

INDEPENDENT PAPER

CHINESE CRICKET-FIGHTING

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The so-called hua niao yu chong (“flower, bird, fish, insect”) culture of China is a tradition related to the growth and raising of small and easy-to-care-for plants and animals. Typical of this culture is that of fighting crickets. Cricket fights, between two male crickets, is an amusement especially popular among urban dwellers. In the past it was followed by the emperor and the nobility, by the rich and by intellectuals such as the literati. Because of this, previous research into Chinese culture has tended to emphasize only the glamorous side of cricket fighting and paid scant attention to those who sustained it in the background. Nevertheless we cannot ignore those people in rural areas who go out to catch the crickets that will provide amusement for cricket-fight aficionados in the cities. In fact, both urban dwellers, as consumers, and farmers, as providers, sustain the culture of cricket fighting, but there are wide differences between them in terms of folk knowledge and skills. The knowledge and skills of the farmers who hunt crickets are concerned closely with the habits of crickets and resemble the type of knowledge that is based on observation, and so can be explained in terms of entomological ecology and behavioural science. Urban aficionados, on the other hand, care for crickets in terms of how they think crickets should live, quite differently from their natural habitat. They have anthropomorphized them, rearing them as if they were associating with other human beings, and in general have inserted human values into their lives.

The expression *hua niao yu chong* 花鳥魚虫 (literally “flowers, birds, fish, insects”) typifies Chinese traditions surrounding the cultivation and raising of small, easy-to-care-for plants and animals, as exemplified by *bonsai*, small birds and aquarium fish, to the extent we can refer to a *hua niao yu chong* culture.¹ The term “culture” suggests both that these activities have a spiritual dimension over and above the simple keeping of pets or the growing of plants, where natural beauty is appreciated and life is experienced,² and that they incorporate a tradition which has given rise to a wealth of knowledge, skills, instruments and tools associated with them, as well as associated crafts such as painting and sculpture, and literary arts such as poetry.

1 Similar expressions include *hua niao* 花鳥, *hua niao chong yu* 花鳥虫魚 and *cao mu chong yu* 草木虫魚. Shanghai gujie chubanshe 1993, Tong 1997.

2 Li Zuqing *et al.* 1995, p. 1.

Hua 花 refers to any growing flower, plant or cut flower, where the focus of appreciation is the “flower” itself, without distinction as to whether it is a plant or a tree. Its cultivation is best typified in the form of *penjing* 盆景, a miniature landscape in a container. *Niao* 鳥 includes birds appreciated for their appearance or their singing, as well as those made to fight for people’s entertainment. *Yu* 魚 refers to goldfish and other aquarium fish – recent examples include tropical fish and the Japanese koi. *Chong* 虫 covers a wide variety of insects, including grasshoppers, “bell-ring” crickets (*Homoeogryllus japonicus*), grass crickets (*Paratrigonidium bifasciatum*) and other singing insects, as well as fighting crickets.

The culture of cricket-fighting, which is the focus of this paper, can be regarded as a representative example of *hua niao yu chong* culture. Scholarly interest in the culture of cricket-fighting has tended to focus primarily on its historical significance and the spectacle afforded by a pattern of urban consumption centred on the ruling class (emperor and the aristocrats), prosperous commoners, and intellectuals such as the literati, rather than on the entire system of knowledge and skills, including where crickets were obtained. Essentially, *hua*, *niao*, *yu* and *chong* all exist in the countryside, and sites both of production and consumption are inseparable and interdependent in sustaining the culture. Cricket-fighting is no exception.

Research on cricket-fighting has been done mostly from a bibliographical angle.³ Empirical studies based on fieldwork, on the other hand, are limited to those by Berthold Laufer, Shu Tassei and a few others. Laufer, a pioneer in the study of Chinese natural history and folklore, made detailed notes about cricket-fighting in the early 1900s based on local surveys.⁴ In addition, Shu has successfully portrayed the rich culture surrounding cricket-fighting in Chinese society by taking an ethno-zoological approach based on fieldwork blended with bibliographical information.⁵ Even these studies, however, focus on the knowledge and skills associated with the urban setting of the cricket-fighting culture, and lack a comprehensive perspective that includes the production phase.

In the following sections, I will attempt to provide an overall picture of the cricket-fighting culture, based on documentation covering both production and consumption, and to clarify the wide range of knowledge and skills associated with crickets. This will enable me to analyze the diversity of the understanding of nature that is reflected in the phrase *hua niao yu chong*. The information on which this paper is based was obtained through field surveys conducted in Shanghai in February–August 1996, August 1998, August 1999 and August 2000, and in Ningjin County, Dezhou City in Shandong Province in August 1998. The surveys were based on interviews with cricket hunters, cricket merchants and cricket-fight aficionados, and involved simultaneous participation and observation.⁶

3 Meng, ed. 1992; Meng 1993a; Meng 1993b; Meng, ed. 1997; Wang, ed. 1993; Wu, ed. 1989; Wu, ed. 1993.

4 Laufer 1927.

5 Shu 1990; Shu 1995; Shu 1996.

6 In 1996 in particular, I collected handbooks and tools and actually looked after crickets, thereby collecting information through contacts with the cricket community (such as *hua-niao-yu-chong* markets and cricket-fighting followers’ groups). I used standard Mandarin, but local dialect words tended to be employed with respect to the name of tools and other terms that depend on a locality. Such terms are represented in italics throughout this paper, based on the pinyin of Mandarin (without phonetic indications). This means that pronunciations may differ in actuality.

HUNTING: ACQUIRING CRICKETS FROM THE NATURAL WORLD

Crickets referred to in contemporary Mandarin as *xishuai* 蟋蟀 were called *cuzhi* 促織 in the past. In the Shanghai dialect they are known as *zeche* (Mand. *caiji* 財吉), while people in northern regions such as Beijing and Tianjin call them *ququ* (蚰蚰). In the cricket market in Shanghai, they tend to be called *xishuai* 蟋蟀, since people from all over the country congregate there, and Shanghai advertisements and signboards generally use this expression. Cricket-fighting aficionados and merchants also tend to use *xishuai*, or simply *chong* 虫 (insect). Fighting crickets are also referred to as *qiuxing* 秋興, in a reference to the season of autumn.

Cricket-fighting is a sport in which two male crickets are made to engage in a duel, and it often involves gambling. It has a long history – according to one theory, it dates back to the reign of Xuan Zong of the Tang dynasty (eighth century).⁷ The first reliable records, however, date from the twelfth century, during the Southern Song dynasty, by which time a highly sophisticated cricket-fighting culture had already come into existence and was then in the process of being elevated from an “amusement” to an “art”. Systematization continued apace and by the Ming dynasty, many handbooks and manuals on cricket-fighting had been written. At the same time cricket-fighting continued as a pastime among commoners, chiefly as an object of betting, so much so that by the Qing dynasty, at least in Beijing, commoners rather than the ruling class were the driving force behind the amusement.⁸

When transport facilities were still not extensively developed, most crickets were obtained from farming villages in the vicinity of cities, which meant suburban areas were sources of supply. In Shanghai, for example, crickets came from suburbs such as Pudong, Jiading and Jinshan, and they were referred to as *dichong* 土虫 (literally “local insects”) to distinguish them from crickets brought in from other parts of the country. Today their number is decreasing as a result of urban development and the modernization of agriculture. Furthermore, crickets from distant regions that were scarce in the past are now readily available in the cities, due in no small degree to improved transport facilities.

Much importance is attached to the origin of the crickets. In Shanghai, until about a decade ago, crickets from Hangzhou and Shaoxing in Zhejiang Province, as well as those from Tianjin, were highly regarded. At present, crickets from Ningjin, Ningyang and Leling in Shandong Province are more popular. At the time of my survey in August 1996, the majority of crickets on sale at the Wenmiao cricket market in Shanghai were from Shandong Province, and the rest were from Jiangsu Province, Hebei Province and Anhui Province. In August 1998, crickets from Ningjin accounted for more than sixty per cent of crickets on sale at the Wennan cricket market in Shanghai; they were followed by crickets from Ningyang (Shandong Province) and Shaoxing (Zhejiang Province), and by small numbers from Leling, Linqing, Qufu and Yanzhou (Shandong Province), Bozhou (Anhui

7 Zhang 1989, p. 270.

8 Meng 1977, pp. 1–10.

Province), Cangzhou (Hebei Province) and Hangzhou (Zhejiang Province). It is fair to say that there were virtually no *dichong*.

Currently, crickets are basically distributed through a channel that starts with cricket hunters, goes through cricket merchants and ends with cricket aficionados. Roughly speaking, farmers in rural areas hunt the crickets in the countryside and sell them at trading centres in townships and villages, where cricket merchants from urban districts go to buy them. These merchants take the crickets into the cities and sell them to urban dwellers at markets there. Cricket aficionados in the cities normally acquire crickets through purchase.

Outside this basic pattern, some hunters visit the cities to sell the crickets directly to customers, while some passionate cricket aficionados visit rural areas to buy them directly. Some farmers living near cricket haunts not only sell their catch locally but also procure more crickets at cricket-trading centres to take into the cities and sell at cricket markets there; in this sense, they are acting as cricket merchants as well. Conversely, some urban cricket-fighting aficionados visit places known to be cricket haunts to take their pick of the crickets available. Neither they nor the urban merchants usually go into the countryside around the farming villages to hunt the crickets themselves.

Currently, the most highly reputed source of crickets in Shanghai is Ningjin County in Dezhou, Shandong Province, located in the lower course of the Yellow River in the northern part of Shandong Province facing Hebei Province. Approximately 821 square metres in area, Ningjin consists mainly of farming villages growing corn and kaoliang. It is famous nationwide as the haunt of the best crickets in China today, and hosts one of the biggest cricket markets in the nation. In August, the busiest time for cricket trading, farmers who normally grow corn and a few other field crops go around hunting crickets, thereby generating a huge cash income.

Cricket hunters have a profound knowledge of the characteristics and behaviour of crickets – including their habitat and the time of the year and the weather in which they tend to appear – and have the skills to capture them efficiently. In Ningjin, hunters believe that crickets caught after 23 August will be fully grown and can fetch a high price, and consider that the strongest, called *jiangjun* 將軍 (literally “general”), appear around 7 September. In practice, though, they start hunting them before the middle of August because they need to have a fair number in stock for the many cricket merchants who visit Ningjin then.

Everyone in Ningjin engages in cricket hunting irrespective of age and sex. Cricket hunters are familiar with the fact that crickets are nocturnal and that many of them tend to emerge between midnight and dawn. Women hunt crickets during the day, however, since night can be dangerous for them. Adult men, on the other hand, primarily hunt in the middle of the night, normally in small groups. In the event of heavy rainfall after a long period of dry weather, everyone scrambles to hunt crickets even during the day because they are known to swarm immediately after such rain.

Cricket hunters normally look for crickets in the vicinity of their own villages, where they have full knowledge of the crickets’ habitat. If, however, good crickets cannot be found locally, hunters will go to more distant villages. Although cricket hunting in other villages is not considered socially reprehensible, most hunters rely on an acquaintance living there to help guide them, since they might become lost if they were unfamiliar with

the geography and lacked knowledge of the crickets' habitat. Crickets might be living all over the village, but their distribution is not necessarily even: their population density depends on location. As crickets concentrate in certain areas, it is more efficient for hunters to know exactly where they are.

Hunters search places where they know crickets live based on years of observation; these might include tufts of grass, cliffs, piles of dead leaves, demolished pigsties, gaps between stone walls, compost heaps and the edges of cornfields. Normally, they pound their feet to set up a vibration, turn over rocks and stones, and dig up the ground if more crickets appear to be there.

The tools for cricket hunting are extremely primitive, the most important being the *zhao* 罩, a net to catch crickets. It is small, with a frame made of thick wire, and it is the same as the net used for cricket fighting, called *chongwang* 虫網 in Shanghai. Cricket hunters always carry this net and a tool for digging in places where crickets are likely to be. The digging tool, which is made of metal and has a sharp end like an ice pick, is used to poke into gaps between stones and dead leaves. In addition, a torch is indispensable. It consists of a light and a separate battery. The heavy battery is put in a bag and carried on the hunter's shoulder. The light has a projection that can be held between the hunter's teeth, freeing his hands when catching a cricket.

When captured, crickets are put into a simple clay pot, which is covered by a lid made from the bottom of an empty can and fastened on by a rubber band. During the hunt, a pot containing a cricket is differentiated from an empty one by putting a blade of grass in the rubber band. Though the pots are cheap to buy, some hunters prefer to use old coffee cups without handles. Crickets are kept inside these containers until sold. They are fed a few grains of rice boiled into gruel a couple of times a day; the food is placed directly inside the container. No other special knowledge, skill or invention is needed in relation to looking after captured crickets. Hunters carry about a dozen containers at a time, but it is very rare for all of them to be filled with crickets because the catch is sorted from time to time and the smaller crickets disposed of. Hunters are interested in nothing but the size of the crickets. In contrast to cricket merchants and cricket-fighting aficionados, who have a complex knowledge and honed skills for determining the quality of crickets (see below), cricket hunters are knowledgeable simply about the nature of crickets in the countryside and the skills to catch them.

When a hunter finds a cricket, he scoops it up in his net, and, holding his torch between his teeth, takes a good look at it. At this point, the only criterion is size: anything considered too small is immediately released. If the cricket is judged acceptable, it is compared with crickets already captured in order to decide whether to keep it or not. If the new cricket is bigger, another is released. Not all crickets found are captured and sold, since, from the hunting stage to the point of sale, only size is of significance.

Hunters working in the same group tend to take a break together every two to three hours. The break also gives them an opportunity to sort their catch. They sit on the ground in a circle, line up their containers filled with crickets, and show their catch to one another. The crickets are compared with respect to size, and those that are obviously smaller than those caught by the others are immediately released. As this sorting process is repeated many times, not more than twenty crickets are actually caught.

As morning approaches, the hunters start focusing on large crickets. After walking around the village a couple of times, covering most parts of its area, they go in a group

towards the corn field. Although it is difficult to catch crickets there because of the densely growing corn, large crickets are believed to congregate there because of the food available. At this point, then, the hunters stop wandering on their own and help each other in the hunt. They turn off their torches and creep about on tiptoe in search of large crickets, following their chirping. They are said to be able to tell the size of crickets by this method: those that chirp loudly in a cracked tone are generally large, while those that chirp in a squeaky, high-pitched tone tend to be small. The hunters walk along the edge of the field in search of any cricket that sings in the desired tone. If they hear a cricket they want, they quietly listen, roughly locate the source of the sound (and thus the cricket), then turn on their torches and dive into the field to catch it swiftly before it escapes into the depths of the cornfield where they cannot follow. Hunters believe that catching a large cricket at this stage multiplies their daily earnings.

Identification of crickets on an individual basis is influenced only by the hunters' criterion of body size. As their only purpose in catching the crickets is to sell them immediately, they do not need to identify them on an individual basis. Even if they had to do so, they can only distinguish "the largest" from "the rest".

In Ningjin, the generic name of cricket is *ququ*, the same as in the northern dialect. In a narrow sense, crickets captured for cricket-fighting purposes are also called *ququ*. Entomologically, crickets captured for cricket-fighting purposes belong to the *Velarifictorus* group.⁹ In addition, Ningjin is home to the *yuhulu* 油葫蘆 (*Teleogryllus emma*) and *guancaitou* 棺材頭 (*Loxoblemmus doenitzi*), but these have no commercial value because they cannot be used in fighting. Accordingly, hunters pay no attention to these crickets, no matter how many there are.

In general, when they arrive in the cities, crickets for cricket-fighting purposes are divided into many *pinzhong* 品種 (type, classification),¹⁰ being classified and evaluated based on shape and appearance. This evaluation is important because it substantially affects pricing, and it also helps urban residents identify their own crickets individually. The residents of farming villages in Ningjin, as we have seen, do not classify them in such detail or become attached to any particular cricket. As hunters who do not indulge in cricket-fighting rarely look at the individual traits of a cricket, it is fair to say that they are incapable of evaluating the differences between crickets and their relative merits. This does not however pose a problem: as they do not amuse themselves with crickets, it is sufficient for them, as hunters, to possess, and use fully, nothing but their knowledge of the habits of crickets and the skills associated with their capture. In other words, crickets are simply commodities – hunters need have no further feelings towards them. Considering that crickets are hunted in order to be sold, it might be thought that the hunters would extend their talents to the sales process. In fact, their role here is very straightforward and ultimately they are little more than mere cricket finders.

9 According to Itō Gen of the School of Agriculture at Hokkaido University, the male crickets I sampled from Ningjin are likely to be *Velarifictorus beybienkoi* or perhaps *Velarifictorus micado* (*douxi* 鬍蟋). Female crickets from Shaoxing are *Velarifictorus micado*. Due to extremely limited differences from species to species in this group, many of their scientific names are undefined. Also, the taxonomic, biological classification of crickets in China is, in a strict sense, far from perfect. Their names tend to be vernacular, concerning which problems in notation have been pointed out. Shu 1990, pp. 309–10; Shu 1995, pp. 78–80.

10 This is a term used widely among sellers and buyers when trading in crickets.

TRADING IN CRICKETS: THOSE WHO PICK AND CHOOSE QUALITY CRICKETS

Cricket hunters return before dawn to their homes, where they do the final sorting. Sometimes, they make the crickets engage in a trial fight, but they use no special tools like those used by urban cricket-fighting aficionados and employ no particular techniques. They simply put two crickets in a small container and stimulate them to fight using the stem of some plant growing nearby. They roughly determine differences in strength between the crickets, but this information serves as nothing more than a sales pitch for when they are selling the crickets on. No cricket merchant or cricket-fighting aficionado who has travelled all the way from the city to buy crickets would select or purchase crickets based on such information. While cricket hunters wish to sell crickets off as quickly as possible, many in fact are left unsold. Since the crickets eventually become less active, hunters dispose of the ones that are unlikely to be sold whenever fresh crickets are obtained.

With a bit of luck, cricket hunters may get a catch that fetches as much as 300 Yuan per cricket. This is rarely the case, however – normally, a catch that generates an income of about 70 Yuan per night is considered reasonably good. In bad times, no crickets of saleable quality may be captured. It is said that cricket hunters make about 2000 Yuan per season every year. This is a significant amount in a smallhold farming village with no industry other than upland cropping, considering that the average annual income per head in farming villages in Shandong Province was 1714.5 Yuan in 1995.¹¹ It should be noted that the income generated from cricket hunting is not included in the statistics.

Cricket hunters go out to sell the crickets early in the morning after finishing the sorting process. They normally sell them to cricket merchants from the cities who are staying in the village specifically to buy crickets. If they fail to sell the crickets to them, they will sell them along the main road at the entrance of the village, targeting other cricket merchants passing by. They will also sell their crickets at general markets called *daji* 大集 in neighbouring townships and villages.

Cricket markets are held all over Ningjin, and there is a daily market at the county town along the main road, where dozens of cricket sellers gather and line up their cricket-filled containers on the street. This market does not have any permanent stalls and is not particularly lively. Crickets are sold by various people, without distinction of age or sex; elementary-school boys can be seen, and women sometimes exceed men in number. The women are there to sell not only their own catch but also that of other family members.

The most lively cricket markets are the ones held in townships and villages. Those in Youji Township, Duji Township, Mengji Township and Chaihudian Village are famous, and are attended by large numbers of cricket merchants and cricket sellers. These are local markets (*daji*), which attract large numbers of people, often from neighbouring counties. Though they are not specialist cricket markets, but rather places where household goods, food, clothes, farm tools and other daily necessities are bought and sold, crickets are also sold at them, as sellers take advantage of the large crowds of people who attend. It is however no exaggeration to say that between August and September cricket sellers take over most if not all of the streets.

11 Zhonghua renmin gongheguo nongyebu 1996, pp. 30–31.

In Youji Township, *daji* are held on days marked with a 4 or 9 in the Chinese calendar. The cricket market here is widely known for the supply of fine crickets, and lures many cricket merchants and cricket-fight aficionados, as well as the cricket sellers who target them; it also attracts almost a thousand farmers who come to sell crickets. Although there are many cricket buyers, the number of sellers far exceeds them in number. People from all over China flock here. Cricket sellers, local small farmers, can easily be distinguished by their clothes from the affluent cricket merchants and cricket-fight aficionados from the cities. When I conducted my survey in August 1998, cricket merchants and cricket-fight aficionados had come from Jinan (capital of Shandong Province), Shanghai, Tianjin, Beijing, Hangzhou (Zhejiang Province), Xian (Shangxi Province), Nanjing (Jiangsu Province), Wuhan (Hubei Province) and Guangzhou (Guangdong Province). It should be noted that these are only the regions that I was able to confirm. All are large cities, and people from Shanghai – which enjoys the highest economic standards of all – appeared to constitute the largest group of visitors.

Most people who visit the regions known to be cricket haunts are cricket merchants from the cities, although some of the visitors may be cricket-fighting aficionados who have come to buy crickets to keep personally, rather than for business. All the same, they tend to buy too many crickets to keep themselves, and end up selling some on to acquaintances, so in this sense, there is little difference between cricket merchants and cricket-fight aficionados. The latter, who travel to distant places known to be cricket haunts to buy crickets of their choice directly, are particularly passionate, in comparison to ordinary cricket-keeping urban residents who normally buy crickets that have been brought to the cities by cricket merchants. Passionate cricket-fight aficionados include those who lawfully enjoy cricket fighting in so-called legal cricket-aficionados' groups, as well as professional cricket gamblers.

Cricket merchants and cricket-fight aficionados are very particular about when the cricket should be purchased. If it is too young, it is difficult to determine its merits because it still has room to grow. On the other hand, if it is mature, it is easier to determine its relative merits but it is more expensive. Crickets are differentiated according to the time they are caught: from early/mid-August to around 23 August, around 23 August to around 7 September, and the subsequent period. Cricket merchants and aficionados usually go around in a group and lodge in nearby farming villages while they visit the markets. All have a thin pen-like implement stuck behind their ears; called *cao* 草 (“grass”), which is used to stimulate the crickets. Buyers examine the stock of each and every cricket seller sitting on the ground with their wares around them. Initially, they focus on the size of the crickets, as do the hunters. This is because in cases where crickets are used for gambling, the larger ones boost the stakes and can make the fight important. The difference though with cricket hunters is that they select large and good-quality crickets, not concentrating on size alone. As we will see below, they have a profound knowledge of cricket classification and methods of determining their relative merits, as well as the skill to identify to a certain degree how they will fight and their relative merits. Any experienced cricket-fight aficionado would be expected to have such knowledge and skills.

By their nature, crickets in the wild have absolutely no value for farmers unless they indulge in cricket fighting, and are, if anything, pests that damage the corn. Nowadays, though, they have become valuable and significant commodities. Pricing is not necessarily

associated with the buyer's evaluation of the cricket itself; rather it is based solely on the hunter's wish to sell his catch and make money. As mentioned above, they merely judge the quality of crickets by size. The rationale of their pricing is highly questionable, as they have no idea about what criteria buyers use to evaluate possible purchases. By contrast, cricket merchants and aficionados from the cities acknowledge differences in value depending on size, quality and classification. Because rural cricket markets have hundreds of thousands of crickets, it is more efficient for them to find crickets there than going out themselves into the countryside; all the same, they will not necessarily easily find crickets that can be distinguished from the run-of-the-mill insects. It is in their search for crickets that are out-of-the-ordinary that buyers demonstrate their ability. Hunters and sellers may be looking at exactly the same cricket as are the merchants and aficionados, but from a very different perspective. It is only the crickets that pass this screening process that are brought into the cities.

TRADING IN THE CITIES

At the end of the Qing dynasty and during the Republican era, the vicinity around Laochenghuangmiao in Shanghai was a paradise for *chongmi* 虫迷 (cricket enthusiasts). Cricket-fighting was suppressed during the Cultural Revolution, but the culture survived and has been passed on from generation to generation. The cricket market in Shanghai market went underground in the late 1950s, being held secretly at the west end of the People's Square in the early days of the Cultural Revolution. About a dozen new but illegal cricket markets operated in the 1980s, while a legal market was opened in Liuhe Road with government approval in 1987. The top five cricket markets, including the one in Wenmiao Road, were established in 1993, and this subsequently sparked off the emergence of smaller cricket trading centres. Currently, cricket-fighting is enjoyed by people as a daily pastime, aided by increasing economic standards as a result of the government's reform and liberalization policies and deregulation.

The cricket-fighting culture is driven by urban consumers. Crickets are brought into the cities from all over China to meet their demand. Currently, the sphere of trading extends beyond a thousand-kilometre radius. The distribution system emerged in tandem with the growth of this urban consumer-driven culture. Crickets arrive first at the *hua-niao-yu-chong* market in the cities, which, as the name suggests, is a market where bonsai, goldfish, pet birds and other such living things are sold. This type of market is widespread: at least one can be found in any city in China. Shanghai hosts a number of such markets, which are flooded by cricket merchants, cricket-item merchants, cricket-item craftsmen and buyers as the end of summer approaches. At the time of my survey in 1998, the biggest cricket market in Shanghai was the Wennan *hua-niao-yu-chong* market. It normally accommodates shops selling bonsai, small birds and goldfish, but in August, the peak month for cricket trading, it is dominated by hundreds of cricket merchants.

Cricket merchants come from many different areas, including but not limited to Shanghai. Many come from Tianjin, Beijing, Hangzhou and other cities. Most flock to Shanghai for a short period in hope of making a large amount of money. As their mission is to acquire good-quality crickets from farmers living near cricket haunts as cheaply as possible and to sell them to discerning cricket-fight aficionados in the cities at the highest

possible price, they have full knowledge of, and rich experience in, cricket-fighting. While their main concern is the selling price, their discernment is not inferior to aficionados in general. The ability to discern a good cricket is important when trading crickets in the cities. In particular, their detailed classification methods and the way in which they determine the relative merits of the crickets by referring to their body parts are distinctive, and this kind of knowledge and skill is foreign to trading practices in cricket-producing regions.

In China, the taxonomic and biological classification of crickets is far from strict. In contrast, the folk taxonomy by urban aficionados is incredibly detailed and systematic. When trading crickets, the factors regarded as most important for determining the quality of crickets are *pinzhong* 品種, a classification based on folk custom and *xianqfa* 相法, a criterion for determining the relative merits of crickets by appearance. The term *pinzhong* does NOT refer to any genetically-fixed group that is distinguished from others in a certain species by character as does breed in taxonomy.

While there are no particular names by category, crickets are divided into two groups: large, ordinary crickets and non-ordinary. Ordinary crickets have the physical characteristics that aficionados are familiar with based on experience, in terms of body size, structure and color. Non-ordinary crickets are classified as those that deviate from this definition. Whether a cricket falls into one or the other category depends on the experience of the expert, and it is not easily understood by the layperson.

Ordinary crickets are divided into six *lei* 類 according to their overall basic colouring: blue, yellow, purple, red, white and black. This classification is subjective and abstract. Once the crickets are classified into *lei* by color, they are further divided into *pinzhong* based on the color of each body part, the combination of shapes, and other detailed characteristics. *Pinzhong* represents the cricket's physical characteristics, decided by the combination of characteristics of each body part.

Non-ordinary crickets are divided into three types based on subjective criteria according to superficial characteristics: peculiarities in shape, external characteristics and colour. Although the number of *pinzhong* of non-ordinary crickets is not substantially different to ordinary crickets, not many of them are actually placed in the market. Those that are so placed are usually sold by merchants who target aficionados and professionals, for they have a scarcity value. They may end up as objects of envy as celebrated *pinzhong*, due to their rarity and unusualness.

One respectable aficionado divides fighting crickets into nine *lei* and more than 140 *pinzhong*, regardless of the fact that the crickets belong to one species in terms of taxonomy.¹² Certainly, many people claim that there are objective, well-defined categories in the classification of *pinzhong*. However, the criteria for classification appear to be so subjective and abstract to the layperson that it would be impossible for any outsider to divide the

12 Bian 1995, pp. 172–222. Aficionados and merchants acquire a broad range of knowledge and range of techniques concerning crickets based on long experience and from extensive research based on cricket-fight handbooks and guidebooks written in the past, including but not limited to *pinzhong* and *xianqfa*. Some serious aficionados write their own handbooks to redefine their system of knowledge and techniques. Bian, ed. 1986, Bian 1995, Bian, ed. 1998, Bian, ed. 2000, Bian and Yang, eds. 1995. The system of classification and judgement referred to in this paper has already been documented in such handbooks, which are available in the market for the general public. Also, a great deal of knowledge is spread among aficionados through newsletters and lectures by aficionado groups. The classification of *pinzhong* in this paper is based on interviews with Bian Wenhua, head of the Shanghai Cricket Society, and on his books.

crickets into over one hundred types, as the professionals do. The *pinzhong* classification is a technique based on the experience of aficionados who have been engaged in microscopic, detailed observation over many years.

The term *pinzhong* serves as an index for many aficionados, as a pointer to the cricket's appearance, unique fighting style, habits and other behavioral patterns. Further, it calls their attention to the past fighting performance of that particular *pinzhong*. When, where, and who fought with this particular *pinzhong* courageously? How many times did it win consecutively? Stories as such serve as an important yardstick for determining the strength of the *pinzhong* when purchasing a cricket. Past fighting performance is concerned simply with *pinzhong*, not the individual cricket's fighting record. Nevertheless, *pinzhong* that have produced a large number of battle-trying warriors are believed to indicate a potential for strength and, understandably, such crickets are highly popular.

Another important method of determining the quality of crickets is *xiangfa*, judgement by appearance. This factor is added to the *pinzhong* properties to make an ultimate judgement on the cricket's relative merits. *Xiangfa* categorizes the cricket's characteristics with respect to eight body parts (head, eyes, jaws, antennae, neck, wings, legs and abdomen), referred to as *bage* 八格. For example, the head is divided into about ten types, such as *qingting tou* 蜻蜓頭 (head similar to that of a dragonfly), *zhenzhu tou* 珍珠頭 (similar to a pearl) and *suanpanzhu tou* 算盤珠頭 (similar to an abacus bead). As far as the combination with *pinzhong* is concerned, *qingting-tou* is deemed to be compatible with any *lei*, but no *zhenzhu-tou* cricket is considered any good unless the *lei* is blue, yellow, purple or white. The relative merits of crickets are thus judged, not only by referring to the shape of each *bage* but also by the classification based on colour and pattern. The purpose is to improve the accuracy of judging the relative merits of crickets by combining many variables.

How many aficionados have fully grasped this complex system that can only be mastered by microscopic observation and an almost inconceivable obsession? How many are capable of implementing them in practice? Although this remains a mystery, most people know that crickets are classified by *pinzhong* and *xiangfa* for the purpose of determining their relative merits and the price differences. Evaluation of the relative merits of crickets naturally depends on an expert level of knowledge and skill.

CARE: TURNING CRICKETS INTO WARRIORS

Crickets are classified and their status defined according to a sophisticated system based on the folkloristic knowledge of cricket merchants and aficionados. However, this does not turn a cricket into fighter. Aficionados stress the importance of nurturing crickets, and claim that their relative merits depend thirty per cent on potential and seventy per cent on nurture. For a cricket to become a fighter, its inherent capabilities are vital, but so is the care it receives in order for it to be able to demonstrate its capabilities. In other words, crickets require delicate and careful nurturing. This does not simply mean keeping the cricket alive and healthy, or controlling it according to its nature. It goes far beyond that. Extensive cricket-nurturing techniques are implemented that are beyond the imagination of a layperson.

Crickets in Shanghai are normally kept in a cylindrical ceramic container called *xishuaipen* 蟋蟀盆, one per cricket. Older *xishuaipen* are regarded as superior: newer ones

are thought to release harmful substances. Crickets are believed to be sensitive and so a new *xishuaipen* will only be used after it has been rubbed with Chinese herbal medicine or it has been boiled. The *xishuaipen* is the cricket's "home", and must always be kept clean. Inside is a small *lingfang* 鈴房, usually ceramic but sometimes made of mahogany. If the *xishuaipen* is the cricket's home, the *lingfang* is its "bedroom". Small bowls (*shuiwan* 水碗 for water and *fanban* 飯板 for food) are placed next to *lingfang*. The interior of the *xishuaipen* is a miniature version of the human world. The bowls must be changed frequently, using tweezers to avoid contact with the cricket. As crickets can easily lose their strength or their legs when touched, great care must be exercised in handling them. Hence, a dropper and a spoon with a thin, long handle are used to place water and food, respectively, in the *xishuaipen*.

These various implements have a great deal of aesthetic value, over and above their functional use in the care of crickets. They come in various designs, in different colors and with engravings. They can be considered works of art and are even collected by people who have no interest in cricket-fighting itself, and there are antique dealers in the *hua-niao-yu-chong* market who cater for them.

What a cricket is given to eat reflects the experience and creativity of the aficionado. Basically, any food that is edible for human beings can be given to crickets. Some people grind such things as fish, prawn heads, crabmeat, lean pork, frog legs, fish bones, snake meat and pork liver, and mix it with rice porridge as the staple diet of their crickets. Most prepare animal-based feed before and after fights. Some even change the type of food they give and the mixing ratio every season. Those who are particularly fussy will even change cricket's diet if it becomes ill, and again after it recovers. Cooking methods are also diverse: some people insist on heating everything, whereas others insist on giving the food raw. The ingredients, the volume, the mixing ratio and cooking methods are decided by the aficionado on an individual basis, according to his own guiding principles. Many people keep what they feed their crickets secret.

Care is also given to the water the crickets drink. Tap water is never given to them directly: water is first boiled and then cooled before it is put in the cricket's drinking bowl. It must be changed frequently. Some people buy mineral water for their crickets, while others dilute licorice, poria, expensive Korean ginseng or other Chinese herbal medicine in hot water. Aficionados put much effort into the mixing ratio, concentration, and so on. Nutritious foods for crickets are sold at the *hua-niao-yu-chong* market, next to the crickets and the implements for looking after them. As food and water are believed to have a substantial effect on the cricket's day-to-day health and its physical condition when it fights, much care and time are given to diet according to season and the cricket's situation.

Crickets are also "bathed" to wash off any dirt on their body, and also to make them cooler when it is hot. They should be bathed once every three to five days between late summer and early autumn, and about once a week when the temperature falls. A large washbasin is filled with water and licorice mixed in. The cricket is put in, and when oil and dirt begin to float on the surface it is scooped out again with a net. Some people put the cricket into a net to dip it in the water. After the "bath," the cricket is placed on a piece of paper to soak up the water. Aficionados always "bathe" their crickets in this way.

The "food," "home," "bath" and other care given to crickets by aficionados are aimed at maintaining the cricket's health and physical condition for fighting. Because they are

in constant contact with their crickets, they are fully aware of their physical condition. If a cricket seems ill, they provide “medical treatment,” which first requires a diagnosis of the symptoms. Aficionados focus on slight changes in cricket behavior (for example, the cricket does not stop chirping at night, or is slow in its movements) to diagnose the causes of illness and work out a specific remedy, which will be based on administering Chinese herbal medicine, chosen according to the symptoms. The same applies to the treatment of injuries after a fight, with treatment depending on what part of the body has been injured. All in all, the same logical system as for human illness or injury is applied.

Male crickets are mated with females, in order to fine-tune their physical condition and boost their vigour. This is based on the belief that crickets get stronger and more aggressive the more they mate, in contrast to other male animals which lose strength after mating.¹³ A female cricket is called 三尾子¹⁴ because she appears to have three tails (including the ovipositor). As with their male counterparts, female crickets are classified into groups such as *meihua-sanwei* 梅花三尾 (“plum flower three tails”) and *lahu-sanwei* 老虎三尾 (“old dragon three tails”), based on body size, shape, pattern and color. They are judged as the male’s mating partner, in which their meekness or forwardness regarding mating is taken into consideration.

This artificial mating technique is distinctive in that it focuses on boosting the male’s willingness to fight and on increasing his physical strength. It contrasts to the human control of, say, the sexual behaviour of cattle, which is normally concerned with reproduction and herd management. The sexual behaviour of fighting crickets is “controlled” to contribute to its fighting power – its *raison d’être* – not for reproduction. In terms of animal husbandry in general, it is fair to say that the significance of this technique is peculiar.

The delicate exchange between the cricket and the aficionado continues through to the final stage, the fight. Crickets cannot fight immediately they have been bought. For a cricket to demonstrate its abilities, it has to be carefully nurtured, as we have seen, so that it gradually develops into a fighting cricket. Before the autumnal equinox, its body is not fully mature, so it is cared for in quiet with ample food. Forcing a cricket to fight when it is still immature may cause injuries. The cricket starts fighting only after its body is fully grown. It also does not start to fight seriously immediately. Most aficionados throughout China let their crickets engage in light trial fights at this time, so they can identify strengths and fine-tune their insect’s physical condition. Some crickets mature quickly and become strong early in the season, whereas others mature slowly depending on their *pinzhong*. Thus the cricket’s owner must accurately determine the best time to start it fighting. Immediately before the fight, the owner does various things to boost its willingness to fight. And as we have seen, one way to do this is to have it mate with a female.

13 Aficionados believe that crickets have three characteristics that run against the nature of ordinary animals. First, whereas in the case of ordinary animals the loser of a fight cries out, the crickets that wins the fight does so. Second, in the case of ordinary animals, the male lies on top of the female when mating, but with crickets, the female lies on top of the male. Third, while the male of an ordinary animal weakens after mating, mating makes the male cricket stronger and more aggressive. These characteristics are called the “three opposites” (*sanfan* 三反).

14 “Three tails.” Cricket-fight gamblers in Shanghai call the female *shanzi* 山字 (“mountain”) because the shape of the tail looks like the Chinese character for mountain (*shan* 山).

Special attention is paid to food and other things given to the cricket before the fight. As might be expected, what food is given at this time is kept secret. Even among aficionados, it is not generally known what owners feed to their crickets. While it is the norm to give Chinese herbal medicine as a stimulant, some gamblers allegedly make their crickets lick heroin and other drugs to help them fight. This is probably not far-fetched, as everyone employs various techniques before a fight. While drugs represent an extreme, some people do employ underhand tactics such as applying a soothing oil that contains menthol on the cricket's forehead immediately before the fight, so that the opponent becomes reluctant to fight and runs away. Drug-affected crickets are called *yaoshuichong* 藥水虫 and to prevent such insects from participating in fights, there are often rules that require crickets to be kept inside their sealed cages for twelve hours before a fight.

Aficionados become extremely nervous before a fight. They worry whether or not the opponent will be drug-affected, whether there will be any unfair practices, whether the opponent will be a good match, and so on. The pairing of crickets is based on a weight system and, basically, crickets of the same size are paired. An aficionados' group in Shanghai always measures the crickets before a fight. This measurement process also constitutes another example of the delicate, curious world that is beyond the imagination of a layperson.

In Shanghai, a scale called *huang* is used to weigh the crickets. Since they weigh less than a gram each, they are not easy to measure and an extremely accurate scale is required. Inevitably, the scale used is made especially for crickets, since such small weights are rarely measured in everyday life. They used to be craft objects made of mahogany, but nowadays can be made of plastic. In Shanghai, the unit of measurement for crickets is called *zun* 尊 (or *zhen* 斟) and a tenth of a *zun* is a *dian* 点. This unit, too, is only used for weighing crickets. Here we see another example of how cricket-fighting has given rise to unique forms pertinent only to its own small world.

The units used are extremely precise. The aficionados' group in Shanghai divides crickets by weight, from two *zun* to five *zun* (approx. 0.51g–0.74g). No cricket that is smaller or larger can participate in a fight. Crickets falling within this weight are then divided into as many as thirty-one classes. Pairings are made between crickets of basically the same weight, but a weight difference of up to two *dian* is allowed. In other words, a difference in weight of less than one gram is divided into thirty-one meaningful classes. The extent to which aficionados are obsessed with such minute definitions is beyond imagination. Such fractional differences in weight are believed to have substantial significance, as clearly reflected in the continual efforts of aficionados to seek an opponent that weighs less than their own cricket, even by one *dian*. Because aficionados attach so much importance to such fractional differences, they even make their crickets lose weight before a fight, like human boxers. There are many ways in which this can be done: using a hairdryer to heat the cricket house to reduce the amount of water in the cricket's body; feeding it Indian rice, which acts as a laxative; and, in the extreme, placing desiccants in the cricket house. Apparently, a cricket can lose a couple of *dian* easily through desiccants to remove excess water inside its body, as the unit of measurement is so small.

After such complex preliminaries, the fight finally begins. At competitions held by aficionados' groups, a special oval-shaped ring called a *douzha* 鬪柵 is used, and the outcome is decided when either the cricket runs away or its opponent beats its wings as a sign of

victory. A referee is appointed to judge the fight. There are two ways to determine the winner: winning three out of five bouts, or two out of three bouts. Nowadays, the latter system is more frequent. Before the fight, the antennae and legs of the two crickets are stimulated by *cao* to excite them. Some get to grips with the opponent and bite straight away, while others stand face to face, indirectly holding each other's movements in check. When movement is slow, further stimulation is provided by the *cao* to induce them to fight more aggressively. Many types of *cao* are used at this stage, and there are many ways to stimulate the crickets. The owner has to employ various techniques depending on the situation. There are even handbooks written on how to exercise for a fight, and the owner's *cao* techniques are believed to have a substantial effect on the fight. It is no exaggeration to say that both human beings and crickets are engaged as one in the fight. Afterwards, the winner enjoys a great sense of honor, whereas the loser suffers from deep humiliation. Victory or loss by the cricket translates directly into victory or loss by the human owner. The fight is the climax, where cricket and human identify with each other.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, crickets living in the Chinese countryside are caught by human beings and relocated to cities far from their birthplace. In the cities, they can only survive through the care of human beings. The knowledge and the skills associated with this care, however, are applied in an extreme way, far beyond the level required for mere survival.

Cricket hunters knowledge of the nature and behavior of crickets, including the place, the time and the weather in which crickets appear is profound, and they use this knowledge to best advantage when applying their skills to catch them as efficiently as possible. Their knowledge and skills have a specific purpose: to catch crickets, which they value only as merchandise. With only a simple criterion for evaluation based on size, they have only limited ability when it comes to distinguishing between crickets individually, and they have neither the knowledge nor the skill to determine their relative merits as fighters. Farmers rarely indulge in cricket fighting and have no special skills in looking after the crickets. Their tools are minimal, limited to what is required to catch and sell the crickets, and they are distinguished neither by design nor handiwork. Their knowledge is based on the actual habits of crickets, consistent with observation-based knowledge that can be explained in terms of ecology, biology and praxiology of insects.

On the other hand, the aficionados, who are the consumers of crickets in the cities, appreciate and fully make use of traditional knowledge that is detailed in the extreme and they apply this knowledge through various techniques. The aficionado knowledge system is represented by the classification systems of *pinzhong*, and *xianqifa*, while weight system used to measure the crickets for fighting constitutes a unique microscopic system in its own right. In addition, the miniature tools, as well as the nurturing actions of feeding, bathing, mating and so on, that resemble the practices of the human world suggest a system that is qualitatively different to the system of knowledge based on the natural sciences. In other words, aficionados have attempted to redefine crickets (as wildlife) within a new world they have created for them, turning "crickets in the raw" as observed in the countryside into "ideal crickets" in the cities. Fighting crickets have been given a new value in the process, being elevated from a simple living being to a cultural being, which reflects the human beings themselves. This reflection is manifested ultimately during fights.

It is important to note that the way crickets are perceived in China is not consistent. Those who hunt crickets and support the cricket-fighting culture do not have the same view of crickets as those who occupy the more glamorous side of it, raising them for fighting. The difference is probably attributable to some extent to a socioeconomic gap, and undoubtedly reflects the situation of the past when cricket-fighting was an amusement supported by the emperor, the aristocrats and the rich. Nevertheless, the cricket-fighting culture exists as it does precisely because of the existence of such hierarchical differences in perception. Without them the complex culture surrounding crickets would be undermined. The existence of such qualitative differences in knowledge and perception may be regarded as a characteristic identifiable not only in the cricket-fighting culture but in the *hua niao yu chong* culture as a whole.

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