From “Humble Things” to the “Great Dao”: A Philosophical Reading of Ancient Chinese “Cricket Books” (*Xishuai Pu* 蟋蟀譜)

**YANG Xiaobo**

**Abstract**

China’s distinctive cricket culture—related to the insect, not the game—has given rise to a unique genre of texts known as “cricket books” (*xishuai pu* 蟋蟀譜). These texts, serving as instructional manuals for cricket-fighting, fall under the branch of *pulu* （譜録）in traditional Chinese bibliography. Beyond scientific and technological merits, this genre has profound aesthetic and philosophical significance. Nurtured by the highly developed urban leisure culture of the Song dynasty, it embodies a philosophy of leisure. During the Ming dynasty, cricket books ultimately attained the esteemed title of “Classics” (*jing* 經) due to their profound philosophical resonance and embodiment of Confucian values. This article undertakes a philosophical exploration of these texts, aiming to unveil the embedded interpretative framework of *Dao-Qi* (道-器) in their examination of the colouration (*se* 色) and physiognomy (*xiang* 相) of crickets. This framework represents a fusion between Confucianism and Daoism: while Daoism embarks on a journey of transcendence from the very bottom (the most minute and humble things under Heaven, or *weiwu* 微物) to the very top (the “Great Dao”), Confucianism strives to bridge these two extremes through the emotion (*qing* 情) inherent in human hearts. This fusion can be aptly characterized as a philosophy of “emotion towards things” (*ai wu* 愛物). Moreover, this article addresses the challenges posed by modern society to traditional Chinese cricket culture, articulating concerns about the survival and revival of these time-honoured traditions in today’s technology-driven world.

**Keywords:** cricket, cricket-fighting, cricket books, Chinese cricket culture, Chinese philosophy

**Od »skromnih stvari« do »velikega Daota«: filozofsko branje antičnih kitajskih »knjig o čričkih« (*Xishuai Pu* 蟋蟀譜)

**Izvleček**

Kitajska kultura čričkov je ustvarila edinstveno vrsto besedil, znanih kot »knjige o čričkih« (*xishuai pu* 蟋蟀譜). Ta besedila, ki služijo kot priročniki z navodili za boj čričkov,

**Ključne besede**: črički, boj čričkov, knjige o čričkih, kitajska kultura čričkov, kitajska filozofija

The “Five Virtues” of crickets: Chirping at the right times shows trustworthiness; fighting once encountering an enemy shows bravery; never surrendering despite severe injuries shows loyalty; remaining silent when defeated shows a sense of shame; seeking shelter as it is cold shows an understanding of the importance of timing.

蟋蟀五德: 嘉不失時, 信也; 遇敵必鬥, 勇也; 傷重不降, 忠也; 敗則不鳴, 知恥也; 寒則歸寧, 識時務也。

Huang Tingjian (黃庭堅, 1045–1105)

**Introduction: The Unique Cricket Culture in China**

As I write this article, the cricket-fighting season in China is in full swing. This season commences in mid-autumn and lasts until the onset of winter. The crickets engaged in these battles were meticulously chosen from their peers captured in early autumn and then underwent careful nurturing for at least one month. Now it is time for them to fight not just for their own pride, but for the honour of their owners. This tradition, unique to Chinese culture, boasts a history of almost a

---

1 All the translations of the citations from Chinese texts are provided by the author of this article. The “Five Virtues” of crickets have traditionally been attributed to Huang Tingjian, a renowned literati and calligrapher of the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127). However, Bai Feng (2017, 20–21) argues that this attribution lacks substantial textual evidence. According to him, the earliest documented instance of this quote can only be traced back to the late Qing Dynasty, thus suggesting a much later origin than previously believed.
millennium, tracing its origins back to the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279). Its allure has captivated Chinese people from all walks of life—commoners, intellectuals, aristocrats, and even emperors.

China's distinctive cricket culture has given rise to a unique genre of texts known as “cricket books” (xishuai pu 蟻蟀譜), which serve as instructional manuals for cricket-fighting. This article endeavours to provide a philosophical interpretation of these texts, recognizing their significance beyond mere technical knowledge of cricket-fighting; as they convey a profound philosophical understanding of the relationship between humans and nature. After outlining the development of cricket books, this article delves into the reasons behind their elevation to the esteemed status of “Classics” (jing 經). It further introduces the unique genre of pulu (譜錄) in traditional Chinese bibliography, a category to which cricket books belong, unveiling the philosophy of leisure inherent in this genre. By exploring the philosophy of cricket physiognomy presented in these texts, this article aims to reveal the embedded interpretative framework of Dao-Qi (道-器). As a fundamental interrelated duality in Chinese philosophy, Dao-Qi represents a profound fusion between Confucianism and Daoism: while Daoism embarks on a journey of transcendence from the very bottom (the most minute and humble things under Heaven, or weiwu 微物) to the very top (the “Great Dao”), Confucianism strives to bridge these two extremes through the emotion (qing 情) inherent in human hearts. This fusion can aptly be characterized as a philosophy of “emotion towards things” (ai wu 愛物), which, in my view, embodies a distinctive feature of Chinese philosophy.

The cricket (Latin name: Gryllus), often referred to as “the insect of autumn” (qiu-chong 秋蟲) 2 in China, has been regarded as a symbol of this season since at least the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600–1046 BC). Indeed, archaeological discoveries of the oracle shell and bone inscriptions (jiaguwen 甲骨文) of the Shang dynasty reveal that the character for autumn (qiu 秋) was depicted pictographically as a singing cricket (see Figure 1). Furthermore, the pronunciation of this character resonates with the melodious chirps of crickets, further highlighting the profound connection between this insect and time of year. 3

---

2 Crickets are known by many names in China, with “ququ” (蛐蛐) being the most common, especially in the north. It also carries the poetic name “cuzhi” (促織), which literally translates as “encouraging weaving”. This is inspired by the insect’s chirping sound during the autumn season, resembling an encouragement to weave cloth.

3 An alternative interpretation suggests that the character “qiu” (秋) pictographically depicts a locust, which is also a symbol of autumn. However, considering that the pronunciation of this character mimics the chirps of crickets, I am more inclined to believe that it actually represents the latter.
This connection between crickets and autumn has been further enriched through literature. The presence of crickets in Chinese literary tradition can be traced back over 2,500 years to the Book of Songs (Shijing 詩經), China’s earliest poetry collection, acclaimed as one of the “Five Confucian Classics” (Wujing 五經). This anthology includes two poems that depict crickets moving from the wilderness to the warmth of human dwellings as colder days approach, a poignant metaphor for time’s relentless march. Although these verses do not explicitly mention the chirping of crickets, it was likely this sound that truly captured the imaginations of ancient listeners. This evocative chirping, emblematic of autumn’s arrival and winter’s approach, has resonated throughout Chinese literary history. It appears frequently in numerous literary works as a classic metaphor for “lamenting the advent of autumn” (beiqiu 悲秋), a recurring theme in classical Chinese poetry.

During the Song dynasty (960–1279), crickets once again captured the popular fascination, yet for an entirely new reason—cricket-fighting (see Figure 2). In the long tradition of rearing crickets for their melodious songs, people discovered that the males of certain species displayed a remarkable capacity for fighting. The game of cricket-fighting began as a mere pastime but evolved, over time, into an activity often associated with gambling. This transformation led to this activity being stigmatized by some, as well as unease among those who initially sought pure enjoyment from it. The particular species of crickets chosen for fighting games is known as the Chinese fighting-cricket (zhonghua douxi 中華斗蟋, Latin name: Velarifictorus micado or Gryllus chinensis) (see Figure 3), although it is not the only species capable of fighting. While the exact reasons for the dominance of this species remain unclear, I can offer some conjectures. Firstly, crickets of this species

---

4 These two poems are “Crickets” (xishuai 蟋蟀) and “July” (qiyue 七月), included in the section of “Folk Ballads” (feng 風) of the Book of Songs.
were likely abundant in the areas where this game was popular. Secondly, they exhibited remarkable fighting abilities. Thirdly, their complex and varied fighting techniques provided a captivating spectacle.

Figure 2: *Children Playing in a Garden in Autumn* (*Qiu ting ying xi tu* 秋庭嬰戲圖) by Su Hancheng (蘇漢臣, 1094–1172), which depicts three children engaged in cricket-fighting. (Source: The National Palace Museum, Taipei, CC-BY-4.0 @ www.npm.gov.tw)

Figure 3: Two male crickets in a fight. (Photo by the author, with the crickets also captured by the author.)
Cricket-fighting held a captivating allure for ancient Chinese literati and scholars, who esteemed it as a refined form of entertainment. In my view, this attraction can be ascribed not only to the enthralling spectacle it presents, but also to two additional factors. First, the diminutive size of crickets ensures that their fights are not as gruesome or bloody as those between larger creatures. This aspect makes cricket-fighting less susceptible to ethical critiques than cock-fighting or dog-fighting. Second, the short life of a cricket, spanning only a single autumn, mirrors the fleeting nature of human life. This transitory existence elicits contemplation of life’s brevity and evokes a sense of melancholy for heroes facing their twilight years.

Gu Wenjian 顧文薦 (birth and death dates unknown), a scholar of the Southern Song dynasty, traced the tradition of cricket-fighting back to the years of Tianbao (天寶, 742–756) during the Tang dynasty (618–907). However, Bai Feng (2017, 9–15) raises scepticism regarding this claim, citing not only the lack of textual evidence but also the adverse and unusually cold weather conditions during that period, which were unsuitable for crickets. According to Bai (ibid., 27–36), a substantial body of textual and archaeological evidence reveals that cricket-fighting became a prevalent form of amusement during the Southern Song dynasty, although its origins may be traced back to an earlier period. Furthermore, it was during this era that the first known cricket book emerged, reportedly compiled by Jia Sidao 賈似道 (1213–1275), who served as the prime minister at that time.

The cricket culture in China exhibits two distinct facets: one associated with gambling and the other with pure entertainment, as referred to in the preface of *A Revised Edition of the Cricket Book* (Chongbian dingzheng qiuzhong pu 重刊訂正秋蟲譜) (see Wang 2013, 3). This duality may explain why the chirping of crickets, a literary symbol canonized in the *Book of Songs*, has resonated throughout Chinese literary works, while cricket-fighting has seldom received praise, and instead is often criticized as “a pastime that can erode one’s aspirations” (wanwu sangzhi 玩物喪志). In contrast to literary works, cricket books serve as instructional manuals specifically designed for cricket-fighting enthusiasts. However, as previously mentioned, these texts provide not only technical knowledge about cricket-fighting but, more significantly, a philosophical understanding of the relationship between humans and nature, with crickets, such a tiny creature, serving as a medium to express this. Regrettably, however, these texts have become obscure to today’s cricket aficionados, and are even less known to a wider readership. Therefore, this article aims to illuminate the philosophy embedded in these texts, offering insights that I believe are relevant in today’s global context.

---

5 以資博賽，以逸性情焉。
The Emergence of “Cricket Books” and Their Canonization as “Classics”

Cricket books, known as *xishuai pu* or *chong pu* (蟲譜) in Chinese, primarily focus on capturing, selecting, nurturing, and training crickets for the purpose of cricket-fighting. They emerged during the Southern Song dynasty, as a result of the growing commercialization of cricket culture in China, when the popularity of cricket-fighting reached its first peak.

Traditionally, Jia Sidao is credited with the compilation of the first cricket book. However, as Jia’s original version has not survived, the versions accessible to us today are actually adaptations and expansions by various cricket connoisseurs since the Ming dynasty (1368‒1644). While it is generally accepted that the first cricket book emerged during the Southern Song dynasty, there is a lack of concrete historical evidence to definitively attribute authorship to Jia Sidao. Given Jia’s dual role as a cricket aficionado and a prime minister under the Southern Song, it is plausible that he played a pivotal role in organizing the compilation of such a book. This association is precisely why many subsequent cricket books, driven by commercial motives, claimed to be based on Jia’s work. Jia, mockingly dubbed the “Cricket Prime Minister” (*xishuai zaixiang* 蟋蟀宰相), became the first real celebrity among fans of the game.

The renaissance of ancient cricket books for modern readers is credited to Wang Shixiang (1914‒2009), a distinguished connoisseur and collector of Chinese cultural relics. Delving deeply into vast reservoir of sources, Wang (2013) completed a groundbreaking compilation titled *A Comprehensive Collection of Ancient Chinese Cricket Books* (*Xishuai pu jicheng* 蟋蟀譜集成), which comprised 17 volumes. Building upon Wang’s pioneering efforts, Bai Feng (2013), another contemporary cricket expert, produced an annotated edition and expanded it with two additional volumes. Subsequently, Chen Tianjia (2013, 147‒48) made a contribution to this genre by discovering an additional six volumes, thereby bringing the total number of extant cricket books to 25. The earliest of these, as revealed by Wang Shixiang’s (2013, 2) research, was published in 1546 during the Ming dynasty, titled *A Revised Edition of the Cricket Book*. This claims to be the compilation put together by Jia Sidao, revised by the lay Buddhist Wang Qizhu 王淇竹 and subsequently by the Daoist monk Buxuzi Long 步虛子隆.6

During the Ming dynasty, cricket books were granted a status akin to that of the revered Classics. This is evident from the titles of some of the books published during that period, such as the *Classic of Cricket* (*Cuzhi jing* 促織經) and *A Revised

---

6 Buxuzi (步虛子), literally the one treading in the void, refers to a Daoist monk.
The canonization of cricket books as Classics, as noted by Bai Feng (2013, 103), might be associated with the influence of the fifth Ming dynasty emperor, Xuande 宣德 (1398‒1435), who was said to be addicted to cricket-fighting. Additionally, I believe this canonization can also be attributed to the Confucian values embedded in these texts. Crickets are always praised for displaying both literary and martial virtues, known as wende (文德) and wude (武德) in Chinese: “As it leaps and chirps, displaying a tranquil demeanour, it embodies the essence of literary virtues. When fearlessly confronting the enemy and consistently emerging victorious with valour on the battlefield, it embodies the essence of martial virtues” (from A Treatise on Crickets [Xishuai pu 蟋蟀譜], see Wang 2013, 65). These qualities exhibited by crickets, especially in their fighting, resonate with the Confucian concept of a “virtuous person” (junzi 君子), as encapsulated in the “Five Virtues of crickets” (xishuai wu de 蟋蟀五德) cited at the beginning of this article.

In the preface of A Revised Edition of the Cricket Book (see ibid., 3), influenced by the Confucian doctrine of “rectifying the name” (zhengming 正名), the compiler sought to destigmatize cricket-fighting by tracing its presence in the Confucian Classics back to the Book of Songs, and citing Confucius’ involvement in a similar activity of hunting as a precedent. The compiler’s intention was to argue that cricket-fighting “never compromises what is considered righteous”. Furthermore, he asserted that, after examining Jia Sidao’s cricket book, he “felt as if he had touched upon the Dao, which is embodied in the affection for things under Heaven”. He then inquired: “Could one genuinely cultivate such a universal love without the harmonious convergence of one’s heart and the external world?” This realization led him to conclude that “by embracing and furthering this Dao, one may foster benevolence towards one’s fellow beings”.

Chinese people have a special fondness for insects, rearing them for pleasure, enlightenment, and to draw upon the virtues embodied in these tiny creatures. For instance, the cicada is frequently revered as an emblem of a pristine and noble spirit. However, among all the insects cherished by Chinese people, the cricket stands unparalleled, epitomizing so many admired human virtues. For the Chinese, the world of crickets presents a microcosm that mirrors the intricacies of
human society. As Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道 (1568‒1610), a celebrated literati of the Ming dynasty, once passionately remarked, “Alas, how intricate and enigmatic the world of crickets can be! From this perspective, even the tiniest of creatures, such as ants and lice, manifest a world strangely akin to our own”\(^\text{12}\) (from *An Essay on Crickets* [*Cuzhi zhi* 促織誌], see ibid., 54).

**The Genre of Pulu 譜錄 as a Philosophy of Leisure**

Cricket books, known as *xishuai pu* or *chong pu* in Chinese, belong to a special genre named *pulu* in traditional Chinese bibliography. The terms “*pu*” (譜) and “*lu*” (錄) denote presenting and recording, respectively. Thus these books are dedicated to the meticulous presenting and recording of specific subjects, often accompanied by illustrations. This genre of literature has a longstanding presence in Chinese history, originally used for recording family lineages, known as “*jiapu*” (家譜). However, it was during the Song dynasty that this genre was formally established, owing to the proliferation of such publications during that era. Centuries later, in the Qing dynasty (1616‒1912), this genre found its place in the *Complete Library in Four Branches of Literature* (*si ku quan shu* 四庫全書) under the “Branch of Zi” (zi bu 子部),\(^\text{13}\) and was further divided into three subcategories: utensils (*qiwu* 器物), foodstuffs (*shipu* 食譜), and flowers, birds, fishes and insects (*hua niao yu chong* 花鳥魚蟲), with cricket books belonging to the last of these.

The proliferation of *pulu* during the Song dynasty can be attributed to two main factors. Firstly, this era witnessed remarkable advances in science and technology. As stressed by Joseph Needham in the first volume of *Science and Civilisation in China*, “whenever one follows up any specific piece of scientific or technological history in Chinese literature, it is always at the Song dynasty that one finds the major focal point” (Needham 1954, 134). Secondly, the urban leisure culture during this period reached an unparalleled zenith, as reflected in the titles of the *pulu* publications of that time, such as the *Bamboo Book* (*sun pu* 筍譜), *Incense Book* (*xiang pu* 香譜), *Peony Book* (*mudan pu* 牡丹譜), *Tea Book* (*cha lu* 茶錄), and many others. As such, the genre of *pulu* can be examined from two perspectives: that of science and technology, and that of culture and art. While these two perspectives might appear distinct, they are in fact deeply interconnected. The insights into the

\(^{12}\) 嗟乎，蟲之微妙曲折如此。由此推之，雖蟻虱蠛蠓，吾知其情狀與人不殊矣。

\(^{13}\) This branch in the *Complete Library in Four Branches of Literature* contains the most diverse contents. The reason it is named “*zi*” (子) is that its main component consists of various schools of thought from the Pre-Qin period, represented by esteemed masters who are often referred to with the honorific title “*zi*”.

natural world presented in these books are invariably infused with the authors’ unique aesthetic worldviews. From my perspective, this aesthetic lens holds much greater significance for contemporary society. Therefore, I regard pulu as more than just an assemblage of scientific and technological knowledge, as this genre embodies, essentially, a philosophy of leisure.

The concept of “leisure”, as explored throughout Western intellectual history by Johan Bouwer and Marco van Leeuwen (2017, 230‒31), is multifaceted. However, at its core, leisure “is the search for the important, for meaning in and of life. That could be manifested in play and recreation, but also in work, its beckoning horizon being the good life, eudaimonia and becoming fully human”. Therefore, leisure should not be perceived as simply “killing” time, but rather as a means to enrich every moment of our lives, encompassing not only play and rest but, more importantly, work.

Pulu books typically focus on everyday objects, especially those with aesthetic value, which serve as a bridge connecting human beings and nature. They reflect Confucius’ teaching of “acquiring extensive knowledge about the names of flora and fauna”14 (see Analects of Confucius: Book 17 Yanghuo). However, in Chinese philosophy the practice of “investigating natural objects” (ge wu 格物) serves a purpose far beyond merely “acquiring knowledge” (zhi zhi 致知), as it ultimately aims at “attaining the Dao” (zhi dao 治道). The term “Dao” in Chinese—often translated as “the Way”—signifies both the ultimate goal and the path to reach it. The search for the meaning in and of life, which is central to leisure, is thus realized through the very act of searching itself. If we consider leisure as a pathway to transcendence, a quest for spiritual liberation, it becomes clear that this transcendence is never detached from our everyday lives. The philosophy of leisure conveyed in the pulu books offers an enlightening perspective. It underscores the notion that our search for meaning is intimately interwoven with our daily experiences. This recognition brings new insights to our understanding of leisure, highlighting its profound significance in shaping our lives.

Se (色) and Xiang (相): The Philosophy of Cricket Physiognomy

What if Jean-Henri Fabre, the esteemed French entomologist, had come across the ancient Chinese cricket books? Undoubtedly, he would have been both captivated and perplexed by the distinct insights and enigmatic knowledge contained in these works, which would have provided perspectives differing from his own observations.

---

14 多識於鳥獸草木之名。
on crickets. The detailed knowledge about capturing, selecting, nurturing, and training crickets for the purpose of cricket-fighting, as detailed in cricket books, was developed over centuries of practical experience. Many of these insights have now been validated by modern science. For instance, entomologists have discovered why male crickets display heightened aggression after mating, a behaviour different from that of other male creatures, which become more aggressive in the presence of females, but tire after mating (see Rillich, Rillich and Stevenson 2019). Notably, mastery with regard to the best method and optimal time to facilitate cricket mating, with the aim of enhancing the males’ combativeness, was elaborately documented in these cricket books around one thousand years ago.

The skill of evaluating a cricket’s potential for combat, known as xiang chong (相蟲) in Chinese, usually occupies a prominent place in a cricket book. As implied by the Chinese term “xiang” (相) used as a noun, which carries the meaning of appearance, this practice involves a careful examination of the physical traits of a cricket. In this regard, xiang chong can be viewed as a form of “cricket physiognomy”, a crucial skill for those intending to engage in cricket-fighting. There are two primary criteria for evaluating a cricket: physical traits and colouration. The physical criteria are more straightforward, including attributes such as large teeth, sturdy limbs, a robust head, and a broad neck. On the other hand, the criteria related to colouration are far more complex, as they involve scrutinizing the hues of the cricket’s body segments and the markings on its head. These colours are considered indicators of a cricket’s lineage. Herein lies the essence of cricket physiognomy—the subtle art of “evaluating a cricket by examining its colouration” (xiang se 相色). This practice, replete with its profound intricacies and an air of ineffability, mirrors the enigmatic nature of Dao in traditional Chinese philosophy.

Crickets have traditionally been categorized based on their colours typically falling into six groups: cyan, yellow, red, black, white, and purple. However, the categorization of cricket colours remains a contentious issue due to conflicting interpretations found in various cricket books (Bai 2018, 2). These disputes arise because such classifications lack a solid biological foundation. Additionally, the concept of “colour” in cricket physiognomy, known as “se” (色) in Chinese, goes beyond mere visual or optical recognition, as it carries cultural and philosophical significance. From a

---

15 Cyan is the English translation of the Chinese term “qing” (青), yet it falls short of fully capturing the richness of this unique Chinese colour. In Chinese aesthetics, the colour qing embodies a hue that fuses elements of green and blue, sometimes leaning towards greenish blue, and sometimes towards bluish green. However, no cricket in reality exhibits a purely cyan colouration. In traditional Chinese culture, qing is typically associated with the “wood” element within the framework of the “five basic elements in the universe” (wuxing 五行). Hence, a cricket with the colour qing stands as a symbol of a tree with a verdant canopy and umber branches. Such a cricket exhibits varying shades of light or dark brown across its body, with wings shimmering in a cyan hue under sunlight.
visual standpoint, cyan and white crickets cannot exist in reality; moreover, distinctions among other colours are often unclear. The combination of colours displayed on different body segments of a cricket, including the head, neck, abdomen, wings, legs, and the so-called “fighting lines”（dou xian 鬥線 or dou si 鬥絲）(see Figure 4)，is usually adopted as a defining criterion. As a result, beginners often find it difficult to accurately identify the colour of a cricket. Bai Feng (2018, 21–26) suggests that the categorization found in A Revised Edition of the Cricket Book, the earliest extant cricket book, may be the closest to that adopted by the cricket books during the Southern Song dynasty. According to this standard, when determining the colour of a cricket, that of the “fighting lines” takes priority, followed by the colours of other body segments. For instance, a “cyan cricket” is characterized by having white fighting lines with a slender and straight shape, while a “white cricket” is differentiated from a “cyan cricket” by its white fighting lines with a flattened shape and wings that shimmer in a pale hue under sunlight.

Figure 4: The “fighting lines”. (Photo by the author, with the cricket also captured by the author.)

---

16 Fighting lines, known as “dou xian” 鬥線 or “dou si” 鬥絲 in Chinese, are a series of horizontal lines displayed on top of a cricket’s head, extending outward from the juncture between neck and head. They are called fighting lines because of their central role as indicators of a cricket’s combat potential.
The intricacies of differentiating cricket colours are not our concern in this article. Instead, we aim to explore a deeper question: Why are there six colours, and not another number? To shed light on this matter, it is crucial to note that in ancient cricket books, crickets were not treated merely as biological beings. Rather, “they were seen as creatures that resonate with the rhythms of the Heavens and embody the balance of Yin and Yang, the opposing forces that shape the universe”\(^{17}\) as they “draw upon the life force of both Heaven and Earth, absorb the essence of rain and dew, and evolve with the shifting times”\(^{18}\) (from *A Treatise on Crickets*, see Wang 2013, 65–66). Essentially, crickets are regarded as a microcosm of the universe. Therefore, as noted by Bai Feng (2018, 8), the six colours of crickets can be interpreted within the framework of the “Six Vital Energies” (*liu qi* 六氣). This theory, foundational in traditional Chinese medicine, associates six climatic elements, namely, wind (*feng* 風), heat (*re* 熱), fire (*huo* 火), moisture (*shi* 濕), dryness (*zao* 燥), and cold (*han* 寒), with six vital energies inherent in the human body, which are symbolically represented by six colours—cyan, purple, red, yellow, white, and black, respectively—corresponding to the six colours attributed to crickets.

In cricket physiognomy, a cricket’s colouration holds more significance than mere aesthetics, since it serves as an indicator of its lineage and potential prowess in combat. Within the six basic colour categories of crickets, each comprises a range of subcategories. When a cricket adheres strictly to a specific colour criterion within its category, displaying a consistent hue throughout its body, it is recognized as possessing the purest lineage, indicating exceptional combat potential. Such crickets epitomize the “authentic” or “pure” colours characteristic of their respective categories. They are thus bestowed with names such as “authentic cyan” (*zhengqing* 真青) or “pure cyan” (*zhengqing* 正青), with analogous designations for other colours. This naming convention, in my view, finds its root in the Confucian doctrine of “rectifying the name”, which postulates that a name should precisely correspond to the reality it represents, and the reality should merit its assigned name (*ming shi xiangfu* 名實相副 or *ming fu qi shi* 名副其實).

However, a crucial question arises: Can a cricket with “authentic” or “pure” colouration be defeated by those with hybrid colours? This very inquiry is explored in a chapter titled “On the Defeat of a ‘General’” (*jiangjun bai lun* 將軍敗論), which is included in *A Revised Edition of the Cricket Book* (see Wang 2013, 12). We may draw a parallel between this question and the one posed by Zilu 子路 to his mentor Confucius: “Can a virtuous person also be reduced to such impoverishment

---

17 似順天時而達陰陽者。
18 乘天地之氣，感雨露之精，隨時變化。
and have no way out?”19 (see Analects of Confucius: Book 15 Weilinggong 論語·衛靈公). Perhaps regrettably, the response to both questions is a resounding “yes”, since given the complexities of reality, triumph in cricket-fighting is influenced by numerous factors, and this is even more pronounced in human competition. Nevertheless, the essay still asserts that “the pure and authentic colour bestowed upon a cricket by Heaven and Earth grants it [the cricket] a greater potential to become a ‘general’; even if defeated, this occurs only once or twice in every ten battles”20 (see ibid.). Establishing “authentic” or “pure” colours as the orthodoxy in cricket physiognomy reflects Confucius’ unwavering adherence to the ideal of becoming a virtuous person. Even in defeat, such a person stands in stark contrast to the base person who, as Confucius put it, “abandons principles in the face of impoverishment and adversity”21 (see Analects of Confucius: Book 15 Weilinggong).

From “Humble Things” to the “Great Dao”: A Philosophy of “Emotion Towards Things” (ai wu 愛物)

As highlighted in the introduction, the interrelated duality of Dao-Qi is a distinctive feature of Chinese philosophy, embodying a fusion of Confucian and Daoist thought: while Daoism embarks on a journey of transcendence from the very bottom (the most minute and humble things under Heaven, or weiwu) to the very top (the “Great Dao”), Confucianism strives to bridge these two extremes through the emotion inherent in human hearts. Viewed within this context, Chinese philosophy could be interpreted as a philosophy of “emotion towards things”. This perspective, as I will further explain in the ensuing discussion, has significant implications in the contemporary world.

“Crickets, though being tiny creatures in the vastness of the universe, resonate with the rhythms of the Heavens and draw energy from the Earth”22 (from Cricket Appraisal (Wangsun jian 旺孫鑒), see ibid., 95). While this portrayal may, at first glance, appear to be just the ancient Chinese perspective on crickets, it is more accurately an illustration of how they comprehended the universe itself, utilizing crickets as a lens to observe and interpret the world around them. In this context, the cricket transcends its status as a tiny creature in nature, and transforms into an epitome of all things under Heaven.

19 君子亦有窮乎?
20 天地既賦其正色, 必多將軍, 間有敗北者, 必十中之一二也。
21 小人窮斯濫矣。
22 趣織微物也。然因乎天時，應乎地氣。
Even in its minute form, it discerns the intricate balances between Yin and Yang, the opposing forces that shape the universe, grasps the nuanced timing between action and inaction, and possesses the true artistry essential for triumph in combat. Such a creature, indeed, transcends its physical limitations.

夫一物之微，而能察乎陰陽動靜之宜，備乎斗戰攻取之義，是能超乎物者也甚矣。（from *A Revised Edition of the Cricket Book*, see ibid., 4)

In Chinese philosophy, objects with physical forms are commonly referred to as *Qi* (器), a term that literally translates to “instrument” or “vessel”. Thus, in the above quote the cricket is considered as transcending the confinement of *Qi* and entering the realm of *Dao*. This depiction resonates with Dongguozi 東郭子 question to Zhuangzi 莊子 regarding the dwelling place of *Dao*. Zhuangzi’s response is profound, as he asserts that *Dao* exists ubiquitously but is to be found particularly in the smallest and most humble things, such as ants, barnyard grass, tiles and bricks, and even excrement (see Zhuangzi: “Knowledge” Rambling in the North 莊子·知北遊). Zhuangzi’s intention is to emphasize that *Dao* can never be detached from *Qi*. Instead, *Dao* is realized through the medium of *Qi*. The profound interplay between *Dao* and *Qi* is based upon the “one-world (the mundane world) view”, a fundamental tenet of Chinese philosophy. This naturally leads to a question: What bridges *Dao* and *Qi*, ensuring their interconnectedness? Daoism does not provide a definite answer to this inquiry. In contrast to Daoism’s profound detachment from the world, Confucianism offers a distinct solution—perceiving the world with emotion. Therefore, emotion emerges as the bridge connecting *Dao* and *Qi*. This notion, known as “qing” in Chinese, is deeply ingrained in Confucianism and was considered by Li Zehou 李澤厚 (1930–2021) as one of the “roots” (benti 本體) of his philosophical system.

Li Zehou traced the connection between *qing* and *Dao* back to the ancient texts found within the “Guodian Bamboo Slips” (Guodian zhujian 郭店竹簡), which articulate the ideas that “emotion springs from disposition” (*qing shengyu xing* 情生於性) and “*Dao* derives from emotion” (*Dao shiyu qing* 道始於情). Expanding upon these, Li formulated the innovative concept of “emotion as the root” (*qing benti* 情本體) (see Li 2008a, 258–59; 2008b, 106–07), which is central to his philosophical system. This concept reveals a distinctive pathway in Chinese philosophy for attaining the *Dao*—nurturing profound emotional connections and

---

23 The “Guodian Bamboo Slips” are a collection of inscribed bamboo slips, discovered in 1993 in a Chu State tomb. They are named after their discovery site in the village of Guodian, located in Zhengzhou City, Henan Province. These bamboo slips contain a wealth of highly significant literature from the Chu State, covering a period from the mid-fourth century to the early third century BC.
achieving a harmonious integration with the world. It is important to note that the Chinese term “benti” is also used to translate the Western philosophical concept of “noumenon”, which represents a transcendent reality beyond the empirical realm of phenomena. However, Li distinguished his interpretation of benti, emphatically stating that “it is not noumenon, but rather the root, the substance” (Li 2016, 1074). In Chinese philosophy, there exists no direct equivalent to the Western notion of “noumenon”, and instead Li’s benti signifies a fundamental essence intrinsic to human existence and experience.

Establishing “emotion” as the “root” holds modern significance, as it dispels the mystical aura surrounding the concept of Dao and infuses it with the richness of human emotional experience. In contrast to the Daoist worldview of “all things being equal” (qiwu 齊物), Confucianism starts with the premise that there exists inequality beneath the Heavens, giving rise to the inherent hierarchies in both the natural world and human society. In the Confucian worldview, the proper functioning of each element within societal hierarchies is maintained through the practice of “rituals” (li 礼). At the core of these “rituals” lies “benevolence” (ren 仁), a profound and innate emotion deeply ingrained in the human heart. These fundamental Confucian concepts find resonance in the way ancient Chinese people expressed their fondness for crickets.

Of all things under Heaven, those that inspire love in people will never be forsaken by a person of virtue. Why is this so? It is because the creations of Heaven are incredibly diverse, and people’s preferences vary widely. Affection is never imposed from external forces; rather, it wells up from our innate emotions. It is when emotions are stirred that we naturally develop affection for certain things. This is because within these things, there are qualities worthy of love. Without these qualities, no one would express affection for them at all. This embodies the true essence of human nature.

From the passage cited above, it becomes evident that the inherent qualities of an object worthy of love, and the natural inclination of a subject to love what is lovable, coexist. This observation may remind us of Zaiwo’s inquiry to his mentor.
Confucius regarding the necessity of observing a three-year mourning period for one’s parents. Confucius responded succinctly: “If you choose to forego it, do so, provided you find peace in your heart”25 (see Analects of Confucius: Book 17 Yanghuo 論語·陽貨篇). This suggests that “rituals” are not externally imposed mandates, but rather external manifestations of innate emotions harboured deep within us. Therefore, the significance of the “rituals” remains self-contained and does not require external validation.

In modern Chinese, the word “emotion” is often rendered as the two-character phrase “ganqing” (感情) or “qinggan” (情感). The character “gan” (感) signifies “being emotionally evoked”. When paired with qing (emotion), this expression suggests that emotions arise from internal sentiment evoked by external stimuli. It highlights the emotional resonance between humans and the universe. In Chinese philosophy, this resonance does not occur directly, but is always mediated through natural objects. This approach is termed tuoxing (托興), which refers to projecting one’s sentiments or aspirations onto an object. "In the Book of Songs, out of its three hundred and five poems, a majority seek to project the sentiments and aspirations of the poets onto insects and plants”26 (from Cricket Appraisal, see ibid., 94). In classical Chinese poetry, crickets typically symbolize the passage of time. This symbolic association can be traced back to the poem “July” in the Book of Songs, where the movement of crickets from the wilderness to human dwellings signals the approach of colder days.27 Notably, ancient cricket books often cite this poem to emphasize the intimate relation between humans and crickets.

Crickets, as tiny creatures, inhabit the wild when it is warm, and draw near humans as the weather turns cold, as if they have an understanding of seasonal changes. When you gently touch their heads with the tip of grass, they will turn and respond with their cerci, and when you do the same to their cerci, they will also turn and respond with their heads, as if they can comprehend your intentions.

況促織之為物也，暖則在郊，寒則附人，若有識其時者；拂其首則尾應之，拂其尾則首應之，似有解人意者。(from A Revised Edition of the Cricket Book, see ibid., 4)

25 女安，則為之。
26 詩三百篇，其托興於昆蟲草木者居多。
27 In the poem “July”, the lines depicting crickets go like this: “In July, they dwell in the fields; in August, they hide under my eaves; in September, they come to my door; and in October, these crickets take shelter beneath my bed” (七月在野，八月在宇，九月在戶，十月蟋蟀入我床下).
Contrasting with Daoism’s view of an emotionless universe, Confucianism posits a world brimming with emotions. This raises the question: why are emotions so deeply embedded in the human heart? The answer lies in their intrinsic existence within the fabric of the world itself, leading to an emotional connection between humans and the universe. Therefore, the core tenet of Confucianism, ge wu (investigating natural objects), is intimately linked with ai wu (emotion towards things), underscoring its emphasis on emotional resonance with the natural world.

Conclusion: Challenges to the Cricket Culture from Modern Society

In recent decades, the cricket culture in China has encountered unprecedented challenges. The rapid pace of urbanization and environmental degradation has posed a significant threat to the natural habitats of crickets. As a result, the number of cricket aficionados has dwindled dramatically. The age-old tradition of cricket-fighting, once a cherished pastime, is now a fading memory for younger generations, who are increasingly drawn towards the allure of a fast-paced urban lifestyle and its modern entertainments. What is even more disheartening is the fact that within the ever smaller community of cricket-fighting aficionados, a substantial number have shifted their focus to gambling rather than pure entertainment. When crickets are viewed merely as tools for making money, stripped of their cultural significance, it signifies the demise of cricket culture. In fact, it is not the crickets that are reduced to instruments in gambling, but the gamblers themselves. Those who instrumentalize the world risk being, in turn, instrumentalized by the world. Thus Confucius wisely cautioned us: “A person of virtue should never become a mere instrument”\(^\text{28}\) (see *Analects of Confucius: Book 2 Weizheng* 論語·為政篇).

One thousand years ago, the cricket culture began to thrive in the southern regions of China, particularly in the capital of the Southern Song dynasty, Lin’an (臨安)—present-day Hangzhou—since these regions were both economically and culturally developed, and the crickets nurtured there were renowned for their robust physical qualities, making them ideal for combat. With the shifting of China’s political, economic and cultural centre to the north, the cricket culture also found its footing in the northern regions. In recent decades, as rapid urbanization has swept through China, especially in the coastal areas of the south, the primary hubs of cricket culture have shifted northwards to the less developed regions. Of these, some regions in Shandong Province—such as Ningyang, Ningjin, and

\(^\text{28}\) 君子不器。
Laoling—have gained the most fame. In these regions a new “cricket economy” has emerged, generating substantial profits that surpass those from traditional agriculture. Every year, commencing in August, cricket aficionados from cities embark on a pilgrimage to these rural areas, seeking their ideal cricket “warriors”. This annual event, spanning nearly two months, yields significant economic benefits for the local cricket catchers, who are otherwise occupied with agricultural production for the rest of the year. During this period the urban cricket fans and the rural cricket catchers—two groups that otherwise seldom cross paths—come together. However, once this annual event concludes, they return to their very different lives, reverting to their usual social roles. This transient meeting mirrors the deep-seated “urban-rural dual structure” (chengxiang eryuan jiegou 城鄉二元結構) that persists in China.

In the past, the trade between urban cricket fans and rural cricket catchers was established based on friendship and mutual trust forged over years. However, the insatiable pursuit of profits through gambling on cricket-fighting has led to the excessive commercialization of cricket culture, empowering those with substantial capital to wield significant influence over the market. This, in turn, has spurred the rise of “cricket brokers” catering to these demands. Consequently, the emotional bonds between cricket catchers and their loyal clientele have been disrupted due to the intervention of these brokers. Those possessing enough capital can effectively exert control over the entire market through the intermediary role played by these brokers (see Mou 2018, 214‒16).

Traditional cricket culture is also facing unprecedented challenges brought about by contemporary science and technology. On the one hand, just as performance-enhancing drugs persist in sports, driven by gambling interests, similar underhand tactics are increasingly being employed in cricket-fighting. Crickets exposed to various performance boosters are colloquially referred to as “doped crickets” (yaoshui chong 藥水蟲). The pace of technological advancement in this realm matches that in human sports, making detection increasingly difficult. On the other hand, with the gradual depletion of high-quality wild cricket resources, the technology of breeding crickets artificially has emerged and undergone continuous refinement. Currently, the cricket market is inundated with such crickets, which are commonly referred to as “white crickets” (baichong 白蟲) or “autumn imitators” (fangqiu 仿秋).29 In their earlier generations these artificially bred crickets could not match the combat prowess of their wild peers. However, their large size and impressive appearance made them attractive for unscrupulous

29 Correspondingly, “black crickets” (heichong 黑蟲) and “rising-in-autumn” (qiuxing 秋興) refer to wild crickets.
traders who mixed them with wild crickets and sold them at inflated prices. Yet, as technology has advanced and breeding expertise improved, these artificially bred crickets are now rivalling—and at times, even outperforming—their wild peers in fights—much like AlphaGo has now triumphed over a human Go champion.

This technological breakthrough implies that in the future access to ideal cricket “warriors” will become virtually limitless, and simultaneously costs will significantly decrease. We might even envision a future where cloning is employed in cricket breeding, or other novel types of artificial crickets, such as cyber-cricket, are created. These lab-cultivated creatures, meticulously bred in controlled environments, will become available throughout the year with guaranteed consistent size and quality, surpassing their wild counterparts as mere autumn insects. But is this truly beneficial for cricket culture? Drawing a conclusion at this juncture might be premature, although personally I am pessimistic. This situation calls to mind Walter Benjamin’s reflections on “art in the age of mechanical reproduction”. It also poses a compelling question: Will the cricket in the age of artificial breeding lose its profound connection to humanity and nature, becoming a mere commodity devoid of its inherent value and reduced to a mass-produced entity? This thought-provoking issue prompts us to reflect not only on the fate of traditional Chinese cricket culture, but also on the broader implications of how these time-honoured traditions can survive and even be revived in today’s technology-driven world.

References


Lishi bentilun & Jimao wu shuo 歷史本體論·己卯五說 (Historical Ontology and Five Essays from 1999). Beijing: Shenghuo dushu xinzhi sanlian shudian.


