



# Aviculture in China

by Robert G. Travnicek, M.D.  
Wilber, Nebraska

Through all Chinese history birds are mentioned prominently in prose and poetry. They are seen in artwork of all dynasties depicted both in the wild and in confinement as objects of wonder to be admired and cultivated. Indeed, *Birds in Literature* is just such a book. The author is a famous scholar. He describes eleven types of birds, their range, behavior, and the methods of production by citing cases and stories in classic Chinese literature.

So important was the keeping of birds in Chinese culture that a book, *Principal Ways To Govern The People, With Annotations*, was written in the northern Wei Dynasty 386-534 A.D. It was written between 533-544 A.D. and is the most ancient book on agriculture and related topics. Some of the chapters concern the breeding of birds as a method of pacifying and constructively fulfilling the desires of the common man.

Shortly following this work, *A Collection of Ancient Literature* from the Tang Dynasty 618-907 A.D. was written in the form of an ancient encyclopedia with some articles on birds and their merits as an integral part of society. This list could go on forever if books were written on stone but as most of the world's ancient literature has sadly been destroyed, only the artwork and these few manuscripts survived. I dare say that 30% to 40% of all Chinese art I have viewed contains some references to birds as objects of admiration and value.

This topic has fascinated this author for over 20 years since studying history and pre-history of China as a part of a general anthropologic background. As luck would have it, in 1983 we were privileged to visit China and spend time in five major cities. We were astounded to see a beautiful gilded ornate cage filled with budgerigars in the middle of our hotel upon arriving in Canton. The

varieties represented in this cage included grey wings, recessive pieds, yellow faces, opalines, and red eyes in addition to the normal varieties. These must have been present in China prior to the revolution of 1948 since China was virtually cut off from the rest of the modern world until the recent past.

In every city birds were seen repeatedly in captivity; many were carried

about early in the morning, by aged and obviously retired men, in single cages made of bamboo. They were taken out for an 'airing'—probably each and every morning. It is apparent that these birds are true love objects of each of their owners. Lively discussions could be heard concerning the most minute detail of each bird and the cage that confined him. Most of the cages are

## 中国鸟类学会

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THE ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF CHINA

7 Zhongguancun Lu, Haidian, Beijing, China

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Dear Dr. Travnicek:

Thank you very much for sending me the bi-monthly magazine, the A.F.A. Watchbird. I have received every issue since Dec-Jan 1983-84 (Vol. 10, No. 6), and found it very interesting and useful to me. The latest issue of April-May, 1985 has also been delivered to my office recently.

With best wishes,

Sincerely yours,

Yao-kuang Tan  
(Secretary-General)

very old. It has been said that some of these cages are worth a hundred times more than the birds they contain, and have been handed down through centuries of conflict and famine. They survived to the present and attest to the ultimate worth the Chinese place on their birds in a society which is now only slightly more than subsistence, and this only in the past few years.

The most recent onslaught to birds came in two forms in China. First, one of the seven plagues decreed by Chairman Mao was birds (more properly translated as sparrows). As communication and dialect are two of China's great and current problems, in the people's confusion and zeal to please their beloved Chairman, many wild birds were destroyed. It may well be inferred that those keeping birds were, at least temporarily, under scrutiny for sharing the ever-precious food with vermin—as birds were then classified.

Second, during the Cultural Revolution, pressure came to bear on all those with bourgeois appetites for the decadent. Birds came into disfavor along with medicine, dentistry, fine arts and the like (pretty good company, as far as I'm concerned). But, typical of the Chinese, their traditional values survive even insane persecution.

Currently, as far as can be determined, aviculture in China is about to reach a plain which is reminiscent of the great dynasties. It lacks a single ingredient — *communication*. This may seem a small matter to you, but think how you learn all the critically important information about the birds you love without having to make each mistake over and over again.

Unfortunately, in China there is no organized aviculture, although I personally believe that something will be done about this in the next year, as the government sees that these people and this activity pose no harm to them and in fact it is in their best interest to promote avicultural activities. So, for now, it is the incessant reinvention of the wheel and the propagation of local folklore that greases the machinery of aviculture in China.

Personally, I have pointed this out to several officials in a position to do something about it and intuition leads me to believe action will be taken soon. Oddly, one person can make a difference even in a country of more than one billion people. There is precedence for the formation of such a general avicultural society as a national dove society now exists and may be contacted by writing Shanghai Ornamental Plants

and Pets Corp., 130 Zhi Zao Ju Road, Shanghai, Peoples Republic of China. In fact, most information concerning the keeping of birds in China can be obtained there. However, letters are infuriatingly slow and frequently not forthcoming.

The Ornamental Plant and Pet Store is a focal point for bird activities in Shanghai, especially if foreigners want information of any kind. But if you want to see birds one must go to the bird market off Yenan Road and you will see hundreds if not thousands of birds from the common budgie to kingfishers for sale. The booths range in size from a few birds to many. One wonders where these people get their birds as the average home is a one room cold water flat with no heat.

Communication with the bird market people is done through an interpreter. The Chinese are so interested to see someone new taking pictures and asking questions that one quickly becomes the curiosity himself. The market is one block long and is abustle with activity. One would think that these types of congregations are present in every major community in China. However, Shanghai is different. By recent accounts there are 10,000 people keeping and breeding birds in Shanghai and tens of thousands of so-called bird lovers who either have a pet bird or would if they had the means.

These bird lovers hold court early in the morning (5:30 a.m. until 8:00 a.m., or so) in the local parks to sun their birds in a somewhat ritualistic way, with the same people going to the same parks on a daily basis. These are mostly old, retired men and some boys who seem to be in the learning process. They socialize much as we do in our bird show activities. They display their birds, almost exclusively soft bills (large thrushes, even a medium sized owl), all in small ornate wooden cages with covers for transportation to and from the parks each day. A few canaries are also seen in these parks.

There is said to be a large organized bird exhibition in Shanghai each year in April or May. This seems to be organized around the Bird Care and Breeding Center, Shanghai Zoo, Hongqiao Road, Shanghai, Peoples Republic of China. Letters sent to these people asking for information are mostly ignored but this would seem to be one's only way to access the world of aviculture that surrounds the zoo.

The people in the zoo itself are experts in the breeding of cranes and pheasants. They frequently go on extended collecting trips to Tibet and

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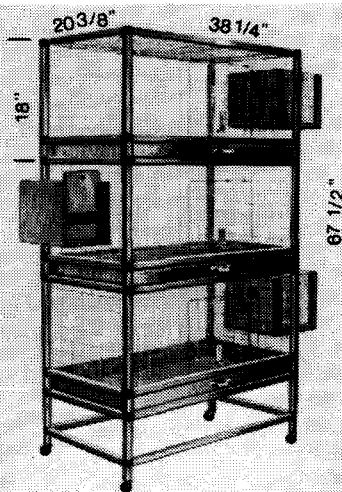
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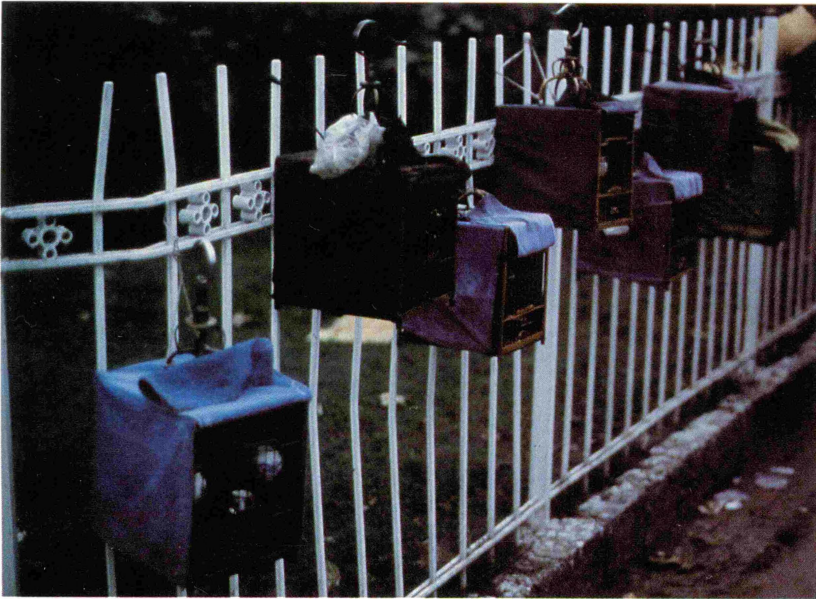
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*"The line up." Bird cages hung on a fence in the People's Park, Shanghai. There were about 200 such cages with their birds enjoying the 6:00 a.m. air.*



*"Two for the price of one." A vendor at the Shanghai bird market.*



*A happy bird seller in the open air bird market in Shanghai.*

*"Bird seed, anyone?" Shanghai bird market.*



*A proud bird owner: "How do you like my bird?"*





*Breeding budgies in a window in Canton.*



*In Xiam a twelve-year-old girl owned these canaries here seen in a back alley amidst abject poverty.*



*In "in-house" pigeon loft in Shanghai.*



*A street view of several stalls in the Shanghai market.*



*Breeding budgies in a window next to the government store in Xiam. There are four babies.*

*A typical scene on Main Street in Xiam. Note the "aviary" for thrushes and other soft-bills. These scenes are often seen throughout China.*





other remote areas of China seeking rare and one-of-a-kind pheasants. These are added to their breeding collections in what can only be described (by our standards) as small, primitive enclosures. Nonetheless, it is easy to see that these people are dedicated to the goals of preserving threatened species through the use of avicultural techniques.

At the zoo the birds on display are mostly of the softbill family and tend to be Chinese in origin. A few large hook-bills and other African birds were present in their collection, but as China is in dire need of hard currency, the acquisition of these is slow and generally through trading with zoos in the West.

The other branch of government which might be concerned with aviculture is the Academy of Sciences in Beijing. I have visited the academy for a day with very good interpretation. I presented a detailed slide lecture to the officers of the Academy of Sciences concerning most of the sophisticated avicultural operations in the United States. It was my feeling that they were dumbfounded and highly interested. They have no contact with aviculturists in China nor any real interest. It seems to me that in time China will definitely organize their bird breeding activities and the Academy is frequently mentioned as the focal point of this activity.

For those interested in spurring their interest, I recommend you write Mr. Tan Yao-Kuang, Secretary-General of Ornithological Society of China, Head of the Ornithological Section, Institute for Zoology, Institute of Zoology, Academy Sinica, 7 Zhongguan-cun Lu, Haitien, Beijing, Peoples Republic of China. The president of the Society is a world-famous ornithologist and zoologist Prof. Tso-Hsin Cheng. He has been mentioned prominently by Americans dealing with the Chinese in the trading and acquisition of birds for export. He seems to be the man to contact with all the connections to get the job done.

The third segment of China's avicultural life is the commercial sale of birds and related products in state-run stores. In Peking, at the "Friendship Store," I saw a cage of perhaps 40-50 budgies for sale to tourists only. These stores are present in every large city for the express purpose of selling goods to foreigners for export. How the Chinese thought people might get their birds through the flight and subsequent customs at home is beyond me. It is indicative of the fact that the government is in the business of selling birds on a larger-than-ordinary scale.

In Shanghai, there are two large bird stores. The Shanghai Plants and Birds Shop, 364 Nanjing Xi Lu, Shanghai, Peoples Republic of China. The second is somewhat smaller, Husngpuqu Flowers and Birds Shop, Xizang Dong Lu at Guangdong Lu, Shanghai, Peoples Republic of China. Both these shops sell birds, seed and cages.

There do not seem to be any avicultural efforts at the stores. One is led to believe their birds come from the thousands of small breeders that dot every city in China.

Prices for these birds range from 50 cents - \$1.00 for untrained budgerigars; \$3.00 to \$20.00 for canaries, dependent on color and 'singing talents'. Zebra finches are \$3.00 per pair—actually quite a sum for people who average \$30-\$50 in wages per month. Parrots, when available, range from \$25-\$50 each. Wild birds are plentiful and frequently seen in local markets at around \$10 per pair. I was bartering on a rural road one day for a pair of zosterops. The asking price began at \$10.00 for the pair and ended at \$2.50 as I showed lack of interest.

China is *not* without its large commercial bird exporting companies. Three which were mentioned to me are as follows.

The Chinese Local Production Import and Export Co., Hunan Province, 373 Hang Sha Dadao, Kwangchow, Peoples Republic of China.

Another company operating in the same area is the China National Native Produce and Animal By Products, Import and Export Corp., Hunan Provincial Branch, 103 Wu Yih Road E., Chansha, Peoples Republic of China; cable "TUHSU" Changsha. I have had contact with the above company. They have indicated a willingness to sell whatever birds I could afford and had the ability to deliver them to an international airport with the proper credentials for export. I saw a beautiful color brochure from the latter offering birds from parakeets to rare softbills.

There is an agency representing China in the sale of their birds to the rest of the world which is based in Hong Kong. It is the Teck Soon Hong Ltd., 37-39 Connaught Rd., West Hong Kong; cable: Stillon, Hong Kong.

Finally, observations lead one to believe that birds are still important to the Chinese. Almost everywhere one travels in China you see birds. They are hanging from windows in every city I visited. They are hung outside shops by their proud owners. Once in a dark, dirt-covered back alley in Zian, I saw

three canaries in cages hung out to air. I was immediately surrounded by several people all talking at once. When I inquired as to the owner, a man went back into the house and returned with a 12-13 year old girl who indicated that the birds were hers. She was elated that someone had come to see her birds. She was as proud of those birds as anyone I have ever seen.

In the same area, I observed two pairs of budgerigars breeding in a cage hung above an open doorway. One pair had youngsters just coming out and the hen of the other pair was observed going in and out of the other box. I saw at least two other instances of birds breeding in cages hung from windows during my trip, although I really wasn't looking for them.

In addition, several pigeon lofts were observed in downtown Shanghai. I was led to believe that these lofts were a common occurrence. And that the birds were kept for food. Time did not permit a study of this aspect of aviculture.

These birds are fed millet, ground soya beans, hard boiled eggs and, of course, meal worms for the softbills. Only one book has been published in China concerning the breeding of birds. Currently it is out of print. Fortunately I was able to obtain a copy and currently have it under translation. It now only awaits a publisher to be available to the western aviculture world.

Last year in the *China Daily* (a widely-read English publication originating in Shanghai), an article appeared on the front page concerning a young man who had devoted his life to the breeding and training of birds. I have written the paper in an attempt to contact this person, no reply. Anyone reading this article and wanting more information and perhaps contact with people breeding birds in China should consider writing a letter to the "*China Daily*" — Shanghai edition, Shanghai, Peoples Republic of China. If you choose to follow through on this interest I recommend that in your letter you describe your own interest in birds and share your own knowledge and advice on breeding birds before you ask for any information from the Chinese.

In conclusion, my feelings are mixed with regards to Chinese aviculturists. They have so little to work with in terms of equipment and support. Worse yet, no affinity groups exist to organize and promote the techniques of aviculture. Still, the love of birds is profound and ubiquitous. We in the west must continue to make contact and stimulate dialogue with the Chinese. ●



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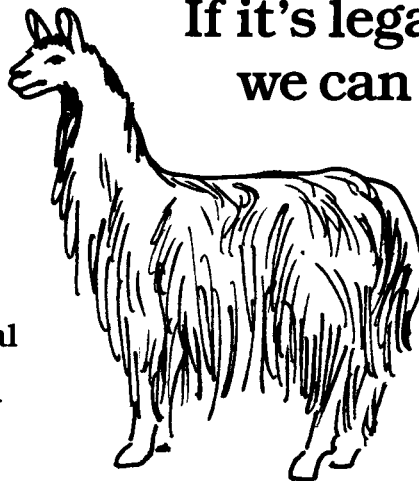
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