

# Aviculture in China

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In March of 2003, Shanghai became my new home. I had hoped to bring my birds from the U.S.A. with me but, unless one has the appropriate paperwork and permits, and unless one's birds are going directly to an animal park or zoo, it is illegal to import birds into China.

## History

Thirty years ago, during the Cultural Revolution, raising or selling any kind of pet in China was considered bourgeois and thus deemed illegal. Now, pets are allowed, the country is prospering, and more and more people are acquiring "Chong Wu" – the Chinese word for "pet" which literally means "Spoiled Thing." Even so, there are a plethora of confusing laws and regulations regarding animals. Furthermore, China is still constantly changing, economically, politically, and socially, so many laws rapidly become obsolete, outdated, or unclear. Sometimes the law enforcement authorities themselves don't know exactly what is legal and what is not anymore.

For example, in China, every pet dog must be registered with the police department. You have to fill out a lengthy application, pay a hefty 5000 RMB (\$650 USD) in fees, and even submit "passport photos" of your dog! If they approve your dog, they will issue you a Dog License, which you must carry, and a Dog Tag, which your dog must wear at all times. If you cannot prove your dog is registered, the police have the authority to confiscate your dog – and you will likely never get it back. Supposedly, you are not allowed to take your dog to any public places... however, I have seen dogs on the streets before. Supposedly, you are only allowed one dog per household . . . but many families in my neighborhood have several dogs. Supposedly, you are not allowed to own a dog over 40 lbs . . . but I was allowed to bring my Doberman Pinscher from the States, and they are selling German Shepherds, Golden Retrievers, and Siberian Huskies left and right at the local dog stores. So what exactly ARE the rules? No one knows for sure.

The same confusion surrounds bird-ownership. Historically, birds are highly regarded in China (whereas dogs have traditionally been viewed as dirty, lowly animals) and are one of the most widely depicted animals in traditional Chinese art. However, even though the Chinese have been keeping birds for thousands of years, birds still do not officially fall into the "pet" category here. Birds are not sold at the same places they sell cats and dogs. Instead, birds are sold alongside flowers, in open-air "Hua Niao Shi Chang"

or "Flower/Bird Markets." This underscores the traditional Chinese attitude towards birds – that they are, like flowers, a decorative element in the home.

## Flower/Bird

I visited my first Flower/Bird Market shortly after I arrived in Shanghai. At these markets, bird sellers are interspersed between various flower shops; some vendors have stalls with roofs and solid walls and others are situated between three walls made of stacked birdcages. The areas with birds have a strong odor, probably from a combination of the different bird feeds, boxes of mealworms, and extensive build-up of bird droppings. The air is usually thick with dander and dust, and unaccustomed visitors often end up needing to sneeze continuously while in the vicinity.

The bird vendors house the various birds for sale in three ways: 1.) Several dozen similar birds packed tightly into crates or metal cages where, in some instances, the height is so low that even the smallest of birds cannot stand up straight; 2.) Singly in circular bamboo cages where sometimes the diameter is so small that the bird inside cannot even open its wings to stretch; or 3.) Chained by the leg (occasionally tied around the chest with a small string) and attached to a metal stand. Every cage or stand is equipped with one small food dish, one small water dish, and a perch when one is available. Dishes are refilled when empty, but rarely taken out and cleaned. I have seen some cages with bird droppings piled so high they form a large mound up and through the floor-grate of the cage.

Bird prices are arbitrarily set by the vendors – usually after they've had a chance to look at you to assess your wealth and to determine whether you are local Chinese, visiting Chinese, or a foreigner – but prices are almost always negotiable. The largest metal cages I have seen for sale in China are 24" (61cm) X 16.5" (42cm) X 14" (36cm); they are painted white and are completely collapsible. I have used very similar cages as bird-carriers in the States. On the other hand, the bamboo cages and the metal stands all have large hooks on top, and both are meant to be hung up somewhere in the home. I have seen many birds in bamboo cages hung on balconies, patios, storefronts, and even on trees in public parks.

A vast majority of the birds sold in these Flower/Bird Markets are housed in small, confined, unsanitary conditions that preclude much movement or flight; however, many of the birds' owners are living in similar conditions themselves. I have been in apartments here equally

cramped and diminutive, and have seen people living in conditions equally dirty and unsanitary. One can only assume that as the country becomes increasingly more modern and prosperous, that the status of aviculture in China will also eventually follow suit.

### Species Availability

By far, the most common types of birds for sale in China are songbirds native to Asia. I have seen all of the following for sale at just one bird vendor: Hwamei (*Garrulax canorus*), Pekin Robins (*Leiothrix lutea*), Short-billed Minivets (*Pericorocotus brevirostis*), Siberian Ruby-throats (*Luscinia calliope*), Blue-throats (*Luscinia svecica*), Blue-winged Minlas (*Minla cyanouroptera*), Fire-tailed Minlas (*Minla ignotincta*), Long-tailed Tits (*Aegithalos caudatus*), Yellow-cheeked Tits (*Parus spilonotus*), Red-headed Tits (*Aegithalos concinnus*), Japanese White-eyes (*Zosterops japonica*), Dusky Willow Warblers (*Phylloscopus fuscatus*), Java Sparrows (*Padda oryzivora*), Spotted Mannikins (*Lonchura punctulata*), and Red Munias (*Estrilda amandara*). This vendor tells me that he sells about 500 of these birds a day! These birds are low-priced, take up very little space, and can be very pleasant to listen to – the ideal for many Chinese households.

On the other hand, if a bird doesn't have a melodious song, then many of the Chinese want a bird that can talk. That is why the Greater Indian Hill Mynah (*Gracula religiosa intermedia*) appears to be the second most common type of bird for sale here. The Chinese name for a mynah is "Niao Ge," meaning "Bird Brother." At the right times of year, you can see crates full of begging mynah babies at the bird markets. The vendors hand rear these babies

with moistened chickenfeed until they are weaned onto their adult diet of dry chickenfeed. Interestingly enough, this is one of the only kinds of birds that the Chinese hand rear on any regular basis.

Then there are the parrots. Technically, it is illegal to sell parrots in China because they are all considered "Protected Species." But, of course, parrots are still being sold. Some vendors are wary about selling these birds, while others don't believe the original laws are relevant anymore. In fact, there are bird vendors and police alike who do not know that Budgerigars (*Melopsittacus*), Cockatiels (*Nymphicus*), or lovebirds (*Agapornis*) are classified as parrots. Thus, there are a variety of these birds available at most markets (although I have only seen the normal grey and lutino mutations of Cockatiels for sale here). The larger parrots are less common, but these are the species I have seen relatively frequently, in decreasing order: Eclectus, White Cockatoo, Lesser Sulphur-crested Cockatoo, Sulphur-crested Cockatoo, Derbyan Parakeet, Slaty-headed Parakeet, Alexandrine Parakeet, Blue-fronted Amazon, Red Lories, and Black-capped Lories. I occasionally see African Greys, Rosellas, Conures, and other species of Lories and Lorikeets. One vendor has told me that he sells one or two large parrots a day, which is saying a lot – given that he is charging nearly U.S. prices for them.

Whether hookbill or softbill, all of these birds were most likely wild-caught. Most bird vendors in China do not have the equipment, know-how, money, space, or incentive to captive-breed these birds. Buying wild-caught birds to resell has just been too cheap, convenient, and easy for them to want to do it any other way. However, as China has prospered and more and more people have been looking for "things to spoil," the traditional Chinese view of "birds-as-ornaments" has slowly been changing to "birds-as-pets." I believe this will have an immense impact on the status of Chinese aviculture over the next few years. ❖

## Facts About Birds

- South America's Harpy Eagles eat monkeys. The birds build twig platforms in the treetops where they lay their eggs.

- To survive, most birds must eat at least half their own weight in food each day.

- The average minimal speed of birds in order to remain aloft in flight is reported to be about 16 feet per second, or about 11 miles per hour.

- Wandering albatrosses spread their wings, clack bills, and shake heads in a ritual dance. Bonds between courting birds may last the whole of a 50-year lifetime.

- The eyes of some birds weigh more than their brain. Likewise, their bones weigh less than their feathers.

- While awake, hummingbirds must eat at least every 30 minutes or they will starve to death. They need to eat 2.5 times their body weight every day, this takes hundreds of flowers everyday.

- While the bones of most airborne birds are hollow for lightness, penguins are endowed with solid bones for ballast when they dive, sometimes to 850 feet or more.

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