

LESSON PLAN

## Music in the Bronze Age



**Subjects:** Music, Visual Arts, Social Studies

**Grade Levels:** Middle School/Junior High, High School

**Duration:** Three 50-minute sessions

**Dynasty:** Zhou (ca. 1050–221 BCE)

**Object Types:** Metalwork, Vessel, Musical Instrument

**Themes:** Technology and Production; Power and Privilege; Tradition and Belief System; Animals and Nature

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**Bell (bo) with birds and dragons; from a set of four**

China, Houma foundry, State of Jin, Shanxi province, Eastern Zhou dynasty, ca. 500–450 BCE

Bronze

26 1/8 x 18 1/2 in; 136.7 lb

Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment. Freer Gallery of Art, F1941.9

## Objectives

Students will develop an understanding of the bronze bell as an indispensable part of the ancient Chinese court and ritual events. Students will learn about music as a virtue-promoting characteristic of Confucianism.

## Essential Questions

- What are the characteristics of ancient Chinese bronze bells?
- What can Chinese bronze bells teach us about the beliefs and values of ancient Chinese cultures?
- Who owned and listened to bronze bells in ancient China and on what occasions were bronze bells performed?
- Why did ancient Chinese philosophers link music to a properly ordered society and the conduct of good government?

## Background Information

This type of Chinese bronze bell is called a *bo* (bó 镛), which is one of the three types of ancient Chinese bronze bells (*bo* bell 镛钟, *niu* bell 钮钟, *yong* bell 甬钟). Different from Western bells, *bo* are not meant to be swung back and forth to make a sound. Instead, one hits the *bo* on the outside with a wooden mallet. Almond-shaped from below, it produces two tones depending on whether it is struck near the center or the edge. This *bo* would have been hung from the loop on the top. The loop is formed by a decoration that looks like a pair of birds. Their bodies face each other while their heads turn back to swallow their cat-like tails. On either side of the bell are eighteen round knobs or bumps. These bumps are called *zhongmei* (钟枚), and they may have musical and acoustic functions. If you look closely, you will see a small head in the middle of each bump; they are coiled snakes. Low relief dragons cover the bottom of the bell and horizontally divide the three bands of bumps. The greenish surface color (patina) on this bell is the result of having been buried; the owner wanted to hear its beautiful sound in the afterlife. Although made in different sizes, *bo* are usually quite large in order to generate deep bass notes. Weighing almost 140 pounds, this bell is the largest of a set of four. Together the set could produce eight different notes.

Bronzes have been cast in China for about 3,700 years. Most surviving bronzes of about 1500–300 BCE (roughly the Bronze Age in China) are ritual vessels (礼器) intended for the worship of ancestors, who are often named in inscriptions on the bronzes. Many were specially cast to commemorate important events in the lives of their possessors. Bronze bells—especially increasingly expanding sets—are most closely associated with the late Western Zhou (ca. 1050–771 BCE) and, especially, the Eastern Zhou (771–221 BCE), when there were numerous localized courts, all of which had to have bell sets for formal occasions that were mostly secular in character (banqueting, feasting, hosting diplomatic events, etc.).

Making a large bronze bell was a costly commission in terms of both material and labor. Its elaborate decoration further emphasizes the high status of bronze bells as a luxury restricted to rulers and the elite. In Chinese, there is a phrase to express this kind of exclusive and prestigious social status, called “钟鸣鼎食,” which literally means “(listening to) the bell ringing (and) eating from tripods.”

Music played an extremely important role in the Zhou dynasty and was part of religious and court rituals, banquets, and other important events. Early Chinese thinkers viewed music as a crucial aspect of culture, and they wrote about it with attention to its moral value and its role in a larger cosmological understanding of the world around them. The great Chinese philosopher Confucius was also a talented musician and considered music to be one of the pillars of a properly ordered society. A well-educated man at the time was expected to have advanced knowledge of music. A virtuous ruler should listen to music that was defined by Confucius as “refined, improving and essential for self-cultivation” so he could make good influence on his people, thus creating a stable governance.

During the Eastern Zhou period (771–221 BCE), central Zhou authority became increasingly weakened. Meanwhile, regional courts began fighting each other not only for land and political control but also for cultural supremacy. Later in the Warring States Period, described as “rites destroyed and music corrupted (礼崩乐坏),” regional courts got rid of the “properly ordered government” system and created bigger bronze bells with better acoustic functions than those used by the Zhou court. Music was a key part in this display of superiority. In fact, casting a perfectly tuned set of bells was thought to signal the power to rule and a proper relationship with heaven. Cherishing their bell sets, many owners chose to be buried with them. One example comes from the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng.

A music lover to the very end, Marquis Yi of Zeng was buried with the musical instruments of his royal orchestra, along with twenty-one women (possibly his court musicians) when he died around 433 BCE. The sixty-five bells being played in the video in the **Procedure** section of this lesson plan are full-size copies of the bells found in the tomb of this Chinese aristocrat. The bells were placed in the central chamber of Yi’s tomb along with other instruments and bronze banquetting vessels. Apparently accumulated over time, the assemblage covered five octaves and required several musicians to play the different bell types.

Although the bronze bell’s place in the court ensemble was gradually replaced by stringed musical instruments after the Qin dynasty, it still left a profound impact on Chinese culture. People’s love and respect for bronze bells has never subsided.

## Vocabulary

**bronze:** a mixture of copper, tin, and often lead that produces a strong metal.

**Bronze Age:** the “Early Bronze Age” in China is sometimes seen as equivalent to the Shang dynasty period of Chinese prehistory (sixteenth to eleventh centuries BCE), and the “Later Bronze Age” is sometimes seen as equivalent to the Zhou dynasty period (eleventh to third centuries BCE).

**Confucius:** Confucius (孔夫子) (551–479 BCE) was a Chinese philosopher and politician of the Spring and Autumn Period. The philosophy of Confucius, also known as Confucianism, stressed the importance of good government, social order, and harmonious and moral living.

**ritual:** a sequence of activities involving gestures, words, actions, or objects performed in a sequestered place according to a set sequence. Although there are broader definitions for ritual in modern days, in the context of teaching ancient China, ritual means worshipping rites and sacraments of organized religions.

**Spring and Autumn Period:** the first of two periods comprising the Eastern Zhou dynasty, the second being the turbulent Warring States Period. Named for the classic text *The Spring and Autumn Annals*, this period was a time of great flourishing for Chinese philosophy and music development. It was the time of both Confucius and Laozi, among other influential thinkers.

**tone:** the product of all influences of a sound that can be heard by the listener, including the characteristics of the instrument itself, differences in playing technique, and the physical space in which the instrument is played.

**Zhou dynasty:** the Zhou dynasty was divided into two periods: Western Zhou (ca. 1050–771 BCE) and Eastern Zhou (771–221 BCE). Two periods comprised the Eastern Zhou dynasty: the Spring and Autumn Period (春秋) and the Warring States Period (战国). Qin Shihuangdi ended the turbulent Warring States Period and unified China. He became the first emperor of the Qin dynasty in 221 BCE.

## Procedure

1. Display Bell (*bo*) with birds and dragons (F1941.9). Guide students through the **Describe** and **Analyze** questions.
2. Show students the picture of *bianzhong* (bronze bell set), and have students listen to the *bianzhong* music (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BMzS0enUEac>). Students will write down one word to describe their feelings when listening to the music and then share their word.
3. Students will explore the interactive *bianzhong* bell web page (<https://asia.si.edu/exhibition/bianzhong-bells/>) and listen to and play the tones. Guide students through the **Interpret** questions.
4. Distribute the **Claim/Support/Question Worksheet**. Students will answer several of the **Interpret** questions with the Claim/Support/Question framework. Students will share their thoughts as a class.
5. Guide students through a class discussion of the **Inquire** questions.

## Discussion Questions

### Describe

- Which design(s) on this bronze bell catches your eye? Why?
- What shapes have you found on this bell?
- How would you describe the color of this bronze bell?
- What patterns have you observed on the bell?

### Analyze

- Why are there greenish colors on the bronze?
- What are the bumps/knobs for?
- Study the designs on the bell. Can you find when a pattern begins and repeats itself?
- Where did ancient Chinese people play this bell and how did they play it?

## Interpret

- What did ancient Chinese bells sound like?
- Use one word to describe the feeling when you hear this bronze bell. Why do you use this word?
- Striking the center and the side of the bell creates two different tones. What is the benefit of developing the technology to cast a bronze bell with two different tones?
- In ancient China, who listened to *bianzhong* and on what occasion would *bianzhong* be played?
- Were *bianzhong* created for entertainment purposes like some music in modern times? Why do you agree or disagree?
- This bell set is a recreation of one that was buried with its owner, along with twenty-one women who were possibly court musicians. What does this burial practice say about the time period? What does it say about the bell set's owner?

## Inquire

- Do you agree or disagree with Confucius's view that music is closely related to morality, and that listening to and playing music would develop moral people and more effective rulers?
- Do you think Confucian views of music apply to the modern world? Why or why not?
- What role does music have in your life?
- What objects in your life are so important to you that you would want to be buried with them?

## Extensions

### Visual Arts

- Students will research ancient Chinese bronze bells or ancient Chinese bronze vessels and make inferences about ancient Chinese values and beliefs based on their research. Inspired by *taotie*, mask-like design patterns of ancient Chinese bronze objects, students will etch their own zoomorphic creatures into metal foil. Visit the [Learning Lab](#) collection for instructions.

### English Language Arts

- Select a quote about music that has been attributed to Confucius. In a short essay, explain why you agree or disagree with Confucius's views about music expressed in the quote. Be sure to provide examples or reason with evidence to justify your choice.

### Social Studies

- This lesson plan introduces Confucius and his views on music. Research Confucius and his views on one of the following topics: gender, social structures, family, or government. Analyze how Confucius's views on music align with the topic you chose.

### Music

- Discuss intervals and the emotional effects of intervals. Play both the major third and minor third and describe the feelings they create when listening. Analyze how these intervals create the emotions in music and how these emotions may have helped the Chinese elite class convey their messages to reinforce their rule and status. Students will select a theme, such as "mindfulness," "power," "solemn," "relaxing," or "spiritual." Based on the theme, students will compose a melody (or a whole song) using the notes from the museum six-bell set. Explore the "Resound: Ancient Bells of China" exhibition page (<https://asia.si.edu/exhibition/soundscape-composer-bios-and-compositions/>) for further learning. "See" sound and explore frequency, volume, and decay of the bell sounds on the "Composer Interactive" website (<https://asia.si.edu/exhibition/composer-interactive/>).

# Resources

*The Art and Archeology of Ancient China: A Teacher's Guide.* Washington, DC: Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, 2003. <https://asia.si.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Art-and-Archaeology-of-Ancient-China.pdf>.

*Ritual Vessels and Music in the Bronze Age Learning Lab:* <https://learninglab.si.edu/collections/ritual-vessels-and-music-in-the-bronze-age/rEIOKb2Zd37uBcfw>.

*Music in the Age of Confucius:*

<https://ia801307.us.archive.org/31/items/musicinageofconf00soje/musicinageofconf00soje.pdf>.

Learn more at: <https://asia.si.edu/teachingchina>.

## More about the Zhou Dynasty:

- Mark, Joshua J. "Zhou Dynasty," Ancient History Encyclopedia. [https://www.ancient.eu/Zhou\\_Dynasty/#:~:text=The%20Zhou%20Dynasty%20\(1046%2D256,followed%20the%20Shang%20Dynasty%20\(c](https://www.ancient.eu/Zhou_Dynasty/#:~:text=The%20Zhou%20Dynasty%20(1046%2D256,followed%20the%20Shang%20Dynasty%20(c)
- Princeton University Art Museum. "Creating a Bronze Vessel." <https://artmuseum.princeton.edu/asian-art/archived/creating-a-bronze-vessel/>.
- Department of Asian Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "Shang and Zhou Dynasties: The Bronze Age of China." 2004. [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/shzh/hd\\_shzh.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/shzh/hd_shzh.htm).
- Britannica. "The Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BCE)." <https://www.britannica.com/art/Chinese-bronzes/The-Zhou-dynasty-1046-256-bce>.

## Chinese Language Resources:

- <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E9%92%9F%E7%A3%AC/56664>.
- <https://new.qq.com/omn/20171120/20171120A028Z2.html>.
- <https://www.zhihu.com/question/26867265>.
- <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%95%86%E5%91%A8%E9%9D%92%E9%93%9C%E5%99%A8%E7%BA%B9%E6%A0%B7>.

## Music Resources:

- Akasu, Hideto. "Ancient Chinese Percussion Instruments," The World of Chinese. 2015. <https://www.theworldofchinese.com/2015/08/ancient-chinese-percussion-instruments/>.
- "How Scales and Intervals Really Work," How Music REALLY Works! [https://www.howmusicreallyworks.com/Pages\\_Chapter\\_4/4\\_4.html](https://www.howmusicreallyworks.com/Pages_Chapter_4/4_4.html).
- Moore, J. Kenneth. "Music and Art of China," the Metropolitan Museum of Art. 2009. [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/much/hd\\_much.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/much/hd_much.htm).

