



Telling the Time, Chinese Style

By BRIAN SALTER

WHAT do a tiger, rat, dog, ox, and pig have in common with a bell and a drum? I have to admit that a few months ago I would have had absolutely no idea. But I'm somewhat the wiser now.

I am at a historical bell museum located in Hai-dian District of Beijing.

Bells are considered auspicious according to Chinese tradition. During major ceremonies they are often rung 108 times. This is because the Chinese lunar calendar comprises 12 months, 24 solar terms and 72 *hou* (five-day period), the sum of which is 108. According to certain Buddhists, the pealing of a bell also dispels 108 common mortal worries.

The museum, set up in 1985, houses over 800 bells, made of bronze, iron and jade. Exhibits come from all over the world. The oldest ones were cast more than 1,000 years ago.

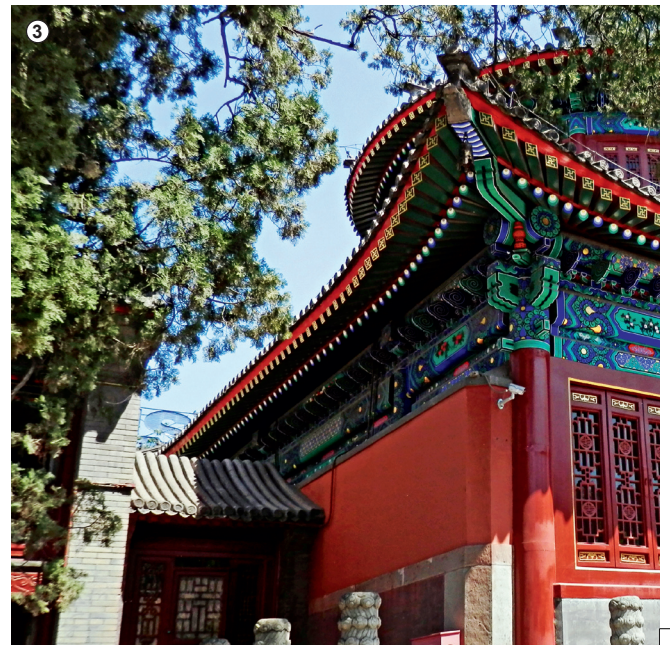
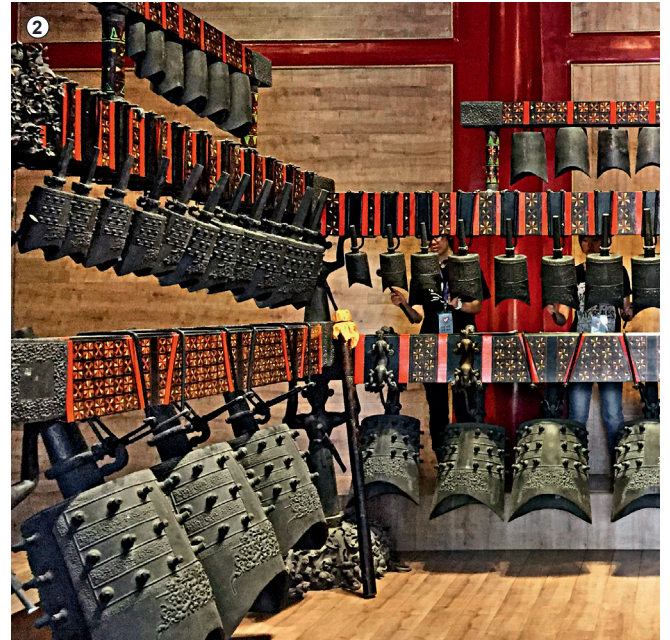
The Dazhong (Big Bell) Temple in the western section of Beijing's North Third Ring Road, built in 1733, is where emperors officiated at rituals to pray for rain. It is the only one of its kind in China.

One of the most beautiful bells on display is the Qianlong Court Bell from the reign of Qing Emperor Qianlong, who ruled from 1736-1795. As its name suggests, the bell was made for the imperial court. It is decorated with 22 flying dragon motifs, but bears no inscriptions.

Furthest away from the main entrance is the building most visitors come to see – the Big Bell Tower. Circular at the top and square beneath, its design accords with the Chinese saying “heaven is spherical and the earth is square.”

Cast in 1403, the first year of the reign of Emperor Yongle, the bell within this tower was one of the three major projects commanded by the ruler after re-establishing Beijing as the capital. The other two were the Forbidden City and the Temple of Heaven.

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1. Dazhong Temple houses around 800 bells from all over the world.
2. A collection of *Ling* bells on display in the museum.
3. The Big Bell Tower containing the Great Bell of Yongle.
4. The Qianlong Court Bell, made for the imperial court, has been designated a grade one national relic.



The Great Bell of Yongle weighs 46.5 tons and is 6.75 meters high. It is struck at the beginning of each Chinese New Year and on other major celebrations. According to the Chinese Academy of Sciences, its loud, clear peal reaches up to 120 decibels, and can be heard 50 kilometers away late at night.

Chinese bell culture truly has a long history. There are two main types of Chinese bells – the *Zhong* and the *Ling*. *Zhongs* produce sound when struck from the outside with a hammer, and *Lings* are equipped with clappers.

Both Buddhism and Taoism have played significant roles in the history of Chinese bells. As long ago as the Sui and Tang dynasties (581-907), most temples housed bells. The Song, Liao, Jin, and Yuan dynasties, however, saw a decline in the casting of ceremonial bells, although large amounts of iron bells appeared over this period. It was during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) that the casting of Buddhist and Taoist bells reached ascendancy once more.

Apart from their religious significance, bells were also an important facet of the daily lives of China's citizenry, as the bell and drum constituted the sole method of telling the time. Bell and drum towers consequently stood in almost every city throughout the country. Those in Beijing, however, are distinct for being placed fore-and-aft, rather than in the traditional right-and-left position.

Bell and Drum towers represented the very essence of Chinese chronology during the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. It was only in 1924, when Pu Yi (1906-1967), last emperor of China, was forced to leave the Forbidden City, that Western-style clockwork was adopted for official time-keeping. 🇨🇳



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Animal Hours

"The morning bell and dusk drum" is a Chinese idiom referring to how time flies. During ancient times, local officials would open the city gates upon the tolling of the bell at early morning and close them to the beating of the drum at evening.

Most people are aware that the Chinese zodiac consists of 12 animals, but few know that five of those beasts represented time periods throughout the night. Eighteen rapid beats and 18 slow ones signified the striking of the hour. There were a total three such binary rounds of a total 108 beats.

As the average drummer could not be expected to work out the time unaided, drum towers were also equipped with clepsydras, or water clocks, that dated back to the Song Dynasty (960-1279). A large bronze *gong* was typically linked to these water clocks through a series of mechanical devices, and would sound each quarter of the hour. The introduction of telling time through incense coils, which burned for hours, however, made the clepsydra obsolete.

Drums kept time at night, and bells sounded the daylight hours. In the Qing Dynasty, the evening officially started at 7 pm, when the drums were sounded 13 times, a procedure known as "setting the watch." The night was split into five *geng*, or two-hour time segments, each named after animals of the Chinese zodiac. The first *geng*, at dusk, was the *xu shi*, or Dog Hour. The second *geng*, from 9 pm to 11 pm, called the *hai shi* or Pig Hour, denoted the time when people went to sleep. The *zi shi*, or Rat Hour, signified the middle of the night – 11 pm to 1 am. Next came the fourth *geng*, the *chou shi*, or Ox Hour from 1 am to 3 am. The fifth and final *geng* was the Tiger Hour, or *yin shi*, from 3 am to 5 am.

The first and last of these *geng* were announced with the beating of drums followed by the tolling of the bell. The city gate was closed and traffic halted after the sounding of the first bell each night.

