

How the Bells came from Yang to Hubei

The First Heroes New Tales of the Bronze Age

by Brenda Clough, 1955–

Published: 2004



The Zhou Dynasty of China came to an end during the Warring States Period (475–221 B.C.), when a number of vassals broke away from Zhou rule and fought vigorously among themselves. Amid this turmoil the arts thrived and the period came to be called „One Hundred Flowers Blooming“. Brenda Clough, who has already brought elements of the Near Eastern Bronze Age into modern

times in two recent novels, illuminates this contradiction, that art may indeed be born out of war, and serve it.

I had never beheld such a miserable wretch. My master Chu gulped. The prisoner was bone-thin, the weeping sores easily visible through his rags. His dirty bare feet left red smears on the tile floor. „The carpet,“ old Lord Yang murmured, and servants carried the priceless textile aside. We ourselves had not dared to walk on it and had stepped around.

The soldier in charge jerked the rope attached to the unfortunate's leg shackle, and the prisoner fell flat on his face with no attempt to break the fall. I saw that his hands had been chopped off, the wrists ending in black cauterized stumps. How could one come to such a horrendous pass, the ultimate catastrophe for a handiworker? My own fingers twitched in sympathy. From my place just behind and to his left I saw Master Chu's cheek blanch. He is oversensitive, a true artist. Luckily he has me, young Li, for First Assistant. Discreetly I gripped him by the elbow to keep him upright. Lord Yang would not think a faint amusing.

„Tell your tale, worm,“ the soldier barked.

The prisoner's Chinese was accented but understandable: „The battle in Guangdong—we should have won. We were winning. Our arrows darkened the sky. We had a third again as many spears.“

„And?“ Lord Yang flicked a glance at my master. I squeezed his arm to make sure he was listening.

„The bells. They had sorcerers with bronze bells. Racks and racks of them, dangling like green skulls, carried into the field on wagons. And the sound...“

„Ah, the sound!“ My master straightened. „Was the note high-pitched, or low?“

„Both. Neither. I cannot say. They beat the bells with mallets, and we fell down. Blood poured from our noses and assholes. Our guts twisted in our bellies...“ The prisoner began to sob, muffling the noise in the crook of his elbow.

Lord Yang sighed. „This one's usefulness is at an end.“ The soldier hauled the prisoner roughly up, and the servants ushered them out. More servants crawled in their wake, silently mopping up the red stains with cloths. I tried not to look. „Now, Master Chu. You know of these bells that Lord Tso used to defeat Guangdong?“

„I can guess, my lord.“ My master would have scratched his head in his usual thoughtful gesture, but I twitched his arm down—you can't scratch in front of a warlord. „When I was First Assistant in his foundries, the Lord Tso was their most munificent patron.“

„As I shall be yours.“ Lord Yang flicked a wrinkled finger. A servant came forward with two bulging leather bags. „Make me bells, Master Chu. Bells of war.“

„My lord, the Lord Tso ordered a set of sixty bells.“

„You shall make me eighty.“

„Eighty!“ My master drew in a deep joyful breath. „Such a commission—the foundry's resources will be yours alone, lord. And a huge ensemble like this—they must be *zhong* bells, of course, mounted upon racks for easy transport...“

It was just like Master Chu to immediately plunge into technical matters. He is like the phoenix, the bird that we inlay in gold upon the cylindrical sides of bells. The phoenix thinks only of its music, and flies higher and ever higher, singing. It doesn't worry about practicalities.

My thoughts ran otherwise. The Lord Tso was a warrior in his prime, reputed to be a tiger in both combat and peace. If he had devoured Guangdong, his power would be overweening. And we were going to fight him? „Then it is war, lord?“ I burst out.

Lord Yang's lean mouth pursed in a smile. „High politics are for me to determine, apprentice. Do you stick to your master's craft, and I will hew to mine. You are but one tile in the mosaic, and who can say which tile is the most essential? Here is gold enough. And from my storehouses you may draw bronze and tin. In two years' time my armies shall march.“

„Two years?“ Master Chu nodded. „I must consult with your musicians...“

„My lord!“ I licked my lips, which had gone unaccountably dry. „No one loves bronzework better than I. But—bells are only bells. They are only our plea to heaven, our voice to the gods. There is no power against mortals in them. The symptoms the prisoner described—could it be that his army merely had drunk bad water?“

When Lord Yang clapped his hands the sound was thin and dry as reed striking reed. „Let the prisoner be returned,“ he said. „You and your master shall question him closely. Wring from him all you can—indeed my spies brought him from Guangdong for this very purpose. Master Chu, you have my permission to have his captor exert whatever persuasion necessary.“

The idea made me shudder, and my master stared. He is incapable of hurting a fly. But the servant returned and fell to his knees, crying, „My lord, you indicated the prisoner was no longer of use to yourself. He has already been executed. Perhaps your lordship would care to see the body?“

Lord Yang shook his head sadly. „Regrettable. No, have the useless carrion flung onto the midden. You must manage without, Master Chu. I look forward to seeing the bells. And—“ He nodded at the servant. „You have served me long. Is it your wish to be executed for your incompetence, or to commit suicide?“

„I shall hang myself immediately, lord, thank you!“ The servant kowtowed and scuttled away. We were dismissed with another gesture, and gratefully backed out of the room.

„Bells we can cast,“ I said, once we were safe in the forecourt. „Bells that will sing a true note clear as crystal, and not only a single note, but sometimes even two harmonious ones. But a bell that can kill? Master, are there secrets to the craft that you have not yet taught me?“

„Never, lad! I was First Assistant in Lord Tso's foundries, and I can attest that no magics were used in those bells. It's some fanciful story that our lord got into his head. He shouldn't have consulted that prisoner. Under threat of death a man will say any nonsense.“

„But you didn't tell him that.“ I could not blame him. The fate of Lord Yang's servant did not encourage frankness.

„Bells are musical instruments, my boy. You could easier make a military weapon of needles and thread! I like your idea that the losing army had drunk bad

water. And it could be that the music of Lord Tso's bells greatly enheartened the troops, urging them on to victory. If they believe it is magic, then it is so."

This was an encouraging line of reflection. "So perhaps our bells could be likewise," I said. "Like the jade button on the top of a mandarin's cap: not the cause of his greatness but an ornament upon it."

"Two years is a long time," my ever-hopeful master said. "Let us design and cast the bells, a fascinating project! And worry about slaying armies with them later—"

"Master?"

We both looked up from our talk. A maid beckoned from a circular archway in the wall. "Do I know you?" my master said uncertainly.

"Of course not. But surely you know of my mistress, Lady Yang. She summons you."

"I?" Bemused, my master followed her, and I fell in behind. Beyond the archway was a walled garden. A plum tree drooped over a carp pool bordered with elaborate stonework. Beside the tree sat a woman, almost lost in the amplitude of brocade sleeves and robe. The mere sight of the gold embroidery on her black satin slippers told us both that we should bow down to the pavement. "Great lady," my master murmured.

"Do it again, only this time don't let your butt stick up."

Astonished, I twisted around to stare up with one eye. The robe and cap and sash were huge, impossibly grand, but the little face beneath the cap was girlish, delicate and pale as plum blossom. "Go on," she commanded. "More elegantly this time."

The little foot in its satin slipper tapped impatiently. I hastened to set the example for my master, rising and then kowtowing again. Both of us tucked our sterns well under this time. I remembered now, how old Yang had lately married a new and exalted wife, a princess from Jiangsu. "Great lady, how may these humble ones serve you?"

"I wish to bear a son."

I could feel my stomach turning right over under my sash with a flop. Was she asking my master to father her child? Surely old Lord Yang could not be impotent—he was rich enough to buy aphrodisiacs by the cartload. And Master Chu has no interest in women, or in anything else for that matter. His love is given to his craft. It was his Assistant's job to take care of all the mundane details, which put me in the center of the target. Such things only happened in stories!

I said nothing and didn't look up, waiting for another clue. And thank the gods, here it was, the solid chink of gold on the pavement between us. I took a sideways peek: a gold bracelet, set with jade plaques.

"You will take this in payment, and you will engrave my wish upon the bell. Thus every time it is struck, my prayer will rise to Heaven."

I sagged so limply with relief that my bowed silhouette surely lost elegance. For once my master was the readier with words. "Willingly, great lady. Your august husband has commanded a set of eighty bells. Shall I have the prayer engraved inside each of them?"

"Oh, that would be very good! Nobody has ever had eighty sons before—I shall be the first!"

I risked looking at her again. This time I saw that her cheeks were round and babyish. Lady Yang must be scarcely twelve, too young to know what bearing ten children would be like, never mind eighty. On the other hand, she had the years before her to do it, if old Yang could keep his end up. For the first time my master's attitude of eternal hope seemed entirely sensible and wise. Not for us to argue childbearing with a princess and the wife of the warlord! „It shall be as you command, great lady,“ my master said. „Thank you.“ I hooked the bracelet with one sideswiping finger and tucked it into my sleeve as we rose and backed out.

Only when we were outside the gate did I say, „You realize we've just signed on to produce not one but two complete absurdities? To defeat armies with the sound of bells is impossible, as unachievable as using their music to make a bride pregnant. What are we going do?“

Thoughtfully scratching his head, my master hardly heard me. „This time I shall make all eighty of the bells two-toned. It will be a tremendous challenge! I can see in my mind's eye what the set should look like, cylindrical but slightly flattened. Inlaid gold phoenixes, the symbol of music, would be a proper decoration, sporting around the shoulders. My lady's prayer can be engraved on the inside of each bell, out of the way. The lower surface must be reserved for inscriptions of the *sui* and *gu* sites, so that the musicians may know where to strike for each note. Truly, this shall be magic.“

„Just not the kind of magic they paid for!“

„You worry too much, Li,“ my master reasoned. „We have the job, and the money, and the materials. What more can we ask for? Let's just do our task. Lord Yang can deal with the wars, and his wife can worry about her babies. Do you think you can go to his storehouses and choose the best copper ingots today?“

Caring for nothing but its song, the phoenix soars higher and higher. Perhaps all would yet be well. Willing it to be so, I said, „Of course, master.“

Safely secluded in our craft, Master Chu and I spent happy months compounding bronze alloys and casting test bells. The molten metal was poured into pottery molds so large they had to be made in sections, an exacting and difficult business. The largest bell would be chest-high. No one had ever attempted so large an instrument before. We practiced on the smaller ones, slowly perfecting the placement of the *mei*, the bronze bumps on the outside of the bell. Even such tiny details affected the tone.

The day we unmolded the first bell was like a birthday. Master Chu lowered the hot pottery mold into a sandbox and levered the halves apart with a stick. It was the tiniest bell, no larger than my hand, and the hot curve of metal rolled out of the dull mold glowing like a chestnut newly hulled. „Hot, hot!“ my master exclaimed, patting it with his leather-gauntleted fingertips. He eased the tip of the stick into the *xuan*, the loop the bell would hang by. When he raised it from the surface of the sand the bell hung at a bit less than the ideal thirty-degree angle, counterbalanced by its heavy *yong*. „We can adjust that,“ he panted. „File the *yong* down a bit. Now, Li, strike!“

I had a tiny wooden mallet ready. The markings made the *sui* position perfectly easy to find on the flatter front surface of the curve. I have not the touch of a trained musician, but I knew how to tap the place. The sweet high note hung in

the air and then faded. It's important that there be no prolonged echo that would interfere with the main melody. Then I struck the *gu* position. „Hah!“

„A perfect harmonic!“ Master Chu grinned so widely the sweat dripped down into his open mouth.

The glorious pure sound made my vision blur, hope and joy bubbling up inside my chest. Perhaps the music of bells really did have some unknown power, unless it was only the heat radiating from the new metal to blame. I grinned too. „And it only took three months!“

„The next bells will be faster. Not easier, but faster. We can set the slaves to polishing this one and engraving Lady Yang's prayer inside.“

There is no madness like love, and surely the love of one's craft is the maddest of them all. Master Chu would not have selected me as his Assistant if I did not also have something of the phoenix in me. Not a thought did I put into larger issues that year. To make the bells was enough; what others would do with them was unimportant.

Compounding this were the usual maddening delays and setbacks. The larger bells cracked or did not ring truly, and had to be cast and recast several times. Right up to the last moment we were adjusting tone by grinding metal from the insides. The Lord Yang had had three special wagons made with racks running down the middle, pegs for the different mallets, and space for the musicians to stand. When all the bells were hung in place and the wagons lined up, it looked very fine indeed.

The Director of the lord's orchestra came to the foundry to accept delivery. When I saw him in his full battle armor and helmet, it washed over me like cold water, what we had done. The phoenix fell to the ground with a thump. Impossible to tell myself that we were merely the ornamental button on Lord Yang's cap. My master was dashing from rack to rack, advising the players. So I was able to remark to the Director, „You are marching with the army, I see. Do you know, have these bells formed a vital part of our lord's battle tactics?“

„They are absolutely essential,“ the Director said cheerfully. „I've had the players perfecting their repertoire, practicing on clay dummy bells. On the way we shall do *Carp and Bamboo* and *Hands Like Lilies*, all the good old walking tunes. Then as they march to the actual battle we will play *Spears of Gold* and my own special composition for the occasion, which our lord has graciously permitted me to title *Thunder Dragon Yang*...“

More proof that love of one's work is madness! I could see that it would be the same whomever I queried. The generals would chatter of battle diagrams, the horsemen would drone on about saddlery, the sutlers would talk about supply trains until listeners wept with boredom. Every tile in the pattern believed passionately that it was paramount. There was no discreet way to find out whether our bells really were supposed to be magic. Suppose the Lord Yang truly was relying upon it? As well lean upon a sewing needle, as my master said. I could see it now, the crushing defeat, the carnage of the battlefield, Lord Tso marching upon our town, the sack and pillage. As his Assistant it would be my duty to defend Master Chu to the death. Perhaps we could escape before the victors put the city to the torch. Our tools could be loaded into a wagon...

It haunted me so much, I derived no pleasure from watching the army march away the next day. Everyone in town turned out to watch and cheer. Incense burners made the air blue with sweet smoke. Scarlet banners fluttered from spear points, and Lord Yang rode on a white stallion with slaves holding a green silk canopy over his head. „Magnificent!“ my master yelled in my ear over the tumult. „Even that old war-horse *Hands Like Lilies* sounds grand when played over a hundred and sixty tones.“

„Will a hundred and sixty tones make Lord Tso’s soldiers fall down and bleed?“

„There’s always a sadness when a big project is finished,“ my master assured me. „Fear not—it passes off entirely when the next job turns up.“

„My next job might be fleeing with you into the mountains. Could we perhaps buy a couple of mules, just in case?“

„Don’t be silly, lad. Look, there’s the palanquin with the Lady. Those gilded poles and rings must have cost a fortune.“

„Is she pregnant?“ I demanded gloomily. But with the flowing robes that princesses wore it was impossible to say.

With the passage of the ladies the most interesting part of the parade was over. „Look here, Li.“ My master patted me on the shoulder as we turned away. „You’ll fret yourself into a fever. The odds are quite good. Either our lord wins the battle, or not. And either the babe will be a girl, or a boy. Fifty-fifty in both cases, and we can’t affect the outcome either way.“

„There’s something wrong with your calculation,“ I grumbled, but couldn’t put my finger on it.

As summer slid into autumn I became more and more uneasy. The war might be won or lost already, with no way to tell from this distance. The first word we got might be Lord Tso’s regiments at the gate with fire and sword. I spent my own small savings on a good mule and its trappings, and packed food and clothing for us both, ready to be snatched up at a moment’s notice. And I sorted all the tools in the forge into a pile to take, and those that could be left. „Perhaps you should marry,“ my master suggested mildly. „It’s not healthy to bear the troubles of all the world on your back. A wife would help you sleep better.“

„I don’t want to sleep better. I want to keep an eye open for trouble.“

„Always, you expect the worst!“ Master Chu looked out over the silent workshop. „Another job, that’s what we need. Perhaps you’re right, and we should move on purely for professional reasons. Lord Yang probably has all the bells he will want for some time.“

„Lord Yang has troubles enough on his hands—“

But he waved me to silence. „Listen. Do you hear?“

The sound suddenly resounded clearly in the empty room, the clamor of many voices and shouting. „News must have arrived! Quick, let’s go to the marketplace and find out.“

Forgetting the autumn chill we dashed bareheaded into the courtyard. But beyond the house gate horses milled, and armed men. Armored fists were raised to hammer for entry. „Oh gods, I knew it,“ I groaned. „All is lost. The town is being sacked. We’re about to die. Run, master, run!“

„Wouldn’t enemies loot the palace and the treasury first?“ Master Chu raised his voice. „Sirs, who do you seek? This is the house of Chu the bronzeworker.“

„Well met then, Master Chu. I bring you news from your Lord Yang.“

„Me?“ Trustfully my master unbarred the gate, while I peered out to see the soldiers' crests. These were not men of ours!

„Behold the orders of the victorious Lord Yang.“ The soldier swaggered in jingling and held out an enameled bamboo scroll-case. „He has lent you and your services to his triumphant ally, my lord the Marquis of Hubei. The fame of your war bells has inspired the Marquis with a profound desire for his own set.“

„Gods!“ My master goggled.

„Did you see them in battle?“ I interjected. „Did the enemy fall down at the sound?“

At this the troops in the gateway yelled with laughter. „The enemy fell down all right, but it was at the sight of us!“ „Oh, ho ho! We rattled our spears, and they wet their pants!“

For a moment I was speechless. Of course they would believe they were responsible. Everyone in the army probably did. Of all the tiles in the mosaic, which is the most essential? The only answer is all of them. „But then it was all by chance!“ I cried. „We had nothing to do with the victory!“

„My Assistant is overwrought with relief,“ Master Chu said calmly. „Your news of victory relieves my mind tremendously, sirs.“

The soldier chortled until his face was red. „My lord the Marquis is merely anxious to reproduce all the elements of this famous victory, when he marches against Zheng.“

„Zheng!“ I was aghast. Lord Zheng was the master military tactician of the western provinces, and we were going to fight him with bells? And there was another thing: „Does the lord Yang's wife enjoy good health, do you know?“

„She was delivered of a son last month.“ The soldier winked at me. „Word is you two had something to do with that, as well.“

My master scratched his head thoughtfully. „I would be delighted to comply with the Marquis' behest. And by the greatest of good fortune my Assistant here has readied our tools and gear for travel.“

„Good!“ The soldier nodded to his men. „Fetch your baggage—we depart immediately!“

We hurried inside to gather up our bags. „The Marquis will not be satisfied to be outdone by Lord Yang,“ my master said happily. „We must make him a hundred bells, perhaps a hundred and twenty!“

„We don't know what we did or how we did it,“ I almost wailed. „But we're supposed to do it again, better?“

My master rolled the heavy leather forge aprons and gauntlets and crammed them into a sack. „What can we do, lad, but what we do best? The work is good, the bells as well made as can be. Mortals can ask for no more. When our best doesn't suffice, we shall die.“

I sat down heavily on a box of metal scraps. The prisoner's fate could have been our own: brutal mutilation and slow death. Instead we had fame and possibly fortune. We had done nothing to either avert it or earn it. All our efforts were unavailing. „Is there anyone truly in control, then?“

„The gods, perhaps. No one less. Let it go, boy. The entire scroll of fate is too broad for our eyes. We view the world through a bamboo stem, a narrow circle of the picture, but it's all we can take in.“

It came to me that the magic of the bells was not in the metal nor in their music nor in our crafting of them. The magic was in the hope they raised in the human heart. With it impossibilities became not certain but possible. My master's fathomless hope and ferocious concentration were the best wisdoms in this meaningless world. Wheat, he could bow to the wind; a phoenix, he could ride the storm. Five years I had been his Assistant, and I had not known that. „You are indeed my Master,“ I said humbly. „I have much to learn.“

Master Chu smiled. „Now come, Li. Gather up those extra shovels. These soldiers can be useful—let us have them carry what we cannot. Surely the Marquis will build us a workshop!“

