

WUHAN GONGS & CYMBALS: Maintaining An Ancient Tradition

Story and Photos by Bruce Howard

The Wuhan factory represents the fusing of ancient Chinese traditional gong and cymbal making with the modern world's demands for orderly, volume production, with an emphasis on maintaining the century-old adherence to the highest quality of sound. The craftsmanship that is the heart of the factory, like the factory itself, represents all the past generations of Chinese knowledge, with the art and technology passed on from father to son to grandson for untold millennia.

Throughout antiquity, gongs have been considered holy instruments, welding the spirits of men, aspiring toward their gods. In ancient China, contracts were formalized with both parties drinking from an inverted gong. These contracts were not easily broken by either party, for after sharing from the gong, the agreement was not only of this world.

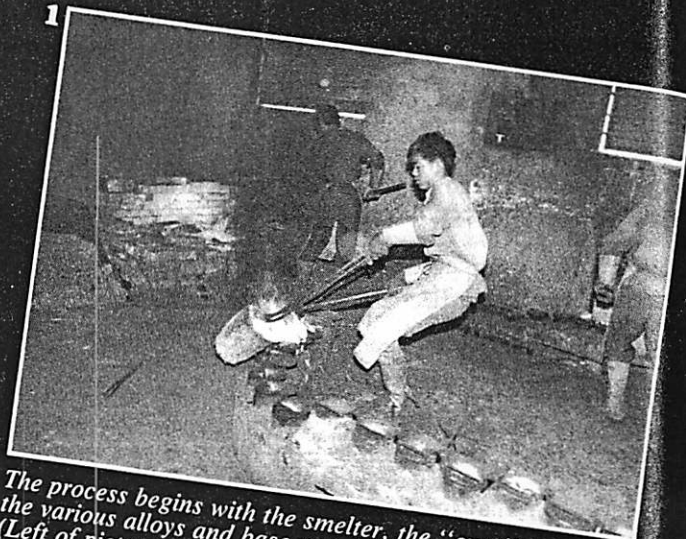
Cymbals had their origin in a more practical vein. Centuries ago, in feudal China, when battling warlords fought each other for land and power, cymbals were an instrument of war. The "roaring" of hand cymbals (thus the term—Lion Cymbals) added weight to the total volume of advancing soldiers with their weapons and calvary, and many battles were undoubtedly won or lost through the use of such percussion. Even today the Chinese term for war and the term for percussion are one and the same, distinguishable only by the context in which they're used.

Prior to the 1960s, the Wuhan factory was known to the world as the Gaohongtai factory. With the coming of the Cultural Revolution, however, Mao Tse-tung attempted to purge China of growing "revisionist" trends; what emerged changed the face of his nation for decades to come. All traces of the former China were to be purged, eliminated. Historical monuments were desecrated, rivers and cities changed names, and the Gaohongtai factory was forced to be renamed after the city of its location, Wuhan.

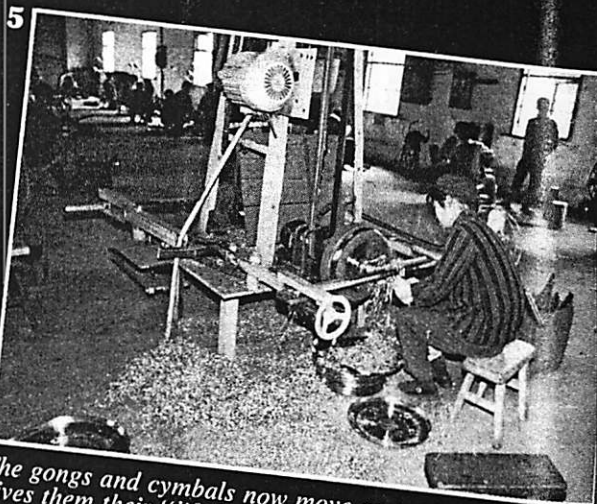
The craftsmanship of the factory, however, could not be changed so easily, and this, like the spirit of China itself, lived on through the turbulent years of the Cultural Revolution. Today, with the fantastic momentum of change that China is being driven by, many mistakes of these years are being reexamined, and ultimately reversed. Thus the name of Gaohongtai has been reinstated to the factory, to take its historical place alongside the name of Wuhan. Gongs and cymbals manufactured by the factory are beginning to bear the stamp of both Wuhan and the traditional Gaohongtai, symbolizing in percussion instruments the newly emerging, deeply rooted China.

The Chinese people have, since the beginnings of time,

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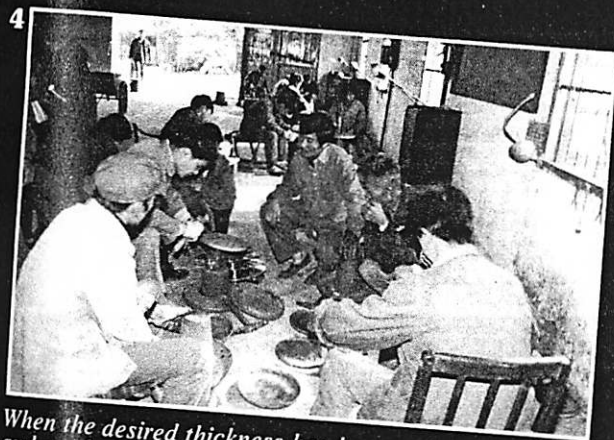
1 The process begins with the smelter, the "oven" that melts the various alloys and base metals down to a liquid state. (Left of picture) After the liquid "blend" reaches the correct temperature, the metal is poured into molds, shown here. From these molds comes the smallest Jing Gong and the largest Chau Gong, and all in between.



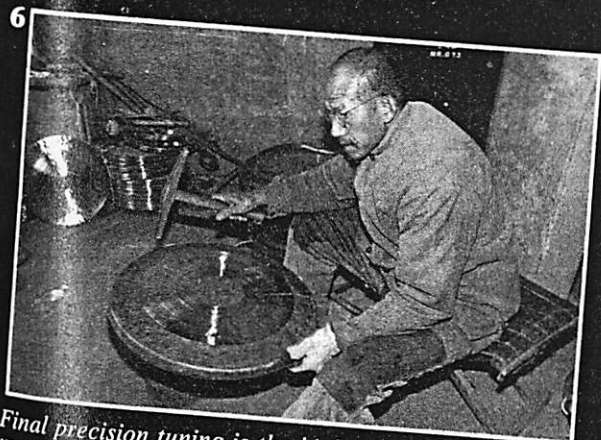
5 The gongs and cymbals now move on to the process that gives them their "life." Either by a belt-run lathe or by hand, the crust formed by the various firings is removed and, according to the instrument, sound-grooves are etched onto the surface. This enlivens the instrument, drawing out the responsiveness.



The metal cools in the molds quickly. The cooled castings are then removed and go on to the next step, shown here. Unlike other manufacturing processes that roll the metal out, the Chinese still use the timeless process of hammering the metal to the desired thickness, giving the instrument its "soul." Assisted today with machine hammers at this initial stage, the process itself is patterned after the century-old methods.



When the desired thickness has been achieved, the gongs and cymbals have to be further shaped to give them the various tone qualities. At this stage the process steps far back into Chinese tradition and lore, thousands of years, to hand-hammer out a sound that no machine processing has ever been able to effectively copy.



Final precision tuning is the highest art of the Wuhan manufacturing process. Pictured here is the master fine-tuner of the factory. With just a hammer, an anvil, and his finely-trained ear, he inspects, rejects, and completes the Wuhan gongs. His son is now apprenticing at this same factory, to learn the entire process so as to someday follow his father at this critical stage of gong production. And so the chain is completed, once again.



This initial hammering process requires many man-hours. (A large Chau Gong can take a team of six craftsmen as long as six weeks to complete.) Here the metal is reheated during the process to give it the correct malleability to allow for the hammering process to be effective to the desired thickness. This process of hammering, cooling and reheating, and continued hammering makes up a great part of the Chinese gong and cymbal making technology.



Pictured here is the master inspector of the Wuhan factory's Lion Cymbals. This man demands the highest quality from the factory's production. At this stage, at the culmination of the entire process, he personally rejects 40% of the completed Lion Cymbals that he inspects, sending them back to be melted down and to start the entire process anew. Thus the extraordinary quality of the Wuhan factory Lion Cymbals, and some of the problems with restricted availability.

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traded their wares with a world that has always treasured the value and quality of Chinese craftsmanship. The impact of their music and musical instruments has affected untold generations and civilizations of man. World Percussion, Inc. takes great pride in offering these traditional Chinese percussion instruments to the Western world, in the hopes that they will find new directions and new futures for these instruments with so deep and rich a history.

The copper musical instrument is a traditional Chinese percussion instrument mainly employed in the performing arts and festivities. Legend has it that the 'Pien Chung' (a Chime of Bells) first appeared during the Warring States Period (480-222 B.C.). The copper gong evolved from the 'Pien Chung.' Chronicles reveal that the copper gong was first used in wars in the Wei Dynasty in the 6th century. In the line from an ancient book, "... beat the drum to proceed and beat the gold to retreat"; the "gold" refers to the copper gong. In 1975, 120 pieces of bronze 'Pien Chung' in three sets were excavated in Leigudun, Sui Xian. These relics of the Warring States Period, about 2,500 years back, are our earliest extant copper musical instruments.

Wuhan ranks first among the Chinese regions for its rich varieties of ancient style copper musical instruments. There are seven categories—gongs, cymbals, chai, nao (big cymbals), ling (small bell), bells, and ban (wooden bar for accent beat); 64 varieties, 140 designs, all with resonant, euphonious sounds. At present, the Wuhan factory has more than 110 workers.

Each instrument has to go through complicated procedures of production, including melting, plate-forging molding, quenching, pitch-checking, shaping, and pitch-fixing. The key procedures are headed by superb technologists.

Technologists Zhou Ji'an and Zhou Jide first learned the trade under Zhou Jichang of the Gaohongtai Workshop. They have now been in the trade for 26 years. Practice through long years enables them to be highly skilled in the traditional methods of rotation-hammering. The gong plates so produced are round, flat, balanced and strong. The hammering marks are evenly distributed in the shape of fish scales. Zhou Ji'an's art was so excellent that he was invited to demonstrate in the National Professional Meeting on copper musical instruments in July, 1965. His performance won him the name "the national king of plate-fixing."

Gao Shichun, a technologist, became an apprentice in the Gaohongtai Factory in 1954. He learned under the experienced masters Pan Tianbin and Li Hanqing. The cymbals produced by him are all of uniform size, round, well-trimmed and well-centered at the top, and his work is highly valued by foreign traders.

Gao Yongyun, factory director and technologist, is renowned for his pitch-fixing technique. He joined the Gaohongtai Factory as an apprentice at age 13. His passion for the handicraft drove him to practice on his own in the dim light each evening when the workers left the factory. After the liberation (the 1948 revolution), Lie Haining, a pitch-fixing teacher from Nanjing, joined the Gaohongtai Factory. Gao Yongyun began to learn from Lie. After a few decades of perseverance and practice, Gao had further developed the technique of pitch-fixing and successfully combined the different procedures in pitch-fixing. His technique is not rigid. It varies with the kind of gong; each stroke is measured and unique. To suit the needs of different genres and schools of drama, he always carries out technological reforms. It is he who created the 'tiger-sound gong.' He attaches great importance to technological reforms, replacing plate-forging by hand with plate-forging by spring hammers, air hammers, improved plate-shaping machines and plate-scraping machines. Manual production of gongs is gradually changing to mechanized production. Gao Yongyun taught his skill to his son, Gao Yongquan, so that the technique of pitch-fixing would be passed on to the next generation.

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