earth, Our Home: The resilience of the community of life and the well-being of humanity depends upon preserving a healthy biosphere with all its ecological systems, a rich variety of plants and animals, fertile soils, pure waters, and clean air.

Preamble – The Challenges Ahead: We have the knowledge and technology to provide for all and to reduce our impacts on the environment.

Principle 7c: Promote the development, adoption, and equitable transfer of environmentally sound technologies.

Principle 9a: Guarantee the right to potable water, clean air, food security, uncontaminated soil, shelter, and safe sanitation, allocating the national and international resources required.

Principle 12: Uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health, and spiritual well-being, with special attention to the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities.

Principle 16d: Eliminate nuclear, biological, and toxic weapons and other weapons of mass destruction.

