

The Chinese Cricket Culture

Chinese Cricket Boxes: An engaging way to introduce the Chinese culture to children from very young ages to adults. These small boxes contain two toy crickets that are sensitive to light and produce a delightful sound.

**May be ordered from the following for approximately \$2.00 each.
Canton Bazaar, 616 Grant Avenue, San Francisco 94108 Tel: 415-362-5750
Old Shanghai, 645 Grant Avenue, San Francisco 94108 Tel: 415-986-1222**

For more items similar to the Cricket Boxes, see “The China Box” that is listed under Asian Studies Resources (China).

When an elderly Puyi, the last emperor of China, returned to the Forbidden City (now the Palace Museum in Beijing), he took out a dust-covered cricket pot from under his chair and passed it to a boy who watched him with great curiosity. Those who have seen the film will remember this as one of the closing scenes of *The Last Emperor*. The scene vividly illuminates the Chinese cricket culture. This tradition of enjoying the sounds of singing insects and fighting crickets has ancient roots and has been handed down throughout the centuries to the present day.

The cricket culture in China encompasses a 2000-year history of both singing insects and fighting crickets. Prior to the Tang dynasty (618-906) people apparently enjoyed the sounds of crickets, but during this dynasty they began to keep crickets in cages to enjoy their songs when in captivity. During the Song dynasty (960-1278) cricket fighting flourished as a popular sport.

In agricultural societies insects played a crucial role in farming practices as they were often the best indicators of climatic change. One such understanding is called *Jing-Zhe*, “the waking of the insects.” At this time, the farmers knew it was time to start spring plowing. In the field, most singing insects sing in the autumn and die with winter. As a symbol of autumn, they are associated with loneliness and sadness and are thus used often in Chinese poetry. When autumn arrived, many ladies of the palace caught crickets and kept them in small cages, which were placed near their pillows so as to hear their songs during the night. The common people also adopted this custom.

The fact that 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 cricket was thus elevated with the symbolism of prosperity.

With the same popularity that football enjoys today, cricket fighting became a popular game and sport for all people beginning in the Song dynasty. Once the emperors began to favor cricket fighting, crickets became the primary tribute for the palace. Each year, thousands of carefully selected crickets were sent to the capital. 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. Cricket fighting continues to be taken very seriously and knowledge about crickets is in high demand. The sport is wide spread throughout the large cities of China. There are even cricket fighting clubs. With the migration of Chinese to America, cricket fighting can be found in New York and Philadelphia. Elaborate cricket cages can be found in American museums, such as the Field Museum of National History (Chicago), the Buffalo Museum of Science and the Nelson Art Gallery (Kansas City). For more information:
http://www.insects.org/ced3/chinese_crcul.html

Activity: There is a correlation between the chirps of real crickets and the temperature. Count how many times a cricket chirps in fifteen seconds. Add 38 to that number. It should be the approximate Fahrenheit temperature.