

## Cricket

# Warriors and Musicians of China

*"The relation of the Chinese to crickets and other insects is one of their most striking characteristics, and presents a most curious chapter in culture-historical development."*

SO WROTE Berthold Laufer,<sup>1</sup> distinguished anthropologist and former Curator of Anthropology, who conducted pioneering expeditions to China and Tibet for the Museum during the early 1900's. According to Dr. Laufer, the reason that the Chinese affinity for insects—and particularly crickets—is so interesting to anthropologists is that it represents a curious exception to a universal rule concerning man's relation to animals. In the primitive stages of life man took a keen interest in the animal world, observing and studying large mammals first, and birds and fishes next. But the Chinese were more concerned with insects than with any other animals; and mammals attracted their

attention least of all.

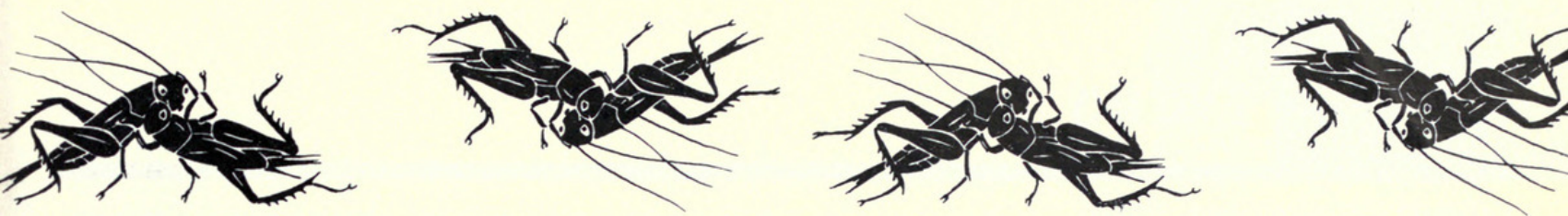
As a result, the Chinese have made discoveries and observations about insects which still inspire admiration. The life cycle of the cicada, for example, one of nature's most puzzling phenomena, was known to the Chinese centuries ago. More significantly, only a people with a deep interest in nature's smallest creatures could have penetrated the mysterious habits of an insignificant caterpillar to present the world with the discovery of silk.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of

this national predilection for insects is in the areas of sports and entertainment. While sports enthusiasts in other parts of the world have focused their attention on baseball diamonds, football fields, bull-fight rings, and gigantic soccer stadiums, the Chinese sports fan has been concerned with a tiny pottery jar, the arena for the most unusual of spectator sports—cricket fighting.

For anyone who might find it difficult to imagine a bout between crickets, the following description by Laufer sheds light on this uncommon sports event.





"The tournaments take place in an open space, on a public square, or in a special house termed 'Autumn Amusements'. There are heavy-weight, middle, and light-weight champions. The wranglers are always matched on equal terms according to size, weight, and color, and are carefully weighed on a pair of wee scales at the opening of each contest. A silk cover is spread over a table on which are placed the pottery jars containing the warring crickets. The jar is the arena in which the prize fight is staged. As a rule, the two adversaries facing each other will first endeavor to flee, but the thick walls of the bowl or jar are set up as an invincible barrier to this attempt at desertion.

"Now the referee, who is called 'Army Commander' or 'Director of Battle' intercedes, announcing the contestants and reciting the history of their past performances, and spurs the two parties on to combat. . . . The two opponents, thus excited, stretch out their antennae, which the Chinese not inaptly designate 'tweezers,' and jump at each other's heads. The antennae, or tentacles, are their chief weapons. One of the belligerents will soon lose one of its horns, while the other may retort by tearing off one of the enemy's legs. The two combatants become more and more exasperated and fight each other mercilessly. The struggle usually ends in the death of one of them, and it occurs not infrequently that the more agile or stronger one pounces with its whole weight upon the body of its opponent, severing its head completely."

The period before the matches is one of rigid adherence to a number of training procedures. Trainers are aware, for example, that extremes of temperature are injurious to crickets. Therefore, when they observe that the tiny antennae of the insects are drooping, they conclude that their charges are too warm. The temperature is then adjusted, the cricket being protected at all times from drafts. When a trainer judges that a cricket is sick from overeating, a change of diet to

a certain kind of red insect is prescribed. If sickness arises from cold, a diet of mosquitoes is the remedy; if from heat, young green pea shoots are given. A kind of butterfly, known as the "bamboo butterfly," is the prescription for difficulty in breathing.

Even in death the cricket enjoys special attention. In southern China, when a cricket champion dies it is placed in a small silver coffin and solemnly buried. The owner believes that showing such respect will bring him an excellent harvest of fighters next year, when he searches the area of the burial. These ideas spring from the belief that able cricket champions are incarnations of great warriors and heroes of the past, from whom they inherit a soul imbued with special prowess.

This month's BULLETIN cover shows a scene from an old Chinese scroll painting in the Museum's collection. The painting depicts the games and pastimes of boys—including the three youngsters peering intently at a wooden cricket cage (like the one in the photograph on page 2) which undoubtedly houses the local champion. Such cages are only one of many objects devised by the Chinese for the comfort and housing of pet crickets.

For example, there are cricket traps—often marvelous works of art—made of bamboo or ivory rods. Circular pottery jars of common burnt clay with a perforated lid house the insects during the summer (many potters are proud of their specialization in cricket houses and impress on them a seal with the maker's name). Tiny porcelain dishes decorated in blue and white hold the insects' food and water. Beds and sleeping boxes are fashioned of clay. During the winter months, the crickets are transferred to homes made from gourds, furnished with cotton padding beds. These cages are shaped by the ingenious method of introducing the young gourd into an earthen mold, so that as the gourd grows it assumes the shape of the mold and is

permanently imprinted with its designs. Such a cage is pictured on page 2.

Of special interest in the long list of cricket equipment are the ticklers used for stirring the insects to fight or sing. In Peking fine hairs from a hare or rat whiskers inserted in a reed or bone handle are used for tickling; in Shanghai, a delicate blade of grass. Ticklers are kept in bamboo or wooden tubes, with elegant ivory containers being reserved for the rich.

An aspect of cricket enjoyment that we cannot omit in this discussion has to do with the insect's best-known characteristic—its melodious chirping. A 6th Century Chinese book, *T'ien-pao i-shih*, describes the origin of a charming custom:

*"When the autumnal season arrives, the ladies of the palace catch crickets in small golden cages. These with the cricket enclosed in them they place near their pillows, and during the night hearken to the voices of the insects. This custom was imitated by all people."*

Instead of using golden cages, however, ordinary people placed their crickets in bamboo or wooden cages—or even in a carved walnut shell—and carried them tucked inside their dress or suspended from their girdles.

Of course, the cricket's chirp has had its place in Western society as well. While some have interpreted the notes of the hidden melodist as a portent of sorrow, or even an omen of death, in England the insect's cheerful notes generally have suggested peace and comfort, and the coziness of the homely fireside.

This July—and for several months to come—when the evening countryside is alive with a chorus of cricket voices, it is hoped that the preceding will provide our readers with a new dimension in their enjoyment of the summer night.

<sup>1</sup> Laufer, Berthold, *Insect Musicians and Cricket Champions of China*, Anthropology Leaflet 22, Chicago Natural History Museum.





Jindrich, Marilyn. 1962. "Cricket Warriors and Musicians of China." *Bulletin* 33(7), 2–3.

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