

1. How would you like to be addressed in the essay? Independent researcher? Singing Bowl teacher? And would you mind me mentioning your Tibetan background?

Thank you for asking. You may refer to me as an independent researcher, which I feel best reflects the nature of my work. I am also comfortable with my Tibetan background being mentioned if you feel it is relevant to your discussion.

2. Regarding the materials of the bowls, you mentioned that they are generally made of 1,3,5,7 & 9 metals due to the favour of odd numbers in Tibetan numerology. (You also quoted Huyser for the mixed metal technique) Would you mind explaining if this mixed metal thing is a common knowledge in Tibet?

In traditional Tibetan contexts, metalworking functioned primarily as a practical, apprenticeship-based craft rather than a formally documented or theoretical discipline. While there was extensive production of metal objects—including ritual items, sculptures, and utensils—very few Tibetan texts discuss metalworking techniques in detail, and most knowledge has been reconstructed through later observation and technical analysis rather than written records.

Existing textual evidence, such as the late nineteenth-century observations recorded by Mipham (as translated in Reedy, 1997) suggests that knowledge of metalworking was largely experiential and transmitted orally. These records appear to document craftsmen at work rather than present a structured or standardised technical system and often include imprecise instructions such as “whatever amount you have,” indicating a flexible and adaptive approach to materials rather than fixed formulations. Even within the text itself, moments of ambiguity and inconsistency suggest that the knowledge being recorded was observational and fragmentary rather than codified into a precise technical framework.

This strongly suggests that alloy compositions were not rigidly defined or consistently controlled. While metals were indeed mixed in practice, the exact number of metals—such as 1, 3, 5, 7, or 9—was unlikely to have been systematically achieved or technically verified. Instead, craftsmen relied on inherited methods, available resources, and practical outcomes such as sound, durability, and appearance, rather than on precise compositional theory.

At a broader cultural level, Tibetan society historically placed greater emphasis on religious, philosophical, and literary traditions, which were carefully recorded, taught, and preserved over generations. By contrast, manual crafts such as metalworking were less frequently documented and were instead transmitted within artisan communities through direct experience, often following familial or workshop lineages. In traditional social contexts, occupations such as metalworkers, stone carvers, carpenters, and butchers were generally accorded lower social status compared to religious figures and scholars, and in some cases were subject to social boundaries in matters such as marriage and association. In addition, the making and commercial exchange of religious statues, relics, and sacred objects could carry

social sensitivities, as placing a monetary value on sacred representations—such as images of the Buddha—was sometimes viewed as inappropriate within the cultural and religious perspectives. This relative lack of social prestige, combined with these sensitivities, may have contributed to the limited formal recognition and documentation of these crafts. As a result, technical knowledge remained largely unrecorded and non-theoretical, with craftsmen focusing on practice, repetition, and the guidance of their masters rather than analysing or systematically recording composition and processes. This reinforced the practical rather than intellectual character of Tibetan metalworking traditions.

In contemporary contexts, much of the production and commercial distribution of religious artefacts is associated with Himalayan regions, where traditional craftsmanship continues to be practised alongside modern market demands.

Nevertheless, the importance of metalworking should not be underestimated. Numerous ritual objects depicted in monastic paintings (thangkas) have corresponding physical forms in metal, demonstrating that artisans could translate complex symbolic imagery into tangible objects. Many remote temples, often located high in mountainous regions, contain hundreds of statues and ritual artefacts that were historically produced by these ancient craftsmen. These objects stand as evidence of a highly developed craft tradition, built not on written theory but on accumulated experience, skill, and continuity of practice.

However, much of this traditional knowledge has gradually diminished over time. With the impact of modernisation, displacement, and changing economic and social conditions, the continuity of these artisanal practices has been affected, and certain aspects of traditional metalworking knowledge are at risk of fading.

Within this context, the commonly cited idea that Tibetan singing bowls are made from a specific number of metals—often linked to symbolic systems such as planetary correspondences—should be treated with caution. Although the cultural preference for odd numbers does exist within Tibetan numerology and continues in various aspects of Tibetan culture, there is limited evidence to suggest that such numerical frameworks were applied in a strict or standardised way within metalworking practices.

Consequently, interpretations of fixed multi-metal compositions, such as the “seven-metal” formulation popularised in modern literature by researchers including Frank Perry Huyser, are better understood as later systematisations or symbolic interpretations rather than reflections of consistently applied traditional knowledge. In practice, Tibetan metalworking appears to have prioritised flexibility, experience, and functionality over precise numerical or theoretical formulations.

3. I really like your theory about the origin of the bowls rooted in Bön tradition. You mentioned a relic bowls in Narthang Parkhang in Kham. Could you let me know where I can get a reference for it please?

It is important to clarify that Narthang Monastery is in Central Tibet (Tsang), rather than Kham, although wider Tibetan regions—including Kham—did historically have access to metal resources and trade networks that supported metal production.

Two of the most prominent Tibetan printing houses (Parkhang) are Narthang Monastery in Central Tibet and Dege Parkhang in the Kham region of eastern Tibet. Narthang, founded in the twelfth century, and Dege, established in 1729, both played significant roles in the preservation and dissemination of Tibetan textual traditions. These institutions were responsible for producing canonical works such as the Kangyur and Tengyur through extensive woodblock printing systems, reflecting a highly organised and systematic approach to recording religious, philosophical, and medical knowledge.

The existence of such institutions highlights a clear cultural emphasis on the preservation of textual and intellectual knowledge. In contrast, material crafts—such as metalworking—were not documented with the same level of detail or institutional support. Although monastic centres like Dege would have contained numerous ritual and utilitarian metal objects, including bowls and vessels, these were rarely described or classified in written sources.

It is therefore plausible that accounts of “singing bowls” associated with such sites may arise from observational or second-hand reports. Individuals may have encountered or heard of metal bowls within monastic settings and interpreted them as singing bowls, whereas they may in fact have been ritual offering bowls or other types of metal vessels. Without clear textual or material documentation, such identifications remain interpretative rather than conclusive.

Furthermore, the Kham region has historically been connected to trade networks and access to natural resources, including metals, which supports the likelihood of local production and circulation of metal objects. However, while the presence of metal bowls in such environments is entirely plausible, there is no direct academic evidence linking specific objects at Dege Parkhang to the origin of Tibetan singing bowls.

This absence of documentation becomes even more significant when considering the possibility of earlier ritual practices, including those associated with Bön traditions, which predate the widespread institutionalisation of Tibetan Buddhism. Many aspects of pre-Buddhist ritual culture were transmitted orally and through practice rather than written records and were later either absorbed into Buddhist contexts or left undocumented. In this light, it is plausible that sound-producing metal objects, including bowls, may have existed within such ritual frameworks without being formally recorded or classified in textual sources.

Therefore, the significance of these printing houses lies not as direct evidence for singing bowls, but as a clear illustration of the broader imbalance between the meticulous preservation of textual traditions and the relative absence of documentation surrounding artisanal practices. This contrast helps explain why objects such as singing bowls, despite their probable historical presence, remain difficult to trace through formal academic sources.

4. Frank Perry distinguishes Tibetan singing bowls from begging bowls and sacrificial bowls on Buddhists' altars, due to how they are made. But he also says the singing bowls were disguised as food bowls during the reform & purge under Je Tsong Khpa. Some people thought the three types of bowls are the same, just used for different purposes. Some even think that Japanese Zen singing bowls belong to the same category. What's your position in this?

This is an important and complex question, and my position aligns with a more fluid understanding of the development and classification of bowls over time. While Frank Perry Huyser distinguishes Tibetan singing bowls from begging bowls and ritual offering bowls based on their method of manufacture, I would suggest that such distinctions may not have been as rigid historically as they appear in modern interpretations.

In earlier periods, the creation of metal bowls required significant resources, skill, and labour, which were often associated with religious or ritual contexts. It is therefore plausible that many early bowls were initially produced for spiritual purposes, such as offerings or ritual use, rather than for ordinary domestic functions. Over time, however, the forms, uses, and cultural meanings of these objects may have evolved, leading to a diversification of both function and interpretation.

In this sense, it is possible that what are now classified as distinct categories—such as singing bowls, begging bowls, and altar offering bowls—may share overlapping origins, with differences emerging gradually through changing practices, regional variations, and historical developments. This may also explain why some observers perceive these categories as essentially the same object used in different contexts.

This idea can be illustrated through the example of major river systems in South Asia. The Brahmaputra River takes on different names as it flows through various regions: it is known as the Yarlung Tsangpo in Tibet, becomes the Siang or Dihang in Arunachal Pradesh, is called the Brahmaputra (or Luit) in Assam, and later flows into Bangladesh as the Jamuna. It then joins with the Ganges River (Ganga), which is itself known as the Bhagirathi/Alaknanda in its upper Indian course and the Padma in Bangladesh. While these rivers have distinct origins, their identities and names shift according to geographical and cultural context, and they ultimately merge into a single system. In a similar way, metal bowls may have undergone changes in naming, usage, and symbolic meaning across time and regions, without necessarily representing entirely separate origins.

This perspective also allows for a more nuanced understanding of related traditions, such as Japanese Zen temple bowls, which may share certain functional or acoustic similarities, while developing within distinct cultural and historical frameworks.

Therefore, rather than viewing these categories as strictly separate, I would argue that they should be understood within a broader continuum of material culture, where form, function, and meaning evolve over time, shaped by religious practice, social context, and regional adaptation.

5. You theorise that the popularity of the bowls follows the exile of Tibetan diaspora in 1959. Do you think that's why it is rare to spot Tibetan singing bowls in Tibetan region nowadays? Because they were mostly owned by Tantric masters and their followers, and not everyday household item? (Reason that I ask is that my tutor spent 6-7 years in Tibet since 2005 for her university. And she claims that she didn't spot any bowls or practice of the bowls during her stay in Lhasa and XiNing.) You said that there are records of confiscation of ritual items including singing bowls. Could you tell me where to get a reference for this please? (We need reference for everything for the essay! Sorry for being so fussy!)

The relative rarity of Tibetan singing bowls within contemporary Tibetan regions is likely the result of a combination of historical, cultural, and political factors, rather than a single cause.

Firstly, it is important to recognise that many ritual objects and practices in Tibet have undergone significant transformation or decline over time. This is due to shifts in religious emphasis, as well as broader cultural and political changes. For instance, during the reign of Langdarma in the 9th century, there are traditional accounts of suppression of monastic institutions, which contributed to what is often described in Tibetan historiography as a period of fragmentation or the “hundred years of darkness” for Tibetan Buddhism, during which many lineages and practices were disrupted before later revival.

More significantly, the 20th century brought profound disruption. During the Cultural Revolution, a large proportion of Tibetan monasteries were destroyed or damaged, and many ritual objects were confiscated, lost, or destroyed. While exact figures vary, it is widely acknowledged that the scale of loss was extensive, leading to the fragmentation of religious lineages and practices. As a result, many traditions—including those associated with specific ritual instruments—were interrupted or displaced.

Notably, there were important regional variations in the extent of destruction. For example, Dege Parkhang was partially preserved, in part because local monks and communities are reported to have taken measures to protect its woodblocks by hiding and safeguarding them during this period, allowing many of these materials to survive and later be restored. In contrast, other major centres such as Narthang Monastery experienced far more extensive damage, with much of their original structure and contents destroyed. This contrast further illustrates the uneven impact of the Cultural Revolution on Tibetan religious and cultural institutions.

In addition, during periods of conflict and political upheaval in the mid-20th century, it has been reported that metal objects from monasteries and households were often collected and repurposed for industrial and military use. This included not only ritual artefacts but also everyday metal items, which were valued for their material rather than their cultural significance. While specific documentation of singing bowls within this process is limited, such practices further contribute to the broader loss and dispersal of metal objects from Tibetan regions.

Following the Tibetan diaspora after 1959, many practitioners, including tantric masters, carried their knowledge and ritual objects into exile. It is therefore plausible that certain practices, including the use of singing bowls in specific ritual or meditative contexts, became more visible and systematised outside Tibet, particularly in interaction with global audiences.

Regarding your tutor's observation, it is entirely consistent with this context that Tibetan singing bowls are not commonly encountered in places such as Lhasa today. It is also important to consider that such bowls, if used historically, may not have been everyday household items, but rather associated with particular practitioners or ritual settings, making them less visible to general observers. As an illustrative example, during the COVID period, I was shared a video and accompanying sound recording of a Tibetan singing bowl said to be from the Potala Palace. In the recording, the narrator emphasised that the sound was rarely heard and described it as a unique opportunity to experience it. While such material should be treated cautiously and cannot be considered formal academic evidence, it may nonetheless reflect the perception that these objects are uncommon and not widely accessible within contemporary Tibetan contexts. I would be happy to share this recording for reference if helpful.

In terms of documentation, there are no widely recognised academic sources that specifically record the confiscation of "singing bowls" as a distinct category. However, broader studies on the Cultural Revolution in Tibet and Chinese policies towards religion do document the confiscation and destruction of ritual objects more generally, including statues, instruments, and monastic artefacts. These sources can be used as indirect but credible evidence when discussing the possible loss or displacement of objects such as singing bowls.

Therefore, the relative absence of Tibetan singing bowls in contemporary Tibetan regions should be understood within a broader historical context of disruption, migration, and transformation of religious practice, rather than as definitive evidence that such objects did not exist historically.

Reference:

Reedy C. L. (1997). *Himalayan Bronzes: Technology, Style and Choices*. Newark: University of Delaware Press.