

Bulango Musik

A documentary by
LEONARDO D'AMICO

A group of five people, three women and two men, are seated in a circle on a woven mat floor. They are wearing traditional Bulang clothing, including black headbands with large red flower arrangements, colorful beaded necklaces, and patterned skirts. In the center of the group is a low, round fire pit with a metal pot on a stand over it. Smoke is rising from the fire. The background shows a simple room with a window and a wooden wall. The overall atmosphere is warm and intimate.

synopsis

Bulang Music offers an insight into Bulang musical culture combining a cinematic narrative that includes suggestive music and images with an ethnomusicological perspective. This documentary also explores minority self-representation in media, staged performances, and popular music taking as a case study a small ethnic minority living in southwest China: the Bulang people in Yunnan province.

the documentary

The first part of the film outlines a musical ethnography conducted by the author with visual anthropologist Zhang Hai among the Bulang in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan Province, Southwest China. The research was focused mainly on three traditional musicians and culture bearers living in Manxi village: Yu Kan La, Ai San Zhan and Ai Wen Lun. The aim was to create audiovisual documentation of Bulang's musical heritage, to highlight the connection between mythology and musical system, and to observe the extent to which the pace of social change in modern times has been accompanied by the pace of musical change and the emergence of a new musical aesthetic.

Music-making is observed in different contexts and occasions, such as in household daily life, in the temple for Buddhist rituals, in staged performances for tourists and urban migrants, as well as in TV talent shows.

The Bulang musical genres and folksong repertoire are defined according to the native concepts and taxonomy (the so-called “ethno-theory”), elicited through formal interviews. The second part of the documentary shows a new scenario in which Bulang's self-representation in media, staged performances and popular music negotiate/reshape their (musical) identity in the contemporary showbiz environment.





Yu Kan La & Ai Wen Lun
(singer) (ding player)



Manxi village
Menghai, Xishuangbanna, Yunnan, China

Location

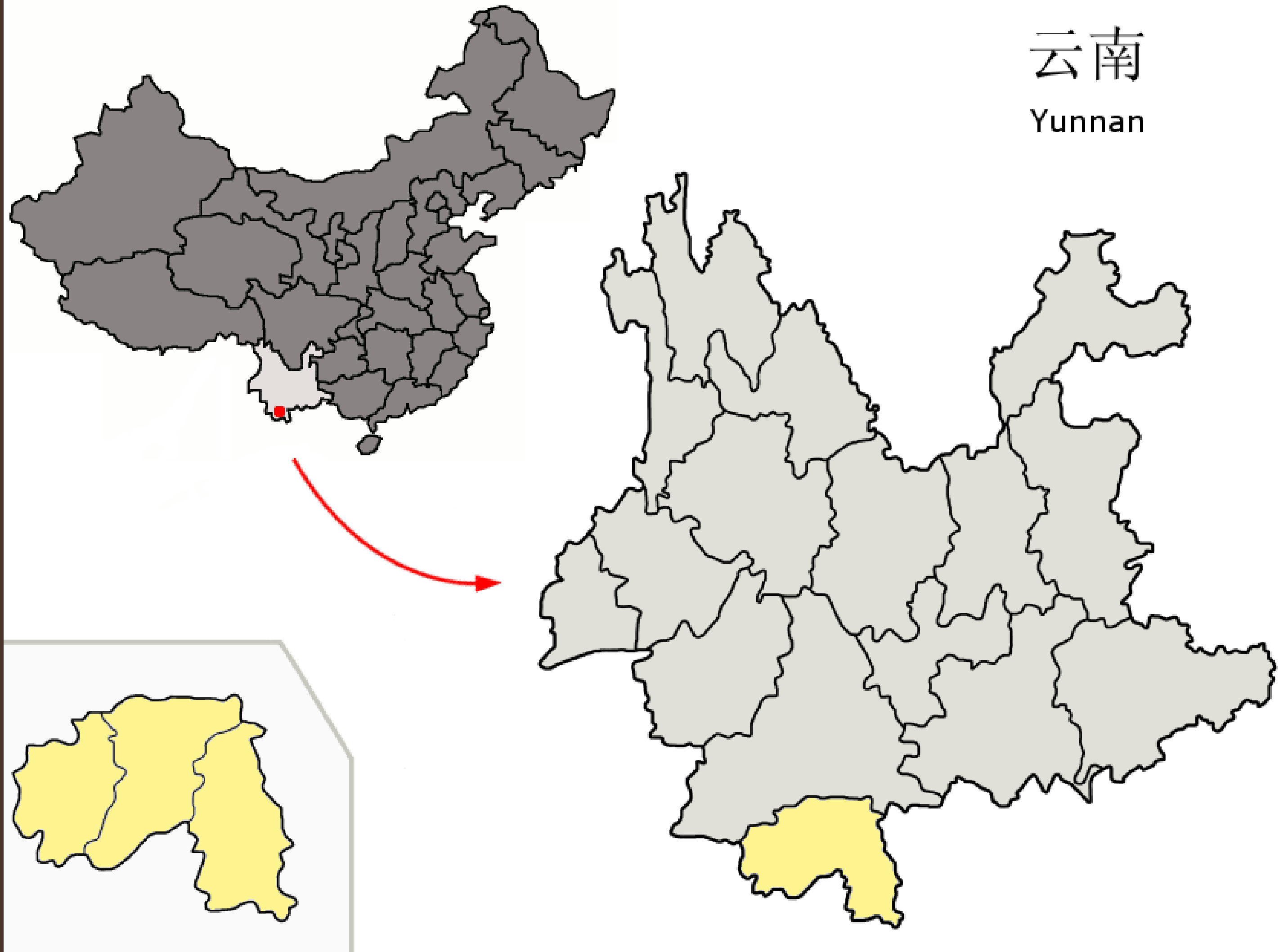
Bulang Mountains

Menghai county,
Xishuangbanna prefecture,
Yunnan province,
China

The Bulang ethnic group have a relatively small population of around 119,636, mainly dwelling in Yunnan province. Bulang count 52,500 people, representing 5.2% of the population of Xishuangbanna.

云南

Yunnan



ethnicity

The Bulang ethnicity (*Bulang zu*) are descendants of an older ethnic group who lived in the Lancang River valley in ancient times, known in Chinese historical records as the “Pu” or “Pu man”. The Bulang language spoken in Xishuangbanna is a Palaungic branch of the Mon-Khmer language family.

musical culture

The word ‘music’ does not exist in the Bulang vocabulary; instead, they use the term *suo* for “singing” and *ding* for both “musical instrument” and “instrumental music”. A feature common to all Yunnanese ethnic minorities, including Bulang, is the highly communicative function of singing to express feelings that are not commonly expressed through spoken language; in other words, people “speak with songs” (*yi ge daiyan* in Chinese), especially with courtship/love songs (*qingge* in Chinese, *suo ki kuo* in Bulang), which make up the bulk of the traditional vocal music repertoire.



religion





Bulang communities converted to Theravada Buddhism introduced in Xishuangbanna in the XIV century by Dai people (the name used in China for the Thai people). *Zaibeng* is a ritual song performed by women and men dancing in concentric circles while singing in responsorial form with the accompaniment of percussion instruments. It is performed in Buddhist temples to worship Buddha.



mithology

myth & songs

Bulang people have a rich collection of oral histories based on myths and legends. According to a legend told by Ai Sai Zhan, in ancient times, the ancestor of the Bulang clans, Zao Suo Modi, wanted to find a rhino hidden (*shēng*) in the jungle to ride and thereby acquire distinguished status. He went to the Bulang people to ask for help (*zhuāi*) in finding the rhino. He looked for (*suǒ*) a boy (*zǎi*) who was able to tie it (*tóng mǎ*). Some of the recurring terms in this short epic story correspond to the names of the five musical genres of the Bulang of Manxi village according to the classification method used by their own ethnic group:

- (1) Zhuāi (拽): “help”
- (2) Zǎi (宰): “boy”, “son”
- (3) Suǒ (索): “look for”
- (4) Shēng (笙): “hide”
- (5) Tóng mǎ (同玛): “tie”

Zhuāi (拽)

musical system

Zǎi (宰)

zai (宰)

zai mi (宰咪)

zai beng (宰崩)

zai muli muran
(宰目列目然)

zai wa (宰瓦)

zai mu (宰目)

se pai zai
(色排宰)

Suǒ (索)

ka you (佉尤)

xi mei (西美)

san dao (三岛)

beng duo (崩多)

jing de (景德)

ka tian (卡田)

ka ding (卡丁)

jingmai (佉景迈)
(gao / di) (高/低)

Shēng (笙)

Tóngmǎ (同玛)



folksongs

"We should be together,
have a common goal in life
and live together as one.
Only one heart
can sing with the same meaning.
Let's not divide ourselves
into two streams of water.
When we become a family
we must become one stream of water.
Gathering into a common force.
We Bulang do not distinguish
between villages and regions.
There are no distinctions,
we are all Bulang.
We must be of one heart and one mind."

Song "Jingde" sung by Ai Wa Luo

transmission of musical knowledge



bio

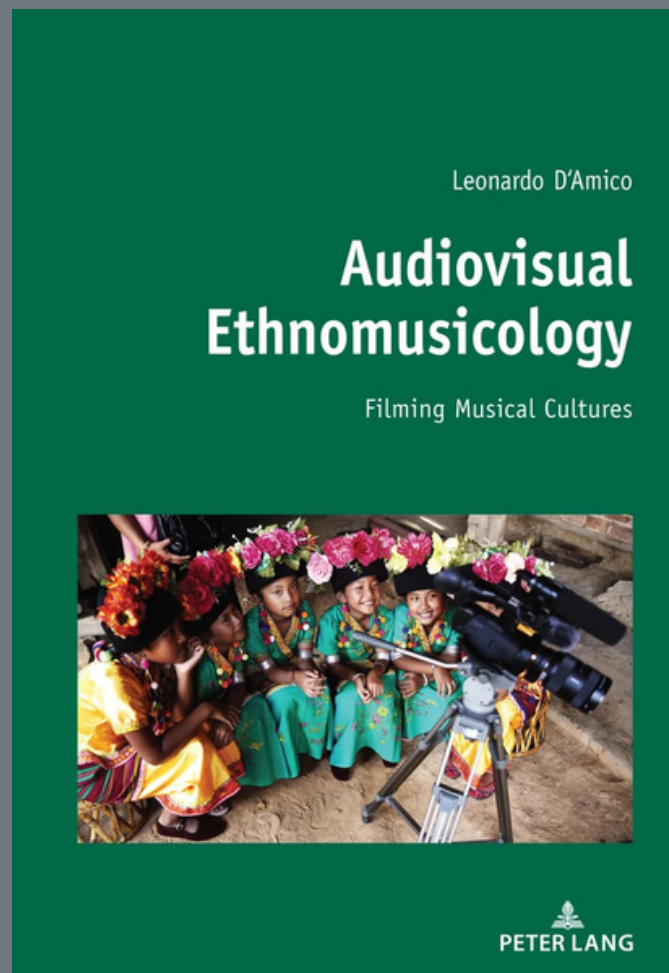


LEONARDO D'AMICO

Leonardo D'Amico is an Italian ethnomusicologist, filmmaker, and festival director. He completed his Doctorate in Musicology *cum laude* from the University of Valladolid, Spain. As a Lecturer, he taught Ethnomusicology and Anthropology of Music at the University of Siena, University of Ferrara, University of Siena in Arezzo, Conservatory of Brescia and Conservatory of Mantua, Italy. In 2014 he received the National Scientific Qualification as an Associate Professor of Ethnomusicology. In 2016 he was appointed Adjunct Associate Professor of Ethnomusicology at Yunnan University in Kunming, China. In 2022 he was appointed Post-doctoral Researcher in Ethnomusicology at the Department of Music in the School of Film, Music, and Theatre at University College Cork, Ireland. He is co-founder and chair of the ICTM Study Group on Audiovisual Ethnomusicology.

As an ethno-filmmaker, Leonardo D'Amico shot two documentary films, *Cantar l'Ottava* (2016) and *Bulang Music: From the Mountain to the Stars* (2023), and he also took part as a scientific advisor and cameraman in the production of the TV documentary series *Cumbia Steps* directed by V. Cavallo (2013).

He is the author of the book *Audiovisual Ethnomusicology. Filming Musical Cultures* (2020)





Yu Wang Kan & Ai Di
(singer) (ding player)



written and directed by
Leonardo D'Amico

cinematography
Leonardo D'Amico and Zhang Hai

narration
Alexander Khalil

editing
Leonardo D'Amico

research
Leonardo D'Amico, Zhang Hai,
Diamantina Palacios

production
Multi Cult

Awarded as Best Documentary at the Virgin Spring Cinefest 2023

TECHNICAL DETAILS



name of the film: BULANG MUSIC. FROM THE
MOUNTAINS TO THE STARS

original language: Chinese Mandarin

voice-over: English

subtitles: English / Chinese

type of film: documentary

format: digital file MP4 H.264

running time: 42 min.

colour

screening ratio: 16:9

25 fps

sound: stereo

country of production: China

year of production: 2023

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Booklet photos by Zhang Hai