

The Historical Significance of the Song “The East is Red”

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Abstract

The song “The East Is Red” is a well-known folk song in China. With a long history, it has been composed by musicians of different periods and has become a work of folk art with a solid foundation among the people. The author begins with the creation of “The East Is Red” and the adaptation of its lyrics during the Chinese People's War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, explaining the background of the song's creation. She then links “The East Is Red” to the Erqi Memorial Tower in Zhengzhou and the Bianzhong of Marquis Yi of Zeng (also known as the Zenghouyi Chime Bells), describing the historical significance of this folk song in different contexts throughout modern and contemporary times.

Keywords: “The East Is Red,” the Erqi Memorial Tower in Zhengzhou, the Zenghouyi Chime Bells, Chinese folk song, February 7th Massacre, Ceremonial Musical Instruments

Introduction

The song “The East Is Red” was composed around 1940. Originally a love song, it later evolved into a resistance against Japanese aggression song. Today, as a modern song, it has been incorporated into various fields such as space exploration, architecture, and musical instruments, bearing witness to the tremendous changes that have taken place in the country. Since 1940, China has seen remarkable development in politics, economy, society and other areas. The founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 marked the end of China's semi-colonial and semi-feudal society and the gradual establishment of the socialist system. In 1978, the Communist Party of China held the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, which established the general policy of reform and opening up. Since 1971, China has resumed its legitimate seat in the United Nations, and its international status has risen steadily ever since. In addition, with economic growth, China has become the world's second largest economy, ranking among the world's leaders in foreign trade and investment, industrial development, and people's lives have changed from solving the problem of food and clothing to moving towards a comprehensive well-off society with the development of high-tech industries. In an era of rapid economic and cultural development, is there a piece of music that can summarise history and describe the present?

The answer is “The East Is Red,” a piece of music with significant political and cultural significance.

In this paper, the author clarifies the history of “The East Is Red,” describes its connection with the Erqi Memorial Tower and the Zenghouyi Chime Bells, and discusses how “The East Is Red” evolved from a traditional folk song into a piece of music representative of China, witnessing and participating in the country's development. The author attempts to explore the significance that different eras have attributed to this short piece of music. In the version praising Chairman Mao and the Communist Party of China, “The East Is Red” reflects the support and endorsement of the Chinese working class and peasantry for the Communist Party's leadership of the revolutionary movement. It not only embodies the people's admiration for their leader during a specific period, but also uses simple and accessible language and melody to narrate the development of the revolution. “The East Is Red” is widely sung. It has appeared in strikes, propaganda, and cultural performances. Today, the Erqi Memorial Tower in Zhengzhou still uses the melody of “The East Is Red” to mark the hours, recounting the unforgettable history of the 1923 strike by workers on the Beijing-Hankou railway (also known as the Jinghan railway). It serves as a reminder to remember the past and encourages people to strive tirelessly for a bright future. The combination of “The East Is Red” and the Zenghouyi Chime Bells unearthed at the Hubei Provincial Museum is inspiring. These bells, which have been silent for thousands of years, have been brought together with a modern song, representing progress in technology and a breakthrough in ideology. It is a collision between ancient history and modern music, and their combination brings us a completely new artistic experience.

Purpose and Methodology of the Study

This paper aims to study the birth and development of the song “The East Is Red.” By deconstructing its regeneration process from a folk love song to a national cultural symbol, it examines how the song has participated in national liberation and revival in different historical periods from 1940 to the present, and how it has participated in the construction of national modernisation consciousness. Specifically focusing on: 1. Tracing the development history of “The East Is Red;” 2. How “The East Is Red” and the Zhengzhou Erqi Memorial Tower jointly commemorate the Jinghan Railway Strike; 3. Through the performance of the original Zenghouyi Bells and their replicas, how “The East Is Red” achieves higher artistic value and achieves mutual benefits for the promotion of bell music and the song.

The article adopts a comprehensive approach combining cultural history research and critical discourse analysis, emphasising the combination of historical context restoration and symbolic meaning. Using historical document analysis, the original lyrics and musical scores of “The East Is Red” were collected and a database of the chronological order of the song was established (1940 to 1945). By reading and analysing lyrics, collecting performance videos, and conducting a detailed analysis of the lyrics and their special context. A longitudinal analysis begins with the use of “The East Is Red” as the time signal at the Erqi Memorial Tower in 1971 and continues with the first piece performed on the Zenghouyi Bells after their discovery in 1978, also titled “The East Is Red.” This analysis explores the significance of “The East Is Red” in different contexts. The author's description of the spatial dimension is innovative, mapping the sound geography of “The East Is Red” in northwestern Shanxi, northern Shaanxi, Henan Province, and Hubei Province.

The Birth of “The East Is Red”

The predecessor of “The East Is Red” was the folk song “Sesame Oil” (simplified Chinese: 麻油歌) from northwestern Shanxi Province (simplified Chinese: 晋西北 pinyin: Jin Xibei). Jin is the abbreviation for Shanxi, and northwestern Shanxi refers to the northwestern edge of the Shanxi Plateau in China. Northwestern Shanxi played a significant role in the War of the Chinese People's War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression due to its geographical advantages. On 24 February 1936, Mao Zedong and Peng Dehuai issued *the Instruction on Developing Against Japanese Aggression Bases in Shanxi*. On 7 July 1937, Japan launched an attack on the Lugou Bridge area. The Chinese 29th Army fought back fiercely, and the Chinese People's War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression broke out in full force, an event known as the July 7th Incident (Lugou Bridge Incident). Following Zhangjiakou, Beiping, and Tianjin, Shanxi became the centre of the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression in North China. On 25 September 1937, in Baiyitai Township, Lingqiu County, Datong City, Shanxi Province, the Eighth Route Army concentrated a large force for the first time to fight against the Japanese army and won a victory, which is known as the victory at Pingxingguan. In October of the same year, the Northwestern Shanxi Resistance Base was established in the northwest of Shanxi Province. In November 1940, the northwestern Shanxi Military Region was established. As one of the important battlefields in the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, northwestern Shanxi provided economic support and material supplies for the victory of the war. It also provided the historical and cultural background for the creation of the song “Sesame Oil.” Folk songs of northwestern Shanxi include minor, Xintianyou, and work songs, which reflect scenes from daily life and express emotions. The original composer and lyricist of “Sesame Oil” are unknown, and the date of its creation is also unknown. The melody was passed down by word of mouth and became widely sung between 1940 and 1950. It is a song about love. The lyrics are as follows:

Sesame oil, cabbage hearts, and green beans with stringy fibres. Three days without seeing you and I feel like I'm dying. Hm, hm, oh my, my third brother.

(Simplified

Chinese:

芝麻油，白菜心，要吃豆角抽筋筋。三天不见想死个人，哼儿咳哟，哎呀，我的三哥哥。)

After being renamed “White Horse Tune” (also known as “Riding a White Horse”), it was rewritten and became a resistance against Japanese aggression song with distinctive characteristics of northern Shaanxi or *Shaanbei* (simplified Chinese: 陕北). The lyrics of “White Horse Tune”¹ are as follows:

Sesame oil lamp, bright and clear, red beans with stringy fibres, red beans with stringy fibres, (huh-hey-yo) no one can sell their conscience.

Riding a white horse, carrying a foreign gun, Third Brother ate the Eighth Route Army's rations. He wanted to go home to see his wife, but he was too busy fighting the Japanese to bother.

¹ The lyrics are taken from songs sung in web videos and transcribed by the author after listening to them. The video is titled *Shaanbei Folk Song: “Sesame Oil,”* but the author believes it should be “White Horse Tune,” which may be more accurate. https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1HW4y1o7EX/?vd_source=b3d6528dc0617974f8e7963cd40f4e9d (accessed 01 nov 2024).

The mountains are beautiful and the land is flat. Chairman Mao led the people of Northern Shaanxi Province, Gansu Province, and eastern Ningxia Province to welcome immigrants and clear the forests. (Hoo-hey-yo!) Our border region is covered in red.

The mountains are low, the Five Great Mountains are high, Chairman Mao has made great contributions to governing the country, the border areas² are being developed successfully, (Hoo-hey-yo) the common people praise Tang Yao.

(Simplified Chinese:

麻油灯，亮又明，红豆角角双抽筋·红豆角角双抽筋·（呼而嘿哟）谁也不能卖良心。

骑白马，挎洋枪，三哥哥吃了八路军的粮，有心回家看老婆，（呼而嘿哟）打日本就顾不上。

山川秀，天地平，毛主席领导陕甘宁，迎接移民开山林，（呼而嘿哟）咱们边区满地红。

山川低，五岳高，毛主席治国有功劳·边区²办得呱呱叫·（呼而嘿哟）老百姓颂唐尧。）

Or, in some cases, the first two lines of the lyrics were changed to:

Riding a white horse, running on the beach, you have no wife and I have no husband. Let's tie ourselves together like a bunch of garlic (hoo-ha-yo), born in the soil and destined to rot in the soil.

Riding a white horse and carrying a foreign gun, the third brother ate the food of the Eighth Route Army. He wanted to go home to see his girlfriend (hoo-ha-yo), but he had to fight against Japan.

(Simplified Chinese:

骑白马，跑沙滩，你没有婆姨呀我没有汉。咱俩捆成一嘟噜蒜（呼嗨吆），土里生来土里烂；

骑白马，挎洋枪，三哥哥吃了八路军的粮。有心回家看姑娘（呼嗨吆），打日本也顾不上。

In 1989, the song "Riding a White Horse" was included in the cassette tape *Red Carrot and Red Embroidered Shoes* from the TV series *The Legend of Kant's First Bodyguard*, performed by Fan Linlin and Wang Di. The song, set against the backdrop of the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, focuses more on the emotions between men and women. The lyrics are as follows:

The one riding the white horse with a foreign gun was the third brother, who ate the Eighth Route Army's rations. That day, he was coming back to see his girlfriend (hoo-ha-yo), but he was so busy fighting the Japanese that he couldn't spare the time.

² The border regions refer to special administrative units established by the *National Government of the Republic of China* in mainland China before its relocation to Taiwan. From the early 1930s to the early 1950s, the Nationalist government established a large number of border regions. <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E8%BE%B9%E5%8C%BA> (accessed 13 May 2025).

The girl who came out of the cave lifted the red curtain, looking at her brother who had gone far away, holding hands and glancing at each other (hoo-ha-yo), calling out to him, saying, 'When the war ends, we will meet again.'

The one riding the white horse with a foreign gun slung over his shoulder, Third Brother, looks so dashing. He's fighting for us poor people. (Hoo-ha-yo) my heart is on fire.

(Simplified Chinese:

骑白马的那个挎洋枪，三哥哥吃的是八路军的粮，那天他要回来看姑娘，呼而嘿哟，打鬼子就顾不上。

出窑洞的那个掀红帘，小妹妹望哥去得远，手拉着手眼瞟着眼，呼而嘿哟，杀完鬼子再见面。

骑白马的那个挎洋枪，三哥哥身影好洒脱，为咱穷人打天下，呼而嘿哟，妹妹心里一团火。)

In the winter of 1942, Li Mianqi rewrote the lyrics for the song, which was sung by Shaanxi farmer Li Youyuan and renamed "The Immigrant Song" (also known as "Chairman Mao Leads the Poor to Overthrow Oppression"). At this point, it had been nearly seven years since the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party had been leading the National War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression from Shaanbei. "The Immigrant Song" consists of nine verses. The first two verses praise the great leader Mao Zedong, and the third verse begins the lyrics about immigration, which are largely based on the previous "White Horse Tune." The first three verses of "The Immigrant Song" are as follows:

The sun rises in the east, and Mao Zedong has emerged in China. He strives for the survival of the people, and he is the great saviour of the people.

The three mountains are low, the five peaks are high, Chairman Mao's leadership has earned him great merit; the border region is thriving, the people are happy, and everyone praises Tang Yao.

Riding a white horse and carrying a foreign gun, the third brother ate the food of the Eighth Route Army. He wanted to go home to see his girlfriend (hoo-ha-yo), but he had to fight against Japan.

(Simplified Chinese:

东方红，太阳升，中国出了个毛泽东；他为人民谋生存，呼而嘿哟，他是人民大救星。

三山低，五岳高，毛主席领导有功劳；边区办的呱呱叫，呼而嘿哟，老百姓都颂唐尧。

骑白马，挂洋枪，三哥哥吃了八路军的粮；有心回家看姑娘，呼而嘿哟，打日本就顾不上。)

In 1945, Gong Mu, Liu Chi, Lei Jia, Yan Wenjing, Wang Dahua and others participated in discussions on "The Immigrant Song." After revisions and modifications by Gong Mu, the current version of the lyrics was finalised. The lyrics of the first verse remain largely unchanged, with *struggling to survive* (Simplified Chinese: 谋生存) replaced by *striving for happiness* (Simplified Chinese: 谋幸福). The second and third verses were rewritten to praise Chairman Mao for his indelible contributions to the construction of New China. The third paragraph praises the Communist Party of China for leading the people to liberation and a

happy life. In the same year, the song was premiered by the Northeast Arts Troupe in Shenyang and officially named “The East Is Red”. The lyrics are as follows:

“The East Is Red,” the sun is rising, China has produced a Mao Zedong; he sought happiness for the people, (hoo-ha-yo) and he was the great saviour of the people.

Chairman Mao, who loved the people, was our leader; for the sake of building a new China, (hoo-ha-yo) he led us forward.

The Communist Party of China is like the sun, shining wherever it goes; wherever the Communist Party is, (hoo-ha-yo) the people are liberated.

(Simplified Chinese:

东方红，太阳升，中国出了个毛泽东；他为人民谋幸福，呼而嘿哟，他是人民大救星。

毛主席，爱人民，他是我们的带路人；为了建设新中国，呼儿嗨哟，领导我们向前进。

共产党，像太阳，照到哪里哪里亮；哪里有了共产党，呼儿嗨哟，哪里人民得解放。)

东 方 红

陕 西 民 歌
李有源、公木词

1=F $\frac{2}{4}$
中速 庄严地

5	5̣ 6̣	2 -	1	1̣ 6̣	2 -	5	5	6̣ 1̣	6̣ 5̣	1	1̣ 6̣	2 -	
1. 东	方 红，		太	阳 升，		中	国	出	了	个	毛	泽	东；
2. 毛	主 席，		爱	人 民，		他	是	我	们	的	带	路	人；
3. 共	产 党，		像	太 阳，		照	到	哪	里	哪	里	亮；	

5	2	1	7̣ 6̣	5	5	2 ^v	3 2	1	1̣ 6̣	2 3	2 1	2 1	7̣ 6̣	5 -	5	0	
他	为	人	民	谋	幸	福	(呼	儿	咳	呀)，	他	是	人	民	大	救	星。
为	了	建	设	新	中	国	(呼	儿	咳	呀)，	领	导	我	们	向	前	进。
哪	里	有	了	共	产	党	(呼	儿	咳	呀)，	哪	里	人	民	得	解	放。

(Simplified musical notation for the song “The East Is Red” — photographed by Yulin Ma)

Looking at the birth and evolution of the song “The East Is Red” during the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, we can see that it carries a rich, diverse and complex historical and cultural background. The song structure is simple, usually consisting of three sections. Each section has four phrases, with the first three phrases consisting of 3.5 bars each and the fourth phrase consisting of 5.5 bars. Its melody remains unchanged, using a C Zhi biangong-scale six-tone mode (Simplified Chinese: C徵变宫六声调式), and has a strong Chinese folk music flavour. The preserved melody represents the work's long-lasting popularity and high degree of transmission. Within just five years, the name of the song has changed repeatedly. From “Sesame Oil” in 1940 to the renamed and rewritten “White Horse

Tune,” from the 1942 rewritten “Immigrant Song” to the officially named “The East Is Red” in 1945. The song title changed from sesame oil, commonly used by the people, to a white horse, which is related to daily life, and from the counter-Japanese *Immigrant Song* to the ultimate symbol of the rising sun in the “The East Is Red.” The perspective shifted from the mundane to the grand and expansive, expressing the people's aspirations for a better life. The lyrics were adapted to reflect national conditions and current life circumstances, ranging from the love song “Sesame Oil” sung by a young woman, to “White Horse Tune,” in which a younger sister praises her third brother for resisting Japanese invaders, to “The East Is Red,” which celebrates the Party and Chairman Mao for leading the people to a better life. Lyrics are no longer confined to love and romance, nor do they merely focus on trivial matters of daily life. Instead, they have shifted their attention to the nation and its people. This shift reflects the gradual broadening of the lyricist's horizons, marking a transition from a narrow regional perspective to a broader, more comprehensive one. The lyrics have evolved alongside China's growth.

China entered a period of nationwide resistance against Japanese aggression on 7 July 1937, which lasted until 15 August 1945, when Japan surrendered to the alliance. “The East Is Red” was composed between 1940 and 1945, during a period when the entire nation was resisting foreign enemies. The song was imbued with multiple meanings that were relevant to the times. As a catalyst for revolutionary propaganda, it relied on a broad popular foundation and spread revolutionary ideas by setting new lyrics to old melodies, mobilising the masses to actively participate in the war of resistance. The creation and adaptation of song during this period laid the foundation for it to become iconic song of the new China. The song was composed in difficult circumstances. It is the result of the musician's immersion in the lives of the people and reflects the practice of ‘serving the people’ through literary and artistic works.

“The East Is Red” and the Erqi Memorial Tower in Zhengzhou

Zhengzhou, currently the central city of Henan Province. In ancient times, Zhengzhou was the capital of the Shang Dynasty, which promoted the development of early commercial culture. The site of the Shang Dynasty capital in Zhengzhou are currently the largest existing ruin of an early Shang Dynasty capital in the world. In early modern times, the completion of the Beijing-Hankou Railway and the Longhai Railway made Zhengzhou a national hub station. On 15 November 1905, the Yellow River Bridge in Zhengzhou was completed, laying the foundation for the completion of the Beijing-Hankou Railway. The Longhai Railway was constructed in China from 1905 to 1953. In 1907, the Kaifeng-Zhengzhou section of the Bianluo Railway, part of the Longhai Railway, was opened, making Zhengzhou an early railway hub. In 1925, the eastern line reached Lianyungang, and in 1953, the western line reached Lanzhou. In July of the same year, the entire Longhai Railway was completed, with a total length of 1,760 kilometres.

The Beijing-Hankou Railway, formerly known as the Luhan Railway, connects Lugou Bridge to Hankou. It was the first north-south trunk railway in China. After the completion of the Wuhan Yangtze River Bridge in 1957, it was merged with the Yuehan Railway to form the Beijing-Guangzhou Railway, which is now the northern section of the Beijing-Guangzhou Railway. In 1897, it was constructed under the supervision of Sheng Xuanhuai, a

representative of the Yangwu group³ of the Qing Dynasty. Completed in April 1906, it has a total length of 1,214 kilometres. The Beijing-Hankou Railway is not only a magnificent piece of early modern transportation architecture, but also a testament to the labour movement. In 2019, it was selected for inclusion in *the List of China's Industrial Heritage Sites*.

In 1922, China was in a semi-colonial, semi-feudal states. Under the rule of the Beiyang government, warlords divided the country and fought frequently. Through the 'open door' policy, the great powers controlled their own economies, making it difficult for national industries to develop. From 16 to 23 July of the same year, the 2nd National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party was held in Shanghai, which for the first time in early modern Chinese history clearly put forward a democratic revolutionary programme of opposing imperialism and feudalism, emphasising the importance of mass participation in the revolution. In the same year, workers' clubs were widely established. Along the Jinghan Railway, other railways, workers' movements, and interregional workers' clubs developed one after another. On 22 January 1922, the Jiang'an Railway Workers' Club was established. In April 1922, the Changxindian Workers' Club was established on the Jinghan Railway. On 26 February 1922, the Yuehan Railway Workers' Club was established. In the same year, workers' clubs were established at the Hankou Yangzi Machine Factory, HanYang Ironworks, Wuchang Mint, and other enterprises. On 16 September 1922, the Shanghai Gold and Silver Industry Workers' Club was established.

As the central hub of the Beijing-Hankou Railway, Zhengzhou's geographical advantage facilitated the coordinated organisation of the workers' movement. It boasted a large population of railway workers, making it the core location for preparing the workers' movement. On 1 February 1923, the Jinghan Railway General Trade Union, led by the Communist Party of China, was formally established in Zhengzhou. Although the conference was obstructed by the warlord Wu Peifu, the general assembly was still declared established. This obstruction directly triggered a strike by workers on the Beijing-Hankou Railway, involving as many as 20,000 people, which spread from the Jiang'an Machine Factory to the entire railway. On 7 February of the same year, Wu Peifu suppressed striking workers, resulting in the 'February 7th Massacre'. The Erqi Memorial Tower in Zhengzhou was built in memory of the martyrs who sacrificed their lives during this strike, which sparked a nationwide workers' movement.

In 1970, China entered a new era of reform and opening up. On 24 April of the same year, China's first man-made earth satellite, Dongfanghong-1, was successfully launched. Its name was taken from the song "The East Is Red." The satellite broadcast "The East Is Red" to the ground via radio signals, allowing the world to hear this piece of folk music. From then on, it became both a revolutionary song and one of the symbols of the Chinese nation. As the people entered a new stage of life, "The East Is Red" became a symbol of national self-reliance in science and technology. Its historical significance continues to expand and develop.

The Erqi Memorial Tower in Zhengzhou was built on 1 July 1971 and is located in Erqi Square in Zhengzhou. It is the only early modern revolutionary memorial hall in Zhengzhou and also a memorial site for the Erqi General Strike. Since its completion, the Erqi Memorial

³ The Yangwu group refers to Qing Dynasty officials who strongly promoted learning from the West and implemented Westernisation policies during the 'Self-Strengthening Movement' in the late Qing Dynasty. Their counterparts were the "conservatives." <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E6%B4%8B%E5%8A%A1%E6%B4%BE> (accessed 29 May 2025).

Tower has been chiming the hour every hour on the hour with the melody of “The East Is Red”. Although the Jinghan General Strike had no direct connection with the song “The East Is Red”, revolutionary music such as “Struggle” and “Jinghan Strike Song” emerged during the strike. These songs were in the same vein as “The East Is Red” and reflected the heroic and tenacious spirit of the people's struggle. They are representative of early revolutionary music among the workers and peasants. Through the Erqi Memorial Tower, “The East Is Red” tells the time to citizens, continuing the revolutionary significance of the song and coexisting with the times. It reminds us of the Jinghan General Strike that took place in Zhengzhou, urging us to remember the martyrs who fought for freedom and democracy, and to cherish the hard-won nature of our current way of life. It is not just a piece of music, but a connection between technology and architecture, between architecture and people, and a link between history and the citizens of Zhengzhou. “The East Is Red” has evolved from a single piece of music into a symbol of the city, serving as a cultural imprint commemorating the history of the general strike. It is worth mentioning that before 1966, many customs offices in China used colonial music to signal the time. For example, the Shanghai Customs and the Wuhan Customs used the British colonial music “Long live the Queen” for a long time. In 1966, all customs clock towers in China uniformly changed their time signals to “The East Is Red” to oppose colonialism and declare cultural sovereignty. The time-telling function of the Erqi Memorial Tower in Zhengzhou is a continuation of the 1966 customs clock tower reform policy. The Customs Clock Tower and Memorial Tower are both iconic buildings in the city. By chimes of “The East Is Red,” they reinforce the people's sense of cultural identity. In the 1980s and 1990s, Shanghai briefly reinstated “Long live the Queen” to appeal to foreign investors, but in 2003, it reverted to “The East Is Red.” After the completion of the Erqi Memorial Tower, as a newly constructed building, it was not influenced by colonial culture. The use of “The East Is Red” has continued to this day, expressing the democratic and self-reliant spirit of the city's people.

The current Erqi Memorial Tower and the song “The East Is Red” remain an integral part of Zhengzhou residents' daily lives. They have become central elements of holiday celebrations, such as the tower's clock chimes adding to the festive atmosphere during New Year's Eve celebrations. Using the song “The East Is Red” for the hourly chimes emphasises the connection between historical memory and modern social ideology. Through its architecture, “The East Is Red” carries the memory of this city's revolution. Despite the accelerated pace of urban modernisation, the sound of bells remains an irreplaceable symbol of the city. As a patriotic education base and famous tourist destination, the Erqi Memorial Tower was included in *the Henan Province Revolutionary Culture List* in 2021. It serves as a political symbol and a repository of urban memory in today's society, acting as a link between history and the present.



(Erqi Memorial Hall in Zhengzhou — photographed by Yulin Ma)

“The East is Red” and the Zenghouyi Chime Bells of Hubei Provincial Museum

The Zenghouyi Chime Bells are a set of large bronze musical instruments used by the rulers of the State of Zeng during the early Warring States period. They are classified as national treasures of the first class and were among the first cultural relics prohibited from being exhibited abroad. Discovered in 1978 in the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng in Suizhou, Hubei Province, it is now treasured in the Hubei Provincial Museum. On 17 April 2025, the Zenghouyi Chime Bells were included in the eighth batch of the UNESCO Memory of the World Register. There are sixty-five chimes in total, with twelve semitones complete, and each piece can play a double note in thirds. The current scale is C major, which can be used to play musical works based on the pentatonic scale, hexatonic scale, and heptatonic scale. It is the largest, best-preserved, and most complete set of chime bells discovered in China to date.



(Zenghouyi Chime Bells — photographed by Yulin Ma)

In ancient China, ritual and music were a system and a means of governing the country. They originated in the Western Zhou Dynasty and continued until the end of the Qing Dynasty. In ancient times, there was a strict class system. People of different social statuses had different orchestras and dance troupes, and used different types of music. The Zenghouyi Tomb Bell and Stone Chime Ensemble includes chime bells, bianqing, jiangu, sheng, and other instruments. The chime bells are divided into three layers: upper, middle, and lower. The upper layer consists of 19 bells, known as niuzhong; the middle layer consists of 33 bells, known as yongzhong; and the lower layer consists of 12 yongzhong bells and one bozhong, highlighting the tomb owner's prestigious social status. In ancient times, the performance of chime bells was often associated with social activities and could be seen in rituals, ceremonies, and banquets. In religious ceremonies, it communicates with the gods to pray for blessings and ward off disasters; in important national ceremonies, it uses specific pieces to highlight etiquette and dignity; in banquets, it creates a pleasant musical atmosphere while maintaining a sense of hierarchy.

The performance of the chime bells is carried out by professional musicians or female musicians of a specific status, and there is a strict hierarchical system. Court musicians were skilled in playing techniques and musical knowledge, and were able to operate large bell instruments. Their status was part of the rules and regulations of etiquette and the power structure. Twenty-two burial coffins were discovered in the tomb of Zenghouyi, 21 of which belonged to women and 1 to a dog. Among the burial attendants, there may have been musicians who performed songs and dances, indicating that female musicians, although skilled in music, played a special role in maintaining the ritual music system at that time. Their social status did not rise, but rather they remained a professional group dependent on the powerful. After the Zenghouyi Chime Bells were unearthed, they were only publicly

performed three times: in 1978, they played “The East Is Red” at the Wuhan Military Region; in 1984, they welcomed visiting ambassadors to China at the Huiren Hall in the Zhongnanhai compound in Beijing; and in 1997, they celebrated the return of Hong Kong to China. Due to the age of the instruments, frequent playing causes damage to the bells, so the original Zenghouyi chimes are now prohibited from use.

For the sake of protecting the original Zenghouyi Chime Bells, only five sets of replicas were made. The reproduction of original artefacts has become a scientific and technological field in need of further development. The Zenghouyi Chime Bells were replicated through six steps: moulding, wax mould shaping, shell making, smelting and casting, post-processing, and decoration. The replication of the entire set of bells was completed in July 1984. The set of chimes currently housed in the Chime Bells Hall of the Hubei Provincial Museum is the most frequently used set. In 2025, the Chime Bells Concert Hall will hold three performances each day from Tuesday to Friday and four concerts each day from Saturday to Sunday. The Chime Bells Hall at the Hubei Provincial Museum is always packed, treating audiences to the timeless sounds of ancient music. For example, on 30 January 2025, which is the second day of the Chinese New Year, they launched a special New Year performance, playing pieces such as “Spring Festival Overture” and “Gong Xi Fa Cai.”

After the discovery of the Zenghouyi Chime Bells, the Hubei Provincial Museum organised musicians to perform “The East Is Red” in 1978. As the first piece of music played on the chime bells after their discovery, “The East Is Red” holds particular significance. It blends early modern songs with chime bells, becoming a model of ancient ceremonial music in the new era and recreating the splendour of court music, thus continuing the function of ancient ceremonial music. The successful premiere transcended the passage of time, achieving a fusion of ancient instruments and modern music, and establishing a bridge for the study of music, history, and technology through the use of large ancient instruments in the modern era. “The East Is Red” is no longer just a song praising the Red Army and its leaders. It has been imbued with the solemnity of ancient ritual music, shattering the foreign perception that Chinese music consists solely of pentatonic scales. This marks a significant breakthrough in the field of Chinese music archaeology.



(The chime bell version of “The East Is Red” is currently being performed — photo by Yulin Ma)

In 1842, the Qing government signed the *Treaty of Nanking* with Britain, ceding Hong Kong to Britain. On 1 July 1997, Hong Kong returned to the motherland. At the Hong Kong Handover Ceremony, “Heaven Earth Mankind: Symphony 1997” brought together conductor Tan Dun, musician Yo-Yo Ma, the Asian Youth Orchestra, the Ye Children's Choir, singer Jacky Cheung, and the Chinese Chime Bells Orchestra for a joint performance, with musician Tan Jun participating in the performance of the Zenghouyi Chime Bells. In September 2020, in an interview with Chutian Metropolis Daily, Tan Jun mentioned the process of playing the Zenghouyi Chime Bells. He said,

‘It was my good fortune, and it is an experience I will never forget for the rest of my life. The replicas of the Zenghouyi Chime Bell No. 1 were used in our performances in Hong Kong and Beijing, but the original Zenghouyi Chime Bells were used for the recording, and not just once, but twice. The first time is the rehearsal before recording, and the second time is the actual recording. I remember it was a night in mid-June 1997. We spent 12 hours recording at the Provincial Museum. The sound produced by striking the original chime bells is purer than any replica I have ever heard. This is not a psychological effect. Experts who have replicated the chimes have also mentioned that the ratio of metal ingredient plays a decisive role in determining the tone. On that occasion, I also gained a deep understanding of the significance of the chime bells as ritual instruments. At that time, we stayed in Hong Kong for half a month, and it rained the whole time. Everyone joked that we were playing the sounds of history, the majestic sounds that would wash away a century of humiliation.’

Tan Jun also mentioned, ‘My teacher suddenly remembered that I had previously studied mallets, so I carried several large bags of mallets to the Provincial Museum, tried one out, and found that the sound was superb... Only then did Tan Dun confirm that his idea could be realised with chime bells. I was also the first chime player he confirmed for the symphony.’

Buried underground for 2,400 years, the Zenghouyi Chime Bells were played again on the Hong Kong reunification. They have witnessed China's rise and participated in the glorious chapter of national rejuvenation. From ancient performances of court music to modern-day celebrations, the Zenghouyi Chime Bells have continued to symbolise the authority of ritual and law, as well as reinforcing the legitimacy of the government through ancient ritual vessels. They have been given multiple identities.

During the reunification of Hong Kong in 1997, celebratory events were held at the Great Hall of the People and Tian'anmen Square in Beijing. A replica of the Zenghouyi Chime Bells from the National Museum (formerly the Chinese History Museum) performed the song "The East Is Red." As a cultural symbol of celebration, the bell chimes embody a sense of historical depth that has become one of the hallmarks of Chinese cultural heritage. They not only represent the pinnacle of ancient Chinese music but also bear witness to the important moment of Hong Kong's reunification. Its echo of the revolutionary song "The East Is Red" symbolises the revival of the Chinese nation. This design, which is significant both politically and culturally, adds to the diverse expressions of Hong Kong's reunification and promotes political, cultural, and artistic exchanges between the two sides of the Strait. The combination of ancient rituals and music with modern political symbols is a manifestation of Chinese cultural confidence.

During the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, replicas of the Zenghouyi Chime Bells were displayed in the Olympic Village and performed in the 'Chinese Stories' cultural exhibition area (Hubei Pavilion). It performed ancient pieces such as "Chu Shang," "Orchid," and "Qu Yuan Asks About Crossing the River," showcasing the charm of ancient Chinese musical instruments and music to the world. On 18 October 2019, at the opening ceremony of the 7th Military World Games (Wuhan Military Games), replicas of the Zenghouyi Chime Bells were featured as an important cultural element, performing alongside other traditional Chinese musical instruments to play "Peaceful Community with a Shared Future" and "Auld Lang Syne." From June to December 2024, replicas of the Zenghouyi Chime Bells were featured as core exhibits in the travelling exhibition 'Music and Ritual in China: Ancient Bronze Musical Instruments,' performing live in Beijing and Xi'an accompanied by a chime bells orchestra. In September 2024, replicas of the chime bells were unveiled at the Nanning International Convention and Exhibition Centre in Guangxi, participating in the 'China-ASEAN Cultural Exchange Year' themed performance. In October 2024, at the 'Chinese Archaeological Discoveries Exhibition' held at the Guimet Museum in Paris, France, a replica of the chime bells was used in a performance of "The Book of Songs," in collaboration with a team of French sinologists.

The Zenghouyi Chime Bells and their replicas are now serving as ambassadors, promoting China's ritual music culture and ancient musical knowledge. Its combination with the revolutionary song "The East Is Red" is an attempt to transform traditional culture into modern culture. In terms of musical tuning, there are subtle differences between the twelve pitches of the Zhou Dynasty's court music and the contemporary twelve-tone equal temperament. Through the interpretation of "The East Is Red," multiple musical versions were created, expanding the performance forms of this piece. The combination of ancient musical instruments and modern culture reflects social phenomena in the contemporary

context. The Zenghouyi Chime Bells, regarded as national treasures, were played again, and their symbol of national identity was reactivated.

Summary

The significance of “The East Is Red” lies in its multiple identities. As a product of its time, the song's meaning has far surpassed that of the work itself. Unlike “The Internationale,” “The East Is Red” is a song that originated in China and has the function of telling a local story. It is a microcosm of China's specific historical period, political changes, and social development, bearing heavy historical memories and serving as one of the symbols of the era. As a historical legacy, “The East Is Red” has a dual nature. On the one hand, it is a testament to the Chinese revolution and a product of a specific era; on the other hand, its lyrics belong to the past, and in modern times, their content has not changed with the passage of time. The combination of “The East Is Red” with ancient musical instruments raises an interesting question from the perspective of music appreciation: should we preserve the original form of the piece or explore its potential for diversification? This is a topic worthy of further research. This also brings to mind a very common phenomenon in Chinese music today, namely the combination of classical and modern music. Can this combination provide listeners with a better aesthetic experience? Can the artistic value of these works be enhanced through this form of fusion? The study of “The East Is Red” reminds us that when exploring any piece of music, we should place it in its specific historical context, paying attention to social changes and the multidimensional interpretation of its value to society. We should analyse the work from multiple perspectives, including music history, music appreciation, and ethnology, and so on.

This paper traces the historical evolution of the song “The East Is Red”, drawing upon the author's firsthand visit to connect it with Zhengzhou's Erqi Memorial Tower and the Zenghouyi Chime Bells at Hubei Provincial Museum, thereby linking multiple geographical locations to the song's historical narrative. The article presents a novel perspective, offering distinctive and forward-looking insights that provide innovative avenues for subsequent research on the “The East Is Red” phenomenon. Through the evolution of song, historical narratives, architectural chimes, and instrumental performances, a multi-dimensional network of meaning has been constructed. The theoretical value and research implications of this article lie in demonstrating that national songs, exemplified by “The East Is Red”, are undergoing a transformation and overlaying of identity. They have evolved from traditional folk songs into regional and national symbols, becoming vehicles of knowledge within the fields of science and education. Through societal development, they have continuously adapted, emerging as products of their era while undergoing cultural reconstruction. The timekeeping function of “The East Is Red” at the Erqi Memorial Tower has evolved from an expression of the spirit of its era into a tangible ritual, embodying the contemporary significance of folk music in the modern context. It is no longer merely a song, but has become a powerful reinforcement of collective memory, intertwined with the city's past, present and future. The successful performance of “The East Is Red” on the Zenghouyi Chime Bells represents a landmark achievement in musical history, demonstrating innovative transformations within cultural heritage. This provides an exemplary model for subsequent research into the transmission of ancient, modern, and contemporary music. Through studying “The East Is Red”, it becomes apparent that researching folk songs entails more than merely examining the songs themselves. One must comprehend the evolution of songs as cultural symbols, their transformation from spiritual essence to tangible function, and the

innovative sparks ignited by the collision of tradition and modernity within their dual context. This reveals the historical songs' contemporary relevance, offering fresh theoretical perspectives for the cross-media dissemination and development of traditional art forms.

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