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## CHINESE CRICKET CULTURE

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Illustration from Er-Ya  
 (ca. 500-200 B.C.),  
 copied from Meng, 1993

The elderly, brain-washed Emperor walked into the Forbidden City (now the palace Museum in Beijing), took out a dust-covered cricket pot from under his chair and passed it to a boy who watched him with intense curiosity. People who have seen the film will remember this as one of the closing scenes to "The Last Emperor." The scene vividly paints the picture of Chinese Cricket Culture. The tradition of favoring singing insects and fighting crickets has ancient roots and has been handed down throughout the generations to the present day. This persistent tradition has deep cultural roots and I have often found myself unexpectedly immersed in ancient Chinese literature during my cultural entomology exploration and I am happy to be able to share my findings with you.

Jin, Xing-Bao's article is divided into the following sections: [Singing Insects](#); [An Elegant Hobby](#); [Paraphernalia including; Pots, Cages, Cases, Tubes, and Gourds](#); [Cricket Fighting](#); [Acknowledgements](#). A [bibliography](#) and [list](#) of common singing and fighting crickets in China.



Cicada (top three and  
 crickets (bottom two)  
 glyphs from Zhou, 1980

Cricket Culture in China encompasses a 2000 year history of both singing insects and fighting crickets. Two millennium of tradition may be divided into three eras (Laufer, 1927). From times prior to the Tang dynasty (500 B.C. - 618 A.D.), people only appreciated the cricket's powerful tunes. During the Tang dynasty (618 - 906 A.D.), people started to keep crickets in cages and enjoy their songs while in captivity. Under the Song dynasty (960 - 1278 A.D.), cricket fighting flourished as a popular sport. It is beyond the scope of this paper to produce a complete historic or chronological overview but I would like to expose some of the interesting snippets I have unearthed from the rich garden of cultural entomology in China along with a [list](#) of the involved orthopteran species.

### Listen to the Cricket

by Bei Ju-Yi, Tang dynasty

闻蛩 唐朝 白居易

闻蛩唧唧夜绵绵，  
 况是秋阴欲雨天。  
 犹恐愁人暂得睡，  
 声声移近卧床前。

*The Singing cricket chirps  
 throughout the long night,  
 tolling in the cloudy autumn  
 with its rain. Intent on*

### Singing Insects: Phenology and Emotions

Throughout history, humans have enjoyed their abilities to perceive the natural world through the senses of sight, sound, touch and smell. As agrarian societies developed, these perceptions started to expose the dynamic interrelationships between plants, animals, and climate. Referred to as phenology, these relationships were understood and utilized in the management of ancient Chinese agricultural practices. Insects played a crucial role in these understandings as they were often the best indicators of climactic change. One such understanding is called "Jing-Zhe," meaning "waking of the insects." At this time, the farmers knew it was time to start Spring ploughing. (The traditional Chinese calendar is divided into 24 solar terms, the third of which has been named "Jing-Zhe.")

Among the thousands of visible insects, the songs from singing insects make them the most obvious and noticeable. The primitive Chinese words of Summer, "Xia" in "Jia-Gu-Wen" take on the form of a cicada. Autumn "Qiu"

*disturbing the gloomy  
sleepless soul, the cricket  
moves towards the bed  
chirp by chirp.*

words are in the shape of crickets. These glyphs, pictured left, are illustrated from inscriptions on bones or tortoise shells. The book "Er-Ya" (500-200 B.C.) clearly depicts a pair of crickets, shown top left. This book represents the first biological and taxonomic work in China that divided organisms into seven groups: Grass, wood, insects, fish, birds, wild animals, and livestock.

### Cricket

by Yi ? Ming dynasty

蟋蟀 明朝 顾瑛

蟋蟀关何事，哀音入夜偏。  
寥寥闲水漏，切切乱鸣弦。  
乍逐微风断，还从疏雨连。  
闺中有思妇，怪尔不成眠。

*What's the matter with the  
crickets? Their sad melodies  
fill the night. So few they  
are, yet so loud their song. It  
cuts through the breeze and  
coagulates in the drizzle. No  
sleep in sight for the anxious  
lady within her home.*

A study of the diverse field of ancient Chinese literature reveals a great number of farmer's proverbs or popular songs relating to insects. The earliest collection of popular Chinese poems and songs are found in the book of "Shi Jing" (1100-600 B.C.). One poem says the following: "In May, the "Shi Zhong" (a kind of katydid) moves its legs; In June, the "Sha Ji" (another kind of katydid) moves its wings; In July, the katydid is in the field; In August, the katydid is in the yard; In September it is at the door; In October, the crickets enter and crawl under our beds." Another clear example of people listening to singing insects is found in ancient literature. When the cricket, "Cu Zhi" (meaning encourage weaving) is found singing indoors it is October and the ladies expedite their weaving efforts to ensure sufficient cloth for the coming Winter.

The Chinese appreciation of singing insects extends beyond the appeal of their beautiful tunes to include their powerful vitality and interesting life-cycles. The fact that both katydids and crickets are able to lay hundreds of eggs was in line with Chinese beliefs that the most important ingredient to success in life was to have as many children as possible. The katydid was thus elevated with the symbolism of thriving prosperity; People blessed their friends to have as many children as the katydids. (Meng, 1993). Another belief stemming from the belief of katydid vitality can be found in an Encyclopedia of Chinese Medicine called "Ben Cao Gang Mo" by Li Shi-Zheng 1578, where the katydid was used as a kind of aphrodisiac.

### Poem of Luo Wei

by Zhang Shi, Ming dynasty  
(Luo Wei is also called  
"Fang Zhi Niang," meaning  
weaving lady.)

蟋蟀词 明朝 张时

蟋蟀不停声，从昏直到明。  
不成一丝缕，徒费织作名。  
蜘蛛声寂寂，吐丝复自织。  
织网网飞虫，飞出网无食。  
事在人为不在声，思之令人三叹息。

*From Dawn to dusk the  
weaving lady sings without  
break. Never yielding a  
single thread there is  
nothing to its name. The  
spider, in silence spins and  
weaves without break. The  
woven net catches the fly  
and provides food. The fruits  
of effort rather than sound  
cause me to heave a sigh.*

In the field, most singing insects sing in the autumn and die with Winter. As a symbol of autumn, they are become associated with loneliness, sadness, pity for the fate of mankind and are thus used prolifically in Chinese poems. Although the translations is problematic, the left column contains a few of these poems to illustrate the deep rooted symbolism these singing insects hold within Chinese culture. 🍂

### An Elegant Hobby

Although katydids were kept for symbols of luck and auspicious virtue from the Chun Qui period (770-476 B.C.) (Meng, 1993), it was not until the beginning of the Tang dynasty that they were kept purely for the enjoyment of their song. We find a record of this kind of captivity in the book of "Kai Yuan Tian Boa Yi Shi" (Affairs of the Period of Tian Bao, 742-759 A.D.):

"Whenever the autumn arrives, the ladies of the palace catch crickets and keep them in small golden cages, which were placed near their pillows so as to hear their songs during the night. This custom was also mirrored by common people."

Most of the ladies of the palace were concubines to the Emperor. With emperors typically having three thousand concubines, their life was typified by a rich material life but starved emotional and cultural experience. A similarity can be drawn between the concubines and their captive crickets in their golden cages. Rather than enjoying the sweet chirps of the crickets, the concubines heard a reflection of their own sadness and loneliness in the cricket's chirp. This noble hobby influenced future emperors and ministers.

Another opinion suggests that the hobby of keeping insects may have started among the folk and was introduced into the palace at a later date. Many people including famous poets, painters, musicians and Buddhist monks were enthusiastic about keeping singing pets. Although it is difficult to determine which is historically correct, with so many high officers and noble lords being among the fans of singing insects, there is no doubt that the keeping of singing



Shanghai Cricket Club in 1885 copied from Ho et al, 1989

insects was regarded as an elegant hobby. Literature reveals that every summer there are people to sell katydids, crickets and cicadas in Chang An (the capital) during the Tang dynasty. The availability of these insects persists to this day. Photographs (left column) depict a [thriving market](#) for singing insects taken recently from the insect market in Shanghai. From the end of May through the end of July, peddlers, found in food markets and along streets, sell hundreds of "Jiao Ge-Ge" (singing brothers) and "Jie-Er" (singing sisters), each of which is woven into bamboo cages (Pemberton, 1990). Three species of katydids are being sold in the market, although there are many other singing insects to be found in the special flower, bird, fish, and insect markets held year round. See a species list including scientific and the common Chinese names, at the end of this article.



Children playing crickets from "Pictures of 100 Children", from Ho et al, 1989.

An old local chronicle, "Shun Tian Fu Zhi," recorded that katydids were treated with a mixture of brass powder and rosin. This mixture was applied to the stridulatory mirror of the front fore wing with a needle. The application was supposed to refine and heighten the volume of the insect's "voice." This practice is much harder to find in contemporary times.

With the growth of adoration towards singing insects, people became more aware of their short life-spans ending with the onset of winter. According to Liu Tong's "Cu Zhi Zhi" (c.a. 1700 A.D.), towards the end of the Ming dynasty, people started to rear crickets:

"...placing soil in a pot, let the insect lay its eggs inside. In the winter, put the pot on a Kang (a heated brick bed,) water it every day and cover it with a cloth. At the beginning of the summer, the soil will start to stir, and one week later, the nymphs will emerge as white maggots. In addition to watering and covering, feed these nymphs with vegetables. After the legs and wings become mature, their color will darken. One month later, the crickets will start to sing their song, although it is softer than in the autumn and they will die with the coming of the spring."

During the Qing dynasty, the palace had professionals to take care of the singing insects in order to present these musicians whenever the Emperor or other high officers had some special occasions. (Meng, 1993). A very special Chinese art of handicrafting containers of varying characteristics was born with the requirements of keeping the singing insect pets in captivity. Of special interest to Western societies, good collections of various kinds of cricket cages and other utensils, especially those made from gourds and portieres, can be found in the Field Museum of Natural History and the Buffalo Museum of Science. Detailed information on these collections can be found within the articles of Laufer (1927), Solomon (1984) and Ho et al (1989).

Insect paraphernalia manifests numerous varieties for specific insects, seasons, and functions. Materials used range from gold, jade, ivory, buffalo horn, animal bone and brass, to sandalwood, coconut shell, gourd, bamboo, reed, clay, pottery, porcelain and plastics. According to their shape and pattern, these cages may be divided into the following five groups: pots, cages, cases, tubes, and gourds. 📌

**Pots.** Pot [containers](#) are made from clay similar to the process used for creating bricks and tiles. Famous ones are made from a specially treated clay called "Chen Ni." This clay is put in a silk bag and soaked in water for several years. Pots made with this refined clay have a smooth look resembling jade. Newly made pots need to be placed into a well or soaked in tea water for several days to remove the kiln smell. Large pots are about 12cm in diameter and have a flat cover. They are typically used for fighting cricket rearing containers or fighting arenas. Some of the smaller pots are used for singing insects and are made with hollow covers for better sound transmission. These pots are often embellished with low relief carvings of dragons, phoenix, bats and lotus, all of which carry auspicious symbolism. 📌



Shanghai Market, China

**Cages.** Cages are typically used for large singing katydids. They are constructed with a wide variety of designs out of many different materials, although the common ones are made from bamboo, wheat or corn stems, wood, reed, or gauze. Miniature 7cm bird cage round designs and 8cm cube designs seem to me the most common. Most cages have one or two sliding doors although the fancier craft work is reserved for the sandalwood cages which are usually adorned with ivory mosaic on corners and top. The cages made from wheat and corn stems are sold with the katydid woven within and have no door. Gauze cages are reserved for katydids with sharp mandibles such as *Hexacentrus unicolor*. Singing insect cages are only used during the summer and autumn months. 🐛



Shanghai Market, China

**Cases.** Case construction also varies greatly with the intended captive and material used. The simplest design is made to size from cardboard with a glass top and a small feeder inside; this case is usually sold with the insect. Small cages are made for small crickets such as "Huang Ling" (Golden bell, *Anaxipha pallidula*) and "Mo Ling" (Inky bell, *Homeoxipha lycoides*). Larger cages are made for the larger katydids and cricket such as "Hua Jing" (Painted bell, *Gryllus bimaculatus*). Cages may be made from bamboo with a sliding glass top and sliding bamboo bottom. One side will have a breathing window covered with gauze and the other side will have a feeder. These cases can be easily cleaned by removing the top and bottom. Cases made from brass are usually curve shaped and conducive for keeping in the pocket during winter. The more elaborate cases are made from sandalwood inlaid with ivory and mother-of-pearl, or made entirely from buffalo horn or ivory, seem to be of more interest as collectibles rather than the insect cases they were designed for. Contemporary cases are less expensive and are utilize plastics or Plexiglas in similar fashion to the older designs. 🐛

**Tubes.** Tubes are specifically constructed for keeping small singing crickets in a pocket. Common designs utilize bamboo and reed with a breathing cover and feeder at the bottom. The older precious examples were made from ivory or sandalwood with beautifully carved ivory tops. 🐛



Shanghai Market, China

**Gourds.** The most popular of all materials used to construct singing insect containers has to be the [gourd](#). Although this material may not be as exotic as gold or ivory, the natural look and feel of the resulting containers align well with the reasons why the Chinese keep singing insects. The gourd is an auspicious material and was linked to the Taoist search for paradise. Many other stories and legends surrounding the gourd can be found in Solomon, 1984, Wang 1993, and Meng, 1993. The material is excellent for keeping live crickets because of its moisture and resilience to the cold. Special care is given to the gourd plants as they grow and the fruit forms after the flowers fall. Maturing gourds have to be turned regularly to receive even sunlight. A popular painting technique associated with gourds is called "Huo Hui" (fire painting). This technique involves a painting scorch lines on the gourd surface with the use of a metal needle heated with a burning incense stick. The lid for these gourd containers are fashioned from a wide variety of materials including sandalwood, jade, ivory, mother-of-pearl, turtle shell, and coconut shell that are carved with lattice designs to create breathing holes. These designs are so popular that gourd-shaped jars are made from wood, clay, brass, and paper. 🐛



Gourd Containers

### Cricket Fighting: Good, Bad and Ugly.

From the beginning of the Song dynasty (960 - 1278 A.D.), there are many historic references to the use of crickets within recreational fighting events. Good evidence for the age of this sport comes from three pieces of cricket transfers (special containers for moving fighting crickets between containers) were unearthed from the tomb of South Song in Zhen Jiang, Jiangsu province in 1964. (Meng, 1993)

With the same popularity that football enjoys today, cricket fighting became a popular game and sport for all people, from adults to children. China produced a famous Cricket Minister, Jia Shi-Dao (1213 - 1275), who was accused of



Gourd Containers

dereliction of his duty due to his obsession with an all-absorbing passion for cricket fighting cult. China also yielded the Cricket Emperor, Ming Xuan-Zhong (ca. 1427-1464). Once the emperor favored cricket fighting, crickets became the primary tribute for the palace. Each year, thousands of carefully selected crickets were sent to capital where many people's financial fate were placed in the mandibles of these insects. It is written in "Ming Chao Xiao Shi" (The minor history of the Ming dynasty): When he saw a good cricket, an officer of the local rice-granaries exchanged it for his best horse. While he was away, his wife opened the pot to peek at the special cricket which promptly jumped out and was instantly eaten by a cockerel outside. The lady was so scared that she committed suicide. Her husband, upon returning and seeing his dead wife along with the missing cricket, also took his life. This sad historic record apparently is the source material for the famous story of "Cu-Zhi" (Cricket) within the book of "Liao Zhai" (Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio) by Song Ling in Qing dynasty (1679) (cf. Laufer, 1927). There are numerous tragedies and comedies associated with cricket fighting.



Cricket Pots

Since the emperor's actions had direct bearing on people's lives, the emperor's interest was largely responsible for stimulating this sport into the status of a nation wide game. The game became fashionable for the upper-class, for which cricket fighting became an activity to show off ones richness and demeanor. They were often content to watch while they hired experienced people to run all aspects of the sport. The lower classes placed emphasis on gambling. Most of them were experienced in the specifics of collecting, rearing, caring for, and fighting the crickets. A few of them got rich but many others destroyed the future for their families. Because of the frequent resulting social problems created through the misfortune of gambling on cricket fights, the sport quickly gained associations as an activity for people who had nothing better to do with their time. After the Qing dynasty the reputation grew to the point where the government officially prohibited cricket fighting; However, during certain periods of the Qing dynasty, cricket fighting was relegated to a national sport each autumn and was organized by the ministry of textiles. (Remember the name "Cu Zhi", meant encouraging to weave Meng, 1992).



Cricket Fighting Equipment

Despite a persistently ugly reputation, cricket fighting has survived to this day even throughout the Cultural Revolution when the sport went underground. My first exposure to cricket fighting was through a video I purchased at the Shanghai market. I was shocked and at the same time marveled at the effort performed by these little crickets. I now understand why this game has endured time and adverse public opinion after witnessing the true warrior-like, brave, valiant, and indomitable spirit displayed by these crickets. Many well written essays and poems account these vivid cricket battles and the exhilaration displayed by the witnessing audience.

Cricket fighting is taken very seriously and knowledge about crickets was in high demand. The book of crickets, "Cu Zhi Jin", was contributed by the notorious Cricket Minister, Jia Shi-Dao. This book gathered related philosophy, literature, and science into one volume that probably represents one of a very small number of books to treat any organism in such broad interest. The cricket has truly earned the attention it receives from Chinese people due to their sounds, intelligence, and competitiveness. The book makes morphological distinction between *Velarifictorus micado* and *V. asperus* as the real fighting crickets although naming them incorrectly. Criteria for good fighting crickets detailed ecological localities and specific characteristics of the body, head, pronotum, wings, legs, and color pattern, although some of these seem unreasonable. The book went on to diagnose various cricket diseases, cures, ways to use females, food, medicine, tickling brushes and addressed many other subjects in great detail. By default, this book became the classic cricket bible for cricket fans. Throughout the years, many other similar books have been published although most are similar to Jia's original work. The latest work is "Xi Shuai Mi Pu," written in 1992 by Meng, Zho-Liang, a specialist in ancient Chinese literature. His work cites several valuable and important sources and provides helpful notes to many confusing issues. In addition, a recently published book, "Xi Shuai Pu Ji Cheng" by Wang Shi-Xiang (1993) represents a

collection of cricket literature and is apparently the best of its kind.

Cricket fighting is wide spread although mainly found in the large cities of Shanghai, Beijing, Tianjin, Guangzhou, and Hong Kong. There are cricket fighting clubs and societies that cater to members interest at all levels of intensity. With the migration of Chinese to other parts of the world, cricket fighting can be found in New York and Philadelphia, although the species used differ. Cricket fighting in Philadelphia apparently uses *Gryllus pennsylvanicus*.

In closing, I would like to present a list of common singing and fighting insects found and appreciated in Chinese markets as my contribution to this truly unique cricket culture within China. Hsu Yin-Chi (1929) was the first Chinese entomologist involved in identifying although he included no katydids. The following list is drawn from a book (in press) on "Singing Insects from the markets of China" with color photographs of all species. 📷

[List](#) of common singing and fighting crickets in China.

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