Boxing Crickets: A Taxonomy of Containers for Singing and Fighting Ensifera

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Box: caging, and facilitating handling (lightweight and with many holes); enhancing sound (while making the carrying pleasurable); controlling humidity and temperature to extend life (with time-honoured dignity in clay). **Size and shape:** spherical and 5 cm in diameter, or tube-shaped and about 5 cm in diameter and 18 cm in height, or a round box of 16 cm in diameter and 14 cm in height. **Colour:** according to the material, i.e. yellow (straw), white (bone or ivory), light to dark brown or middle grey (gourd, wood, clay). **Behaviour/Activity:** hung on bedsides, used as decoration for garden parties, carried around in inside pockets, displayed on shelves, placed in the middle of an eagerly watching crowd. **Habitat:** sleeping rooms, scholars’ studios, market places, gambling houses, museums. **Distribution:** Sinosphere, in the past also in Japan, but only for singing. **Migration:** from boxes with cricket residents to empty arts and craft objects in museums worldwide. **Status:** survived a period of endangerment in the 1960s and 1970s, but with this exception has been thriving in the Sinosphere since the eighth century; has experienced various changes and adaptations in material and shape.

**Keywords:** caging, facilitating handling, being disposable, emanating dignity, being collectible, enhancing sound, controlling humidity and temperature, extending life, attracting interest
In the seventh month, in the fields; 七月在野、
In the eighth month, under the eaves; 八月在宇、
In the ninth month, about the doors; 九月在戶。
In the tenth month, the cricket, 十月蟋蟀、入我牀下。
Enters under our beds.

(The cricket is in the hall, 蟋蟀在堂、
And the year is drawing to a close. 岁聿其莫。
If we do not enjoy ourselves now, 今我不樂、日月其除。
The days and months will be leaving us. (“The Cricket’, ibid.)

These two poems from the canonical Book of Odes (sixth century BCE) lay out how crickets marked the passage of the seasons with their movement from their place of birth in the field into the warm houses of humans, undertaken in the hope of extending their lives for a while longer. Their chirping sound brought the end of a yearly cycle right under people’s beds. This instinctive behaviour of the cricket was transformed into a courtly art and culture in China since at least the Tianbao era, i.e. 742 to 756, of the Tang dynasty. A collection of anecdotes about this era mentions how palace ladies hunted down crickets to put them in cages made from ivory sticks or gold wire, and placed them next to their pillows. While having a calming effect on their sleep, the ‘autumn insect’ (qiuchong 秋蟲), as the cricket is sometimes called, also reminded them of the passing of summer and the fading of their beauty, and maybe, as the Book of Odes encourages, to enjoy youth while it lasts. For the Chinese this is a strong and poetical image: palace beauties and insects, both caged, both doing time in an environment that feeds them and tries hard but will nevertheless not be able to eternally extend their singing lives or attractive beauty.

Nowadays, from late summer onward, small ball-shaped straw cages (Figure 10.1) are sold on Chinese city streets for a few pennies. The hand-woven cages have no exit and enclose one singing cricket, mostly coming from the biological
family of *Tettigoniidae* crickets, and commonly named as katydid, bush cricket, or *guoguo* 螈蟈. The cricket and its disposable cage are one, and are thrown away together after the insect has died and the object stopped working as a music box emanating chirping sounds. Food pieces are passed through the eyes of the lattice to ‘wind up’ the chirping; good care and a constant, warm temperature are repaid with chirping that lasts at least until late November, and sometimes even Chinese New Year, i.e. early February.

Japan most probably copied the custom of keeping singing insects in cages early on in the Heian period (794–1185) (Hammond 1983: 81). At the end of the nineteenth century the Irish-Greek writer Lafcadio Hearn (1850–1904), who had moved to Japan in 1890 to become a lecturer on English literature in Tokyo’s Imperial University, wrote a full report on the different singing insects valued and on sale in Japan, with crickets being the most popular musicians (1898: 39–80). In Japan, we learn from him, beautiful cricket cages and the atmospheric sound they provide were used for decorating gardens during festivities. Their cages often mimicked bird cages, and it is said that the Japanese found as much difference between the singing of crickets and cicadas as Europeans find between larks and sparrows (Hammond 1983: 85). Compared with the height of its commercialisation in the nineteenth century, the raising of singing crickets plays only a minor role in Japanese leisure today. Nevertheless, the insectarium of the Tama Zoo in Tokyo is reported to have yearly ‘singing insect shows’, and to sell electronic boxes emanating katydids’ and other insects’ (Pemberton 1994).

Chinese arts and crafts also invested creativity and expertise in providing collectible art objects to host crickets. The focus for these containers for singing crickets was on optics, touch, sound, and the transportability of the container in an inside pocket close to the cricket owner’s body.

This is the habitat of Chinese force-grown gourd containers (FIGURE 10.2). The technology of these *fanpao* 范匏 or *mozi hulu* 模子葫芦, both meaning ‘moulded gourd’, was highly valued by the early Qing (1644–1912) emperors, but existed in its basic idea much earlier. A clay mould was put over the gourd flower, into which the gourd then grew, filling up the mould and reproducing in positive relief the shape and negative intaglio designs of the inside of the mould. The covers of the gourd containers were carved from
ivory, jade, or wood, and allowed air and sound to pass through them. The gourd containers thus not only had a pleasant, smooth touch and an elegantly decorated look, but their trumpet-like shape and permeable top functioned as a sound box for the chirping cricket. To enhance the volume of the sound, the serrated edges of the cricket’s fore wings – used for stridulating – were sometimes even coated with wax (Laufer 1927: 16). When designed for sound and carrying, the containers mostly housed singing *Tettigoniidae*. But if an elite gambler was going to the teahouse or a tournament to boast about his possession, he might also put his fighting *Gryllidae* cricket into this kind of container, keeping it warm and listening, not to the beauty, but to the combativeness of the singing.
TYPE II: GAMBLING AND CARING BOX

From about the thirteenth century, another natural behaviour of the cricket was embedded into human culture: its ambition to fight till death for its territory. Although again based at the Chinese imperial court, the iconic proponents of cricket fights were this time not solitary court ladies, but one man in particular: the high minister Jia Sidao 賈似道 (1213–1275). The story goes that Jia could not stop gambling and look up from the tiny arena where two crickets fought for their lives, even when reports arrived about the Mongol invasion of China, which in the end brought about the fall of the Song dynasty in 1279.

Jia Sidao is, moreover, traditionally credited with being the author of the first monograph solely dedicated to crickets. The booklet elaborates on the evaluation of the shape and character of crickets for fighting, how they should be trained, fed, and cured when sick, and how to guide them through a tournament. While

FIG. 10.3 Round box cricket container made from grey clay, with lid (source: Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, ID 39977; published courtesy of the museum; photo: Martina Siebert)
it is possible to identify about fifteen different titles on crickets in Chinese history before the early twentieth century, they cannot really count as independent texts, as they share numerous passages or even repeat older texts completely with very few additions (Siebert 2006: 165–67). This phenomenon is specific to monographs on crickets – and on quails, another animal kept by Chinese scholars for gambling. Titles on the cricket are thus like a ‘box’ of assorted knowledge which is handed from one author to the next, who might add pieces, or take superfluous or seemingly wrong ones out. This sharing of written knowledge about what makes a champion cricket continues until today, with the republishing of historical cricket books and the compiling of new guidebooks for professional and hobby cricket gamblers. But this knowledge also circulates freely within the cricket community, to Hugh Raffles ‘in a spirit of democratic scholarship’ (2011: 83).

When crickets of the family *Gryllidae* became precious fighters who could earn their masters money and prestige, new containers for the various purposes of raising, training, and fighting were developed to guarantee the crickets’ health and strength. Constant temperature and humidity, darkness and no draught are crucial for the wellbeing of these insects, whose natural habitat is holes in the earth. Thus, cages are actually a difficult environment for them. From the thirteenth century, Chinese cricket lovers professionalised the culture of cricket fights and started to keep their pets in fairly spacious circular boxes made from the finest clay, with thick walls and a lid. Jia Sidao himself mentioned only containers in his book, and no cages (Meng 2004: 241–43). The interior of such boxes is normally furnished with a small, fan-shaped clay cubicle, open on one side for the insect to crawl in and sleep, but with a lid for the master to check on the insect, and with tiny porcelain bowls for water and food, filled daily with cucumber, rice, and sometimes cooked chestnuts. In the early twentieth century, Berthold Laufer reported that when a tournament was approaching, the cricket might even be fed a mosquito that had drunk its fill of the cricket’s master’s blood (1927: 16). Slightly larger clay containers without lids serve as training and fighting arenas. Here cricket and master learn to understand each other during the two to four weeks of training before the tournaments start at the autumnal equinox. The master ‘talks’ to the cricket by using a tickler made from rat or hare whiskers fixed to
a handle, with which he brushes the sharp mandibles, head, and back of the insect to stir or control its aggression.

After a pause from the mid-twentieth century to the late 1980s, cricket fighting is back again, and accepted as an expression of Chinese high culture, despite the hard-to-suppress gambling that remains stubbornly connected with it. Hugh Raffles has reported on both of these cultural aspects, namely the Shanghai scene of back-room gambling on the one hand, and a cricket museum run by a scholar with a cultural mission on the other (2011: 74–115). In his ethnographic study, Yutaka Suga draws another distinction, namely that between cricket hunters, and buyers or fighting aficionados. Suga spotlights the difference in the knowledge systems that these differently motivated parties adhere to and work with. He shows how crickets are hunted down with professional knowledge about their habitats and habits, but are collected mainly for their size. When entering the Shanghai market, the insects are reevaluated and classified according to elaborate criteria that consider body colour, shape, and proportions as crucial (Suga 2006). Supporting Raffles’s view that a ‘taxonomy doesn’t simply require judgment; it is itself a set of judgments’, the evaluation classes of Chinese cricket aficionados stand on equal ground with scientific taxonomies (2011: 84).

Beginning with Jia Sidao, the literary tradition of cricket monographs also commonly included a chapter on ‘collecting’, not least because the specific location where a cricket was found was considered to have an influence on its prospects as a warrior. The Tang court ladies in the anecdote above considered catching the insect to be part of the fun. But artificial hatching of crickets and bush crickets is mentioned as long ago as the early seventeenth century by Liu Tong 劉侗 (1593–1636). Liu reports that in Hujia village 胡家村 near Beijing, crickets were hatched on warm oven beds to be sold for high prices as singers during winter, and for the Spring Festival in February. But, he adds, these artificially bred singers came with weaker voices then those hunted in the fields in autumn (Liu 1995–2002: 3, 51a). Today, many singing insects are still bred by humans, at least those in the lower price segment. However, cricket-fight aficionados would never think this an appropriate pedigree for their champions.

A lot of money and prestige is involved in cricket fights today. Aficionados pay prices up to two thousand yuan (about $320), and sometimes even more for an insect; total stakes at gambling arenas can reach one million yuan (Raffles
Cricket coaches equip themselves with ticklers kept in carved ivory tubes, and bury their champion crickets in small silver coffins (Hammond 1983: 83). The individualised evaluation applied throughout history to fighting crickets – and the connoisseurship and money it triggered – today seems to have spilled over to singing crickets. At Beijing markets, prices of up two hundred yuan per singing insect are paid.44

A TAXONOMY OF RELATIONALITY

Humans and crickets, crickets and boxes, and humans and boxes – these constitute the three main axes in the relationality that defines Chinese cricket culture. In the thirteenth century there was a move from cages to more biologically suitable closed clay containers, although cheaper singers remaining in cages – even straw cages that constituted a disposable composite with the enclosed insect. Artisanal masterpieces, such as force-grown gourd containers with elaborately carved lids, made cricket and box into, as Laufer has put it, ‘inseparable companions’ (1927: 15). The cricket was kept safe in the box, and the box was made complete by the singing of the cricket. While the shape of the gourd amplified the insect’s chirping, and its size made it an ideal ‘listen-while-you-walk’ device, carrying it in an inside pocket kept the insect safe and warm. But the companionship of gourd container and cricket singer did not remain on equal terms as the relation and attraction between human and box became stronger over time. When the insect died and the box fell silent, the gourd container was just replenished with a new insect. Looked at in terms of the high prices these objects now achieve as collectibles, the insect has become an add-on, and is no longer the main purpose of these containers. The container has been emancipated from its original purpose; the singing insect inside the collectible is but an implement that makes the object work beyond its visual and haptic beauty. The gourd container thus moves between the functions and practices of carrying, touching, and listening, on the one hand, and on the other hand being a display object, collectible, and commodity.

Fighting crickets move through different containers in their life span of a few months. After being caught in a trap or net in the field, and carried in simple bamboo (or plastic) tubes to the market, they start their residence in
the aficionado’s home in a clay container that keeps them safe from late summer heat. Moved daily to a clay tray training ground using the fan-shaped cubicle, they finally find themselves in a fighting arena with an equally well-trained opponent. When the season gets colder, the fighting cricket might sometimes move to a gourd container close to the body of his master and, warmed by his body heat, accompanying him on his way to the teahouse. If they do their masters proud, they might move to their last box: a small silver coffin. Losers are thrown away – or set free, depending on how one looks at it.

Crickets define the boxes and containers in which they are kept, and different boxes make distinctions between species and usages. For example, when a gourd container houses a fighting *Gryllidae* cricket, its ground is plastered with a special kind of cement; when it houses a singing *Tettigoniidae* cricket, a wire spiral is placed inside to allow the insect an elevated perch. Depending on the desired usage, different cricket boxes may be designed for shelter, or else effective amplification and acoustics. And some boxes develop lives of their own. Gourd containers, as well as those made from clay, may be transformed into collectibles by their great age or the prestige of a specific kiln or shop. Although they are still identified as cricket containers, the boxes in this last category no longer need to host crickets to be of interest.

**NOTES**

1. A selection of Japanese cages is shown in Hammond 1983: 86.
2. Excavations at the old imperial summer palace of Yuanmingyuan unearthed thirty-seven fragments and four complete clay molds for force-growing gourds for cricket containers under the auspices of the imperial household department. See the report by the Beijing Municipal Cultural Relics Bureau in *Beijing wenwu yu kaogu* 北京文物与考古 = *Archaeology in Beijing*, 6 (2004): 79–89 (‘简论含经堂遗址出土的葫芦器陶范’ [Brief introduction to the clay models for gourd containers excavated at the historical site of the Jingtang hall]).
3. Lisa Gail Ryan has presented some photographs of such a contemporary breeding facility. See Ryan 1996: 29.
4. A popular daily documentary on Beijing television called *Shenghuo diaocha* 生活调查 (Enquiries into Daily Life) broadcast a twenty-minute report on the selling and buying of singing insects in Beijing. See *Shenghuo diaocha* ‘首都鸣虫专业委员会常务副主席兼秘书长赵伯’ (The executive vice-chairman and secretary of the
capitals’, Special Committee on Singing Insects Zhao Bo 赵伯), at <http://www.tudou.com/v/P01nOsFViRU> [accessed 12 November 2015].

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