

The Spread and Cultural Influence of Đông Sơn Bronze Drums in Southern Vietnam and Southeast Asia

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Abstract: This study aims to analyze the presence and dissemination of Đông Sơn bronze drums beyond their traditional cultural sphere. By analyzing 159 Đông Sơn-type bronze drums discovered in southern Vietnam and Southeast Asia, we created distribution maps, identified key characteristics, and reconstructed their diffusion routes. The study also suggests a multi-centered system of production-distribution-consumption of bronze drums, hypothesizes the relative chronology of diffusion waves, and identifies the driving forces behind the spread of towards Southern Southeast Asia. Đông Sơn bronze drums have helped affirm the unity in diversity of Southeast Asia while serving as evidence of the cultural exchange, integration, and creativity of the region's communities, which is good for safeguarding regional cultural heritage and affirming Đông Sơn culture's significance within Southeast Asia. The findings highlight the extensive influence of the Đông Sơn culture, which transformed bronze drums into a shared cultural-civilizational heritage, reinforcing the 'unity in diversity' of Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Archaeology, Đông Sơn bronze drums, Southeast Asia.

Subject classification: Archaeology.

1. Introduction

The Metal Age marked a transformative period in human history, shaping the foundations of ancient civilizations. In Southeast Asia, this period began approximately 4,000 years ago, with the emergence of highly developed "regional centers" that served as focal points of cultural convergence and crystallization. Notably, this era witnessed intense cultural exchange and integration, both intra-regionally and inter-regionally, establishing important prerequisites for the formation of early states in the first centuries CE. Within this context, bronze drums

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became a distinctive cultural and archaeological hallmark, across Vietnam, southern China, and the broader Southeast Asian region. In particular, Đông Sơn bronze drums - also known as Heger Type I drums - are considered the pinnacle of ancient bronze drum craftsmanship, demonstrated through sophisticated casting techniques and a rich system of deeply symbolic decorative patterns. The study of Đông Sơn bronze drums holds significance beyond mere archaeological interest, playing a crucial role in reconstructing the comprehensive picture of Southeast Asia's protohistoric development.

However, for an extended period, studies on Đông Sơn bronze drums were often confined to discussions of origins, partly due to the sensitivity of this issue in relation to nation-building processes and ethnic identity formation*. This inadvertently created significant gaps in our understanding of the presence and diffusion of Đông Sơn bronze drums across a vast geographical space, extending beyond the traditional sphere of the Đông Sơn culture. Filling these gaps requires new interdisciplinary and inter-regional approaches.

In recent years, the emergence of new source materials about Đông Sơn bronze drums in Southeast Asian countries has opened opportunities for more comprehensive research. Based on this rich database, our research aims to analyze the distribution characteristics of drums in southern Vietnam and Southeast Asia, to explain their presence and outline the diffusion routes of bronze drum "waves". Through this, we contribute to illuminating the role of Đông Sơn bronze drums as an important indicator of cultural, economic, and political interactions among ancient communities in the region.

2. Distribution of Đông Sơn bronze drums in Southern Vietnam and Southeast Asia

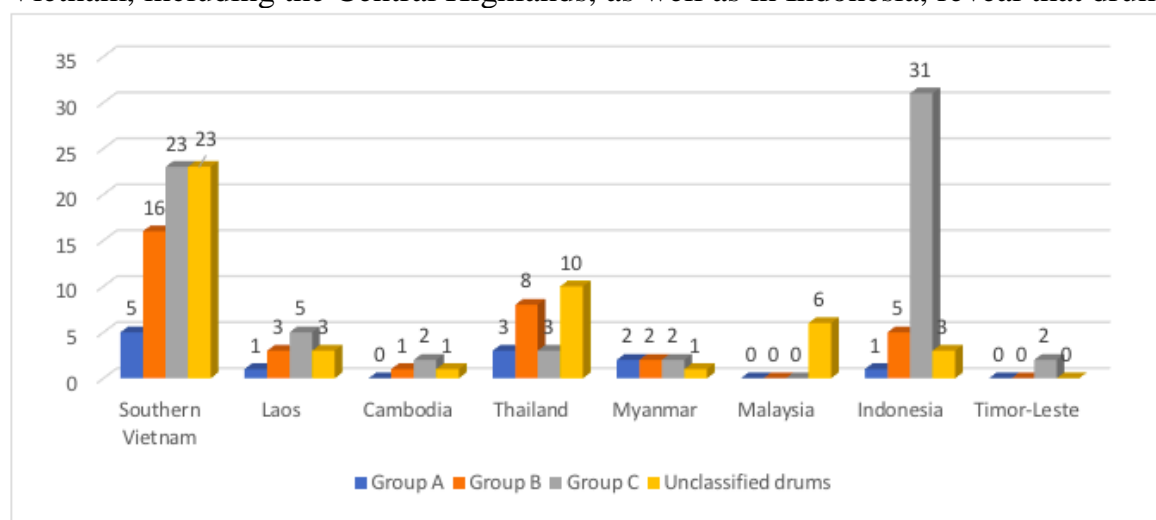
2.1. General characteristics

This study adopts a regional and inter-regional perspective, moving beyond the constraints of modern national boundaries in Southeast Asia. Instead, we strive for a regional and inter-regional approach to provide a comprehensive overview of Southeast Asia in the centuries around the Common Era. Therefore, the entire geographical scope of this study is divided into mainland Southeast Asia, which includes Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, the Malay Peninsula, and insular

* Currently, researchers remain divided on the classification and dating of bronze drum types, particularly between Vietnamese and Chinese scholars. In this article, the author agrees with the classification and dating of bronze drums proposed by Japanese scholar Imamura (2010) in his article "The distribution of bronze drums of the Heger I and Pre I Type: Temporal changes and historical background".

Southeast Asia, which includes East Malaysia, Indonesia, and Timor Leste. References to modern administrative locations are solely used to pinpoint specific archaeological sites on the geographical map.

Currently, there are various hypotheses regarding the functions of Đông Sơn drums. However, the motifs on some of them, such as the Ngọc Lũ drum, depict their use as musical instruments in rituals. Archaeological discoveries in southern Vietnam, including the Central Highlands, as well as in Indonesia, reveal that drums



Source: Nguyễn Hữu Mạnh, Vũ Thảo Hiền

The chart shows that Đông Sơn bronze drums are found in almost all Southeast Asian countries, except the Philippines where none have been discovered. Most drums were found in early metallurgical and agricultural centers or large trading ports, and it is surmised that they were often used as grave goods in tombs or coffins. Tombs containing bronze drums have been identified as the burial sites of leaders or prominent figures in society, referred to as “Big Men” (Eiji, 2004). Notably, while some drums in western Indonesia have been discovered in burial

[†] Recent archaeological discoveries reveal that Đông Sơn drums have been found in most provinces of Central Vietnam, within the distribution area of the Sa Huỳnh culture. Quảng Trị province has four drums: Trà Lộc (A4), Quảng Trị (B2), Đồ Sơn (B3), and Hiền Lương. Thừa Thiên-Huế province has one drum: Phong Mỹ (C2). Quảng Nam province has three drums: Phước Trà (C2), Duy Xuyên, and Co Noon. Quảng Ngãi province has one drum: Bàu Lát (A3). Bình Định province has 15 drums. Phú Yên province has one drum: Hòa Tân Tây (C2). Khánh Hòa province has four drums: Đại Cát I, II (A3), Nha Trang I (B), Nha Trang II (A5), and one unclassified drum: Đại Cát III. To contribute to the synthesis and provide visual materials for researchers and interested individuals, we have established an online digital map using open-source data from Google. (<https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/edit?mid=1WRiXQHGjYLVfibxJoO783mw0ggqowas&usp=sharing>).

sites, all 31 drums in eastern Indonesia were found by chance (Calo, 2009: 15-16, 107-109, 125; Nuno Vasco Oliveira et al., 2019: 166). Many of these drums remain in situ and are often revered when discovered. Based on the distribution characteristics of Đông Sơn drums, we draw the following points for discussion:

- *Regarding typological characteristics:* This region exhibits the presence of all four drum groups (A, B, C, and D). This indicates continuous cultural interaction between the inhabitants of northern Vietnam, southern Vietnam, and Southeast Asia throughout the existence and development of the Đông Sơn drums, resulting in the presence of both early and late drum groups (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Distribution of Đông Sơn Bronze Drums in Southern Vietnam and Southeast Asia

Source: Nguyễn Hữu Mạnh, Vũ Thảo Hiền



- *Regarding distribution characteristics:* in general, nearly all drum artifacts are distributed according to three main patterns:

+ Along the coastal routes of mainland Southeast Asia, stretching from the south-central coast of Vietnam to Myanmar, Thailand, and the western coast of the Malay Peninsula, as well as the major islands of the Malay Archipelago (Spriggs & Miller, 1988; Calo, 2009).

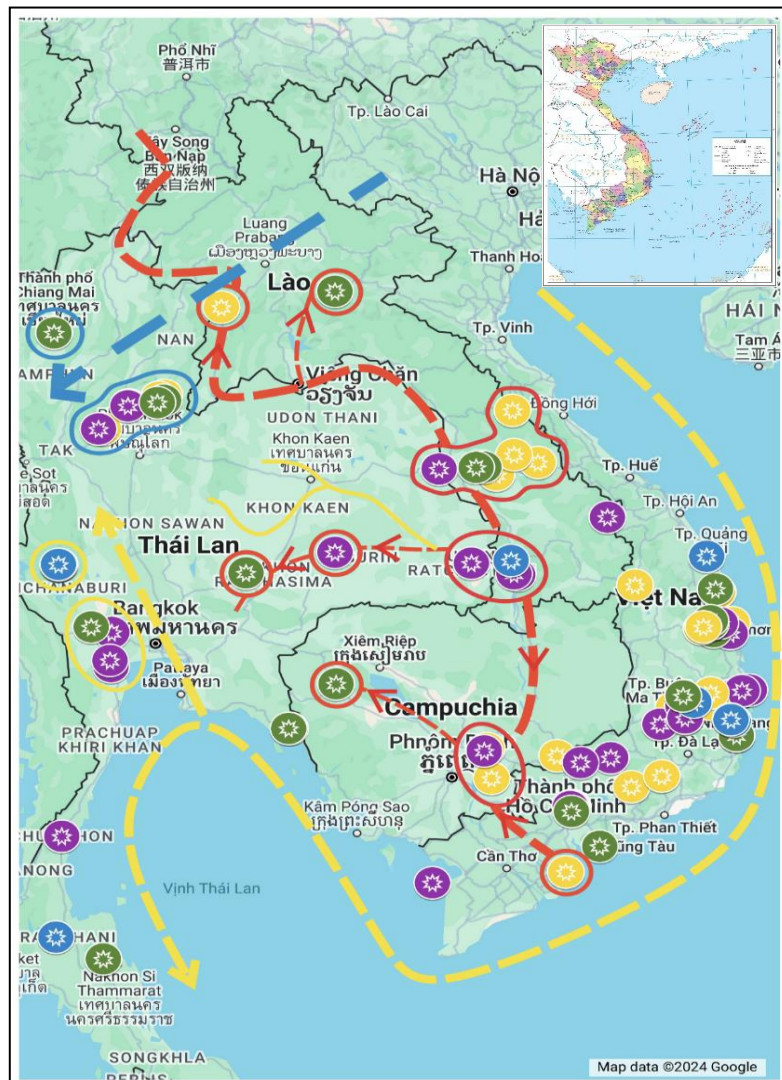
+ Around the basins of major rivers, particularly large river systems such as the Mekong, Chao Phraya, Mae Klong, Đồng Nai, and Kôn rivers.

+ Clustered in large numbers in areas with favorable geo-economic positions, such as river junctions, estuaries, seaports, lowland river deltas, or along major river systems.

To clarify, we will now analyze in detail some typical drum clusters, thereby identifying the relationships between distribution trends and preliminarily proposing hypotheses about the intra-regional exchange routes of the drums.

Along the coastline of mainland Southeast Asia, we focus on two major clusters of Đông Sơn bronze drums: the Nha Trang cluster and the Malay Peninsula cluster. These served as prominent examples of distribution centers for bronze drums, functioning as transit hubs for long-distance maritime journeys rather than being distributed deep inland. A notable characteristic of these clusters is the high density of drum artifacts, located near coastlines, river mouths, seaports, peninsulas, and other geo-economically advantageous positions (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Assumptions about the Spread of Đông Sơn Bronze Drums in Continental Southeast Asia



Source: Nguyễn Hữu Mạnh, Vũ Thảo Hiền

2.2. Mainland Southeast Asia

During the Metal Age, thanks to its favorable geographical location and natural conditions, Nha Trang was an important seaport with a dense population and numerous archaeological sites belonging to the Xóm Cồn and Sa Huỳnh cultures. The dating of the Nha Trang cluster indicates that Đông Sơn drums appeared here very early on. Similarly, the Malay Peninsula cluster consists of 10 drum artifacts scattered not far from the eastern coast of the Kra Isthmus and both the eastern and western coasts of the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula. With its strategic geographical position connecting Biển Đông (the East Sea, also known as the South China Sea) with the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal, as well as linking mainland Southeast Asia with insular Southeast Asia, early on the Kra Isthmus and Malay Peninsula were vibrant maritime trade centers, acting as pivotal “hinges” in the dissemination of Đông Sơn bronze drums.

In contrast, the Đồng Nai river cluster, Cồn river cluster (Bình Định province), and the Ongbah cave cluster (Kanchanaburi, Thailand) exemplify centers of bronze drum importation and consumption. These clusters are characterized by a significant number of drum artifacts penetrating deep into inland areas, scattered around river basins and lakes, which were favorable for large communities and used in the cultural context of local populations.

The Đồng Nai river cluster comprises 12 drums, spanning from Vũng Tàu coastal areas to upstream regions such as Bình Phước and Đà Lạt (Lâm Đồng). This area represents an intersection and cultural exchange zone between the Sa Huỳnh and Óc Eo cultures. The distribution pattern clearly illustrates a transportation route from the coast upriver, penetrating deep into inland, where the drums were adopted and utilized within the cultural context of local communities. Notably, four drums excavated from Phú Chánh cemetery were used as coffins or lids for wooden jar coffins - a unique funerary practice reflecting the cultural interactions among ancient civilizations in Vietnam (Bùi Chí Hoàng et al., 2017).

The Ongbah cave cluster includes four drums used as burial goods in boat-shaped graves. Additionally, in the upper reaches of the Mae Klong river in Kanchanaburi province, Thailand, several burial sites with bronze drums used as grave goods have been discovered. The owners of these drums not only carried the drums but also preserved the burial traditions of the ancient Đông Sơn culture. These drums exhibit shapes and bear motifs closely resembling those of the Quảng Xương and Hữu Chung drums (Vietnam).

Recent studies have also identified bronze drums discovered in Ubon Ratchathani (northeastern Thailand) and Champasak (southern Laos) that feature patterns similar to Đông Sơn drum molds found in Luy Lâu (Nitta, 2000). This suggests that these drums might have been transported from northern Vietnam

along coastal routes before moving upriver into inland. This hypothesis is supported by the scattered distribution of drums in Khu Bua, Pak Tho, and Khao Saphai Raeng (Ratchaburi province, Thailand) in the lower Mae Klong river area.

The Côn river cluster (Bình Định) shows signs of being a drum-casting center outside the traditional Đông Sơn cultural area. Bình Định possesses the largest collection of Đông Sơn drums in the south-central region of Vietnam. Notably, six drums from the Gò Thị burial site in Vĩnh Thạnh district were discovered alongside other burial goods. After analyzing bronze samples from eight drum artifacts, researcher Diệp Đình Hoa concluded that the Bình Định drums were cast using local ore sources from Vĩnh Thạnh and Phù Cát. Researchers also observed that the Tây Thuận drum exhibits casting techniques and decorative patterns entirely different from Group C drums in the region (Phạm Minh Huyền, Nishimura, 2008: 188-191). This suggests that ancient Bình Định communities not only collected and used drums in their cultural practices but might have also developed a local drum-casting tradition modeled on the Đông Sơn style.

When examining drum clusters concentrated around river basins, particular attention must be paid to the scale and interconnectedness of clusters distributed along the Mekong river system and its tributaries. At least 18 drums from Groups A, B, and C have been identified across the territories of Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. The Mekong river system played a crucial role in the dissemination of Đông Sơn bronze drums throughout Southeast Asia. Along this route, early metallurgical and ore-extraction centers existed, such as those around the Sepon copper mine (Laos) and northeastern Thailand. These centers were part of an extensive trade network, actively collecting, using, and distributing bronze drums of considerable size and quantity.

From north to south, artifacts are particularly dense around the Sepon copper mine in Vilabuly district, Savannakhet province (Laos) - a renowned archaeological cluster from the Metal Age. Among these is the Vilabuly drum, which measures 110cm in diameter and 80cm in height. While no evidence of ancient copper mining has been found in northern Vietnam, discoveries at the Sepon mine raise the hypothesis of a transportation route for copper materials from Sepon to Vietnam, and finished bronze drums from Vietnam to Laos. From there, the drums spread further south, forming another large cluster around the confluence of the Mekong river and its tributaries, the Chi and Mun rivers. This flow branches westward into northeastern Thailand, with the Khorat drum being the furthest westward artifact recorded along these river branches. Meanwhile, the Mekong River continues southward, where drum artifacts are concentrated around Phnom Penh and Tonle Sap lake (Cambodia).

A critical question arises regarding the direct connection between the Đông Sơn cultural area in northern Vietnam and the Mekong river system, including the Sepon mine. Although the Sepon mine is geographically close to the northern-central region of Vietnam, the two areas are separated by the Trường Sơn mountain range. There is also no direct connection between the Red, Mã, or Cả river systems

- key distribution areas of the Đông Sơn culture - and the Mekong river system. Transporting heavy goods like copper materials in exchange for completed large drums (over 100cm in diameter) across the Trường Sơn mountain range would have been logistically challenging given the transportation conditions at the time. Instead, alongside the movement of physical goods, there may have been a flow of cultural ideas and techniques, leading to the establishment of new drum-casting centers modeled on the Đông Sơn style in the Sepon area, which then distributed drums further along the Mekong river system.

The case of the Khao Sek drum (southern Thailand) exemplifies this possibility. The Khao Sek drum is large, with a design and decorative motifs resembling the Đông Sơn style of northern Vietnam. However, its casting technique and alloy composition do not match known “Đông Sơn data” but instead align closely with the Sepon copper source. Various scenarios are plausible: the Khao Sek drum was cast in Sepon; cast in Khao Sek using Sepon copper; or cast in northern Vietnam using Sepon copper before being traded to Khao Sek (Nguyễn Thơ Đình, Nguyễn Hữu Mạnh, 2022: 68).

However, based on experimental casting of bronze drums using traditional techniques, it is evident that casting large drums with complex decorative patterns was highly challenging. It is unlikely that non-Đông Sơn communities could have independently cast bronze drums based solely on existing models without the direct transmission of knowledge and participation of skilled Đông Sơn drum casters. Therefore, research on drum-casting centers outside the traditional Đông Sơn cultural area remains a complex issue requiring further investigation.

Additionally, the supply sources and transportation routes of bronze drum clusters located deep in inland, such as in the Central Highlands or northern Thailand, present an intriguing issue. Northern Thailand’s mountainous region, around the upper reaches of the Chao Phraya river, is home to eight Đông Sơn-style bronze drums, the most notable being a group of four drums found in Thung Yang cave (Uttaradit). This raises the question: by what route did Đông Sơn drums reach northern Thailand’s mountainous areas? Traces of Đông Sơn bronze artifacts found in the northeastern highlands of Thailand - one of the region’s early metallurgical centers - seem to support the hypothesis of an East-West exchange route passing through northern Laos. However, despite clear evidence of cultural exchange, no bronze drum artifacts have been documented in northeastern Thailand to date. On the other hand, while no artifacts have yet been officially discovered in the lower Chao Phraya river area, the significant number of drums found along Thailand’s central coastal region makes the idea of a transportation route upstream along the river worth considering. Overall, to fully explain the exchange routes between Đông Sơn culture and northern Thailand’s mountainous areas, further archaeological discoveries are needed.

In the case of the Central Highlands, the available data allows for a more detailed examination. Excluding artifacts in Lâm Đồng province, which we attribute to trade routes along the Đồng Nai river system, there are currently 20 documented

drum artifacts in the provinces of Kon Tum, Gia Lai, and Đắk Lắk. There are differing opinions regarding the routes by which these drums were introduced. Diệp Đình Hoa suggested that Đông Sơn bronze drums entered the Central Highlands during a major migration of Đông Sơn cultural inhabitants at the end of the first millennium BCE. From there, the Đông Sơn people integrated and established a local mining, metallurgy, and drum-casting center, potentially even creating “bronze drum cemeteries”. In contrast, Lê Xuân Hưng and Phạm Bảo Trâm (2010) argued that Đông Sơn drums in the Central Highlands resulted from exchanges between certain indigenous cultures and Đông Sơn culture, mediated by the Sa Huỳnh culture.

However, as many scholars have pointed out, while the northern Central Highlands region exhibited advanced metallurgical techniques and clear evidence of interaction with both Đông Sơn and Sa Huỳnh cultures, had sparse bronze drum artifacts. Meanwhile, the southern Central Highlands, where metallurgical evidence is relatively weak, had a dense concentration of drums, particularly in the valleys between the Lâm Viên Plateau and the Đắk Lắk Plateau, even forming large-scale “bronze drum cemeteries”. This suggests that there is not necessarily a strong correlation between metallurgical development and the presence of bronze drums in this region. Furthermore, to explain the presence of bronze drums in the southern Central Highlands, we consider a possible exchange route with the south-central coastal region via the Ba and Kôn river systems. This hypothesis is supported by the distribution of a group of four drum artifacts around the lower reaches of the rivers in Phú Yên province and the system of bronze drums discovered along the Kôn River.

2.3. Insular Southeast Asia

Across the entire region of insular Southeast Asia, we have documented 40 bronze drum artifacts, accounting for more than a quarter of the total recorded drums, belonging to all three groups (A, B, and C). This demonstrates the strong interaction between mainland Southeast Asia and insular Southeast Asia throughout the existence and development of Đông Sơn bronze drums. These artifacts are particularly concentrated on major islands such as Sumatra, Borneo, and Java, as well as scattered across smaller islands like Sangeang, Selayar, Roti, Leti, Luang, and several others in the Sumbawa and Maluku archipelagos.

Numerous bronze drums have been unearthed in the Malay Archipelago and reflects strong Đông Sơn cultural influences, evident in burial practices, stilt houses with curved roofs, and ceremonial costumes adorned with bird feathers, resembling motifs on early the Đông Sơn drums. Notably, based on the prototypes of imported bronze drums, indigenous communities in Indonesia created their local drum traditions, such as the Moko and Pejeng drums, which have been preserved to this day (Trịnh Sinh, 2013: 643-653).

Based on the distribution characteristics of drum artifacts, we support the hypothesis of intra-regional exchange routes within the Malay Archipelago as follows: Despite its geo-economic advantage for trade connections with mainland

Southeast Asia via the Malay Peninsula, southern Sumatra lacks evidence of having been a major center for importing and distributing bronze drums on a regional scale. Instead, this role likely belonged to coastal centers in northern West Java and Central Java, where a high density of drum artifacts has been found. It is likely that these drums were directly imported from mainland Southeast Asia via the Malay Peninsula and then distributed to other islands like Sumatra or Borneo.

Supporting this view, scholar Suleiman (1984), based on ancient Chinese texts, identified a direct route connecting the eastern coast of the Malay Peninsula with Kerawang, along the Tarum river south of Mount Krakatau in West Java. Furthermore, Central Java, particularly around the Pekalongan, Kendal, and Semarang areas, had numerous ancient ports and is home to the highest concentration of bronze drum artifacts in the Malay Archipelago (Calo, 2009: 117). This implies the existence of economic, cultural, and political centers of early state-like entities in this region during the Metal Age, associated with wealth accumulation and social stratification, as reflected by the presence of rich burial sites, including those of children.

Figure 5: Đông Sơn Type C Bronze Drums Found in Eastern Indonesia and Surrounding Regions



Source: Nuno Vasco Oliveira, 2019.

In Eastern Indonesia, drum artifacts are scattered across islands such as Papua, Selayar, Roti, Sangeang, and several smaller islands in the Maluku

Archipelago. These primarily belong to Group C; they are large in size, and feature intricate decorations. Many of these drums exhibit characteristics never seen in Vietnam, with unique and rare motifs depicting humans, animals, and birds - features that are either completely absent or extremely uncommon in other regions. However, some distinctive motifs found on Eastern Indonesian drums have also been identified on drums from Kuala Trengganu, Malaya (Peacock, 1966), and Ongbah cave, Thailand (Sorensen, 1988), indicating that such motifs were not entirely exclusive to Eastern Indonesia. For example, stylized human motifs arranged in rows are also common on drums from Hữu Chung and Hòa Bình (Nam Định) and Sao Vàng (Thanh Hóa) in Vietnam. Therefore, it must be acknowledged that Eastern Indonesian bronze drums are not entirely isolated but maintain close connections with the Đông Sơn tradition in northern Vietnam (Figures 5-6).

Calo suggests a two-step model for the dispersal of bronze drums to Eastern Indonesia:

1. Initially, drums moved from production centers in northern Vietnam or southern China to the archipelago, primarily via maritime routes, around the 3rd to 4th centuries CE. The uniformity of drums in Eastern Indonesia suggests this dispersal might have been a short-term event.

2. Subsequently, in Eastern Indonesia, “a network of inter-island trade routes controlled by local seafaring merchants” emerged (as cited in Nuno Vasco Oliveira et al., 2019: 166-167).

Moreover, Đông Sơn drums served as prototypes for the indigenous creation of a new type of drum with an hourglass shape, known as the Pejeng drum. In a child burial site in Plawangan, Central Java, a unique artifact was discovered: a Đông Sơn bronze drum attached to a locally cast drum. This appears to represent the early form of the Pejeng drum, suggesting a period when imported Đông Sơn drums coexisted and were used alongside locally cast ones.

Today, Southeast Asia is home to some of the world’s largest active metal mines, such as the Sepon copper-gold mine in central Laos, copper ore mines in Sumatra, Java, and West Timor, lead mines in Sumatra, and tin mines in West Malaysia (Malay Peninsula), Bangka, and Belitung. However, the locations of prehistoric mines and production activities across Indonesia in general, and specifically in Timor-Leste, remain extremely limited. An initial report describes traditional copper mining and smelting using metal crucibles and furnaces near Noil Toko, as well as an ancient copper mine near Tanini, both located in Western Timor. The copper resources in West Timor are currently under exploration for mining. Hence, it appears that the Sunda Islands region in Timor has the potential to provide evidence of prehistoric copper production and bronze artifacts (Nuno Vasco Oliveira et al., 2019: 166). Occasionally, mold fragments for casting axes have been found on islands east of Java, suggesting local metal production (Calo, 2009: 140).

Figure 6: The Dissemination of Đông Sơn Bronze Drums to Insular Southeast Asia



Source: Nguyễn Hữu Mạnh, Vũ Thảo Hiền

3. The driving forces behind the dissemination of Đông Sơn bronze drums in Southeast Asia

The dissemination of Đông Sơn bronze drums in Southeast Asia, when placed in the historical context of northern Vietnam and the region, can be divided into three main phases (Figure 7):

- *Phase 1* (from the 4th-3rd century BCE to the 2nd century BCE): during the prosperous period of the Đông Sơn culture in northern Vietnam, early Đông Sơn drums were cast in northern Vietnam and exchanged throughout Southeast Asia via coastal and riverine routes. Alongside the flow of physical goods, these trade routes also facilitated cultural elements, ideas, technologies, and beliefs that spread widely across Southeast Asia - a phenomenon many Vietnamese scholars refer to as the “Đông Sơn inspiration” (Phạm Đức Mạnh, 2014: 16).

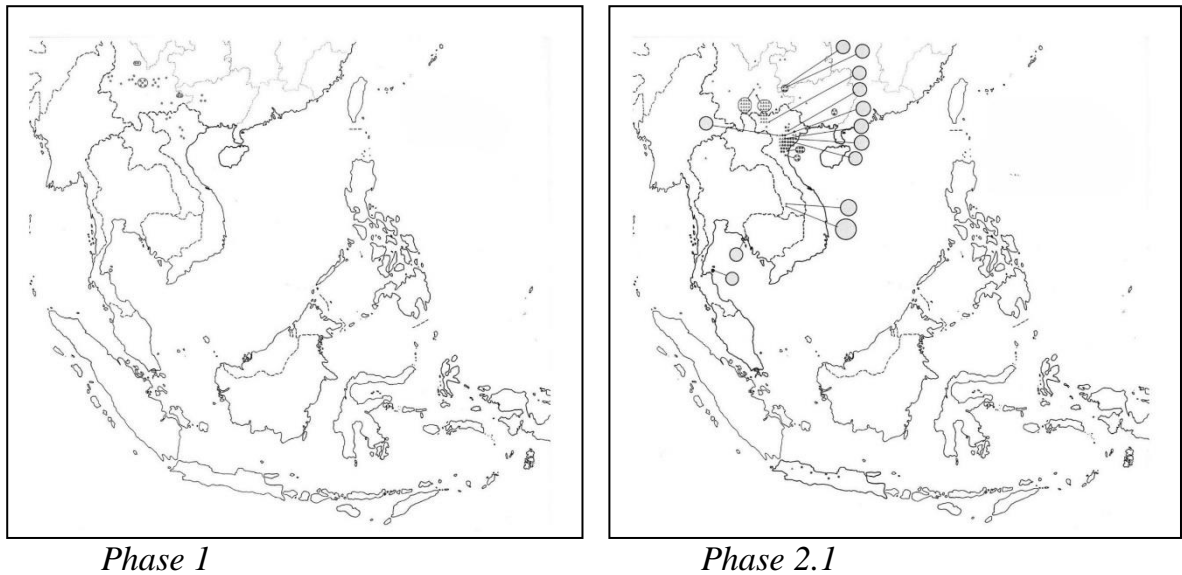
- *Phase 2* (from the 1st century BCE to the 1st-2nd century CE): in 43 CE, the suppression by Ma Yuan temporarily disrupted the Đông Sơn drum tradition in northern Vietnam. Thanks to a relatively lenient governance policy, the Đông Sơn culture continued to be preserved and developed during the early period of Chinese rule. However, military pressures caused the Đông Sơn cultural sphere to gradually shift southward. Bronze drums almost completely disappeared from southern China during this time (Phase 2.1) (Imamura, 2010: 29). It is possible that the scarcity of

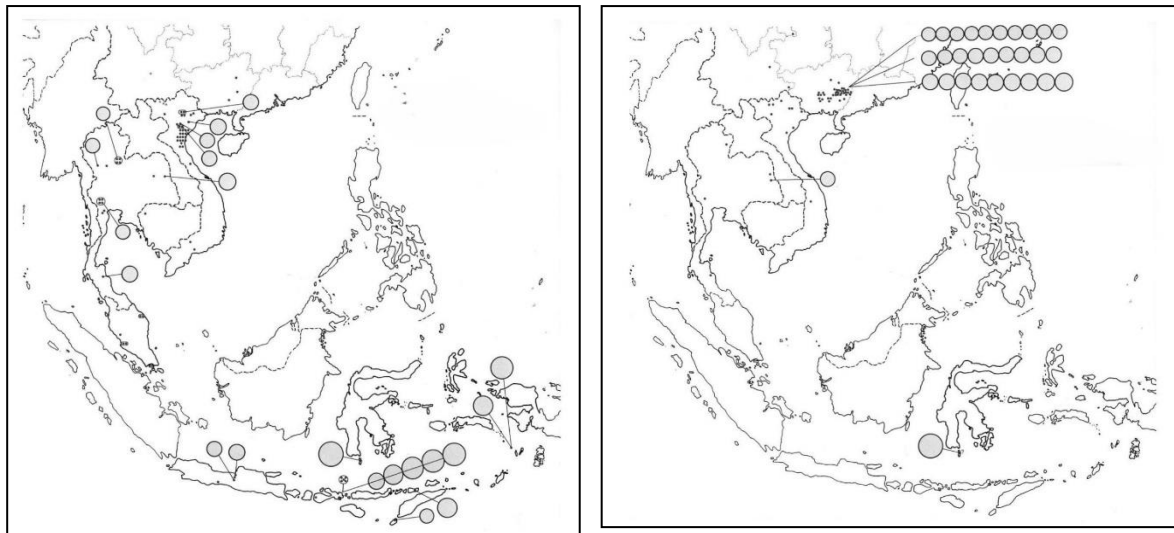
supply from northern Vietnam, combined with waves of migration carrying drum-casting techniques, contributed to the establishment or growth of drum-casting and distribution centers outside the traditional Đông Sơn cultural area. This could explain cases such as the Khao Sek drum (Thailand), Selayar drum (Indonesia), and Tây Thuận drum (Vietnam).

It is likely that the “peak” Group C drums, characterized by their large size and intricate decorative motifs, were produced during this period. These drums continued to be integrated into regional trade networks, reaching as far as eastern Indonesia across the Southeast Asian seas (Phase 2.2).

- *Phase 3* (from the 2nd-3rd century to the 4th century CE): the weakening of central authority during the late Eastern Han Dynasty created an opportunity for a “revival” of the Đông Sơn drum tradition among communities in the midlands and mountainous regions of northern Vietnam. This occurred before the bronze drum culture completely disappeared from the lowland areas due to the massive migration of northern Chinese (Han) people during the Southern and Northern Dynasties period.

Figure 7: Phases of Đông Sơn Bronze Drum Dissemination in Southeast Asia





Phase 2.2

Phase 3

Source: Imamura (2010), adapted by Nguyễn Hữu Mạnh.

Regarding the driving forces behind the southward dissemination of Đông Sơn bronze drums in Southeast Asia, several initial hypotheses can be proposed:

1. *Military pressure from the North:* under the pressure of northern military campaigns, particularly during periods of harsh cultural suppression by colonial authorities, the Đông Sơn cultural sphere gradually shifted southward, even crossing the seas to reach distant lands in Southeast Asia. Đông Sơn migrants not only carried bronze drums as mementos of their homeland but they also brought with them their cultural achievements, technologies, and ideas, which integrated with local populations. This contributed to the formation of new drum-casting and distribution centers outside the traditional Đông Sơn cultural area (Imamura, 2010: 26).

2. *Social stratification and early state formation:* the process of social stratification, which gave rise to early state forms in Southeast Asia during the Metal Age, created a demand for bronze drums as luxury goods for the elite. These drums served as “crowns” or “scepters,” representing power and legitimacy for local leaders. The presence of bronze drums also signified the emergence of early states. Some even hypothesize that during the peak of the Đông Sơn culture, northern Vietnam may have had a ceremonial center where a powerful institution distributed these symbols, much like the role of popes in medieval Europe. A tribal leader who received a drum would become a legitimate king (Loofs-Wissowa, 1981: 77).

3. *Economic motivation:* economic factors likely played a significant role in the dissemination of bronze drums. For Southeast Asian merchants during the Metal Age, bronze drums could have been expensive luxury goods that yielded high profits, or valuable “tokens” or “gifts” used to build and strengthen alliances between distant merchants, emissaries, and local elites. Regardless of their purpose, the economic benefits must have justified the effort required to transport large,

finished drums across forests, mountains, and seas to distant lands, despite the risks, technical limitations, and less-than-ideal transportation conditions at the time.

These driving forces may have occurred simultaneously or sequentially in specific historical contexts, but they all played important roles and were closely interconnected. Bronze drums were not merely utilitarian items or ordinary consumer goods; they were highly symbolic cultural products. As such, non-Đông Sơn communities could not simply adopt bronze drums as physical objects detached from their original cultural context. Instead, through bronze drums, they also absorbed the ideas, technologies, art, and beliefs of the Đông Sơn culture. It is even possible that they adopted the political models and social organization of this culture, as bronze drums served as symbols of elite power and indicators of the formation of early states.

In other words, for bronze drums to achieve widespread dissemination and deep integration into the cultural lives of various Southeast Asian communities, the “triad” of producers, distributors, and consumers must have shared a common “spiritual language”. This shared understanding likely convinced many ancient Southeast Asian communities to place bronze drums in a sacred position within their ritual systems. Even as the bronze drum culture gradually faded from the daily lives of northern Vietnamese communities, it remained vibrant in the cultural and spiritual practices of peripheral communities within the Đông Sơn cultural sphere. This dual role - as both a product of cultural diffusion and a catalyst for further dissemination - enhanced the spread of Đông Sơn bronze drums and sustained their enduring influence on Southeast Asia’s cultural traditions and practices.

4. Conclusion

The study of Đông Sơn bronze drum dissemination provides valuable insights into the cultural history of Đông Sơn and the broader prehistoric Southeast Asian region. By cataloging, analyzing, and comparing 159 Đông Sơn bronze drum artifacts from Southern Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries, the research highlights key aspects such as distribution patterns, dissemination routes, and the driving forces behind their spread. The widespread dissemination of Đông Sơn drums and the associated bronze drum culture exemplifies the flow of anthropology, technology, art, customs, and beliefs from Đông Sơn culture across Southeast Asia - a phenomenon often referred to by Vietnamese scholars as the “Đông Sơn inspiration”.

First and foremost, the research results indicate that Đông Sơn bronze drums are not merely archaeological artifacts of high artistic and technical value but are also cultural symbols with far-reaching influence, extending beyond the traditional Đông Sơn cultural sphere in northern Vietnam. The presence of Đông Sơn bronze drums in southern Vietnam, mainland Southeast Asia, and the islands of Southeast

Asia demonstrates that the Đông Sơn culture was not simply a localized phenomenon but a regional culture that contributed to the unity in diversity of prehistoric Southeast Asia. As symbols of power, ritual tools, and trade commodities, Đông Sơn bronze drums became cultural, economic, and social bridges connecting communities across the region.

Regarding distribution patterns, the study identified three main trends in the concentration of Đông Sơn bronze drum artifacts: along coastal routes, around the basins of major rivers, and in areas with favorable geo-economic conditions such as river confluences, estuaries, seaports, and lowland deltas. Typical clusters, such as those in Nha Trang, the Đồng Nai river, and the Côn river in Vietnam; the Malay Peninsula; Ongbah cave in Thailand; and clusters in eastern Indonesia, clearly reflect the connections between economic, cultural, and political centers in the region. Notably, the Mekong river system played a crucial role as a “lifeline,” linking early metallurgical and trade centers and facilitating the dissemination of Đông Sơn bronze drums from northern Vietnam to mainland Southeast Asia and further to the islands of Southeast Asia.

The research also reveals that the dissemination of bronze drums was not merely the physical movement of objects but also a transmission of cultural values, ideas, and techniques. The discovery of drum-casting centers outside the Đông Sơn cultural sphere, such as the Bình Định cluster in south-central Vietnam or the unique bronze drums in eastern Indonesia, suggests that local communities did not simply adopt bronze drums as imported products but also created and developed their own drum-casting traditions influenced by the Đông Sơn culture. This highlights the deep and multi-dimensional cultural exchange and integration within Southeast Asia, involving active participation from producers, distributors, and consumers alike.

Regarding the driving forces behind the dissemination, the study identified three main factors: northern military pressure, social and political demands of Southeast Asian communities, and the economic motivations of trade networks. The cultural suppression campaigns by northern colonial authorities prompted the migration of Đông Sơn communities southward, carrying with them the cultural values and drum-casting techniques. Meanwhile, the process of social stratification and the formation of early states in Southeast Asia created a demand for bronze drums as symbols of power and legitimacy for local leaders. At the same time, intra-regional and inter-regional trade networks transformed bronze drums into highly valuable “luxury goods,” contributing to their exchange and dissemination across the region.

All these factors elevated Đông Sơn bronze drums and the broader culture of their usage from a national cultural heritage to a regional cultural-civilizational heritage, reflected in multiple dimensions: the existence of a complex, interconnected system of multi-centered production, distribution, and consumption spread across a vast geographical area; the continuous influence of Đông Sơn bronze drums over nearly a millennium of existence and development, inspiring all

other bronze drum traditions in the region; and the deep integration of bronze drums into the production, cultural, and spiritual lives of local communities, remaining vibrant in the consciousness and cultural-spiritual lives of some Southeast Asian communities.

However, the study also raises several issues that require additional investigation in the future. *Firstly*, the direct connection routes between the Đông Sơn cultural sphere in northern Vietnam and the bronze drum distribution centers in Southeast Asia remain unclear, particularly given the complex geography and limited transportation conditions of the prehistoric era. *Secondly*, the roles of drum-casting centers outside the Đông Sơn cultural sphere, such as the Bình Định cluster or centers in eastern Indonesia, need further study to clarify their relationship with the original Đông Sơn culture. *Thirdly*, the scattered distribution of bronze drum artifacts in the mountainous regions of northern Thailand and the Central Highlands of Vietnam raises questions about the cultural and economic exchange routes between these areas and the Đông Sơn culture.

Overall, research on the dissemination of Đông Sơn bronze drums not only contributes to a deeper understanding of the Đông Sơn culture but also provides new perspectives on the cultural history of prehistoric Southeast Asia. Đông Sơn bronze drums, as cultural-civilizational symbols, have helped affirm the unity in diversity of Southeast Asia while serving as evidence of the cultural exchange, integration, and creativity of the region's communities. In today's globalized context, studying and preserving Đông Sơn bronze drum heritage is vital, not only for its scientific value but also for safeguarding regional cultural heritage and affirming Đông Sơn culture's significance within Southeast Asia. Furthermore, understanding the distribution patterns, dissemination routes, and driving forces behind the spread of bronze drums allows us to reconstruct the cultural-civilizational space of prehistoric Southeast Asia as a unified network with complex interconnections, mutual influences, and shared heritage, reaffirming the "unity in diversity" of the region.

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