

Cricket Fighting in China



■Cricket fighting also has a long history in China. It dates back at least to the 14th century and has traditionally been a gambler's sport. The fights are often held in miniature arenas where determined punters fight for views, judges watch through magnifying glasses and most spectators watch on closed circuit television. [Source: Mia Turner, International Herald Tribune, June 19, 1999]

■The cricket fighting season begins in September when the crickets are about a month old. Bets frequently top \$1,000 and sometimes exceed \$10,000. Because the stakes are so high and gambling is technically illegal, many of the fights are held in private homes or discreet corners of parks. Chinese are particularly fond of crickets because they are said to bring good luck and wealth.

■Cricket fights take place in eight-inch-wide plastic containers. The owners of the crickets poke the insects with little hairs attached to a chopstick-like device or some other instrument. During the fights crickets butt heads, toss each other out of the ring, with the winner chirping loudly as the loser slinks away.

■Describing a fight, Mia Turner wrote in International Herald Tribune, "Once in the ring the competitors are then tickled with a rabbit-hair brush or a stick of grass to incite them. In the most vicious matches, which last about five minutes, the crickets, who fight with their jaws, can tear the claws off their opponents...A fighter who runs away automatically loses."

■The annual Chinese national cricket-fighting tournament is held in Beijing. Held on the grounds of a large temple, the matches are video taped and shown live on big screens so observers can get a good look at the action. The crickets have names like Red General and Purple Tooth King. In Macau, crickets are matched according to their size. Before a fight they are stirred up by brushing a mouse whisker on their antennae.

Chinese Fighting Crickets

■There are several different kinds of crickets. Most of them have wings but can not fly and produce their song by scraping their wing covers together. Male crickets like to fight. They are also the ones that produce the songs.

■Fighting crickets are about two inches long. The largest ones weigh about half a gram. Before a bout they are weighed in like boxers and matched against crickets of around the same weight. When they are not working the crickets often sing. They like to sing when they are warm, producing a noise like a working loom, which is one reason they are called "cushi" (literally "call to work at the loom") in Chinese.

■The strongest and fiercest crickets are said to come from Shandong province in northeast China. Wild ones are said to be best. Attempts at breeding have only resulted in weak fighters. There are several lively cricket

markets in Shandong. The ones in Ningyang are particularly famous. Here it not uncommon for people to spend over \$10,000 for a single cricket. In Shanghai fighting crickets and pet crickets go for between \$1.45 and \$14.50 with exceptional creatures fetching \$1,000.

■Fighting crickets fight only one time because anything more than that, one dealer said "would exhaust them." Winners live out the rest of their lives in pampered luxury inside elaborately adorned cages and porcelain jars in the summer, and hollowed-out, molded gourds in the winter. Sometimes gourds are inlaid with silver and ivory, insulated with pea paste and cabbage leaves and washed every day with tea. In the old days crickets were kept in silk purses.

■Fighting crickets are fed powdered tofu and calcium supplements and prodded with straws during training sessions. Good fighters also tend to be good in bed and are encouraged to make love to three or four females before a fight. One dealer told the International Herald Tribune, "These days the crickets are treated like Olympic athletes. They give them drugs to perform better. In the old days we enjoyed them as a hobby. But today they don't care about them dying. They lost the spirit of the competition."

■The cricket trade is so lucrative that farmers have let their fields become fallow so they can be used as cricket breeding grounds. In some places cricket-fighting mania has gotten out of hand, "There getting crazy," one dealer told the International Herald Tribune. "They're battering an ox for a small cricket."

Cricket Singing Contests in China

■In recent years cricket singing contests have become popular in Beijing. Describing one event Barbara Demick wrote in the Los Angeles Times, "The performers are lined up in glass bottles that look like big salt shakers. Some have socks around them to keep out the late December chill, because its well known that cold crickets don't sing. Hovering over the bottles, a judge wields a hand-held sound meter."

■Loudness is often the main criteria but timbre and resonance are also taken into consideration. Winners have recorded sounds of 106.3 decibels, louder than a lawn mower. Most of the cricket owners and observers are men, some with cell phones that chirp and jackets with pockets for their gourd-shaped cricket carriers. Some cheat by giving their crickets drugs which slows the rate of vibrations and produces a deep, more resonant sound.

■Cricket fancying has a long history in China. Tang princes were often obsessed with crickets and instruments played in Peking Opera were reportedly inspired by them. The Last Emperor Pu Yi kept a cricket as a pet. The Communists found the custom to be decadent and distasteful and banned it.

■Most singing crickets are bush crickets or katydids—species that are bigger and lighter than fighting crickets. Top of the line ones sell for as much as \$250 a piece. Coddled ones live in decorated gourds, costing hundreds of dollars, that have their own water and food bowls and canopied beds and are fed specially-prepared mixtures of tofu, chopped vegetables and worms.

■Molded gourds have traditionally been made for singing insects such as crickets. They were built to resonate and their shape varied in accordance with the type and size of the insect they housed. The gourds are molded on the vine in carved wooden molds, hollowed, dyed and lined, for acoustic reasons, with mud composed of limestone, yellow earth and sand.