

Chinese new year: Fighting tradition marks year of the horse

500-year tradition sees stallions clash in bouts over mares in mountain villages across southern China

- theguardian.com, Monday 3 February 2014 04.44 GMT



Two stallions fight during a traditional Chinese New Year horse fighting competition for the Year of the Horse in Tiantou Miao village in Rongshui, China. Photograph: Xinhua/Landov/Barcroft Media
Hooves clash in mid-air, a stallion bites his opponent while delighted spectators cheer wildly - in southern China some saw in the Year of the Horse by watching the animals fight.

For the residents of Tiantou, a remote village in the Guangxi region, the 500-year-old tradition which pits male horses against each other in a fight over a female was the only way to kick off the Lunar New Year.

"Without horse fighting it wouldn't feel like a new year," said Pan Jianming, whose horse Little Black reared-up on its hind legs and bit its opponent's neck to scoop victory in a competition this weekend.

"He stood up and hit the other horse straight away," Pan, a 31-year-old air conditioner repairman, said.

"If he likes the female horse, it doesn't matter how much pain he's in, he won't run away," he added, his black and white shirt stained with blood which dripped from a gash on his horse's nose.

"We have medicine to treat his injuries, and he will gradually get better," added Pan, who claimed a champion's prize of 500 yuan (\$80).

Fifteen animals fought in bouts which saw horses jump into the air with their front hooves spinning before crashing down on their opponents and biting their head or neck, sometimes drawing hair and blood.

Horse fighting competitions held by the Miao – an ethnic group living in mountain areas of southern China and southeast Asia – date back more than five centuries, according to locals.

The first battle is said to have been held to settle a dispute between two brothers who both hoped to marry the same woman.

But the fights, held in dozens of small mountain villages in southern China every year with prizes of up to 10,000 yuan, have been condemned by animal rights groups.

In 2010, Hong-Kong based Animals Asia called horse-fighting a "horrific spectacle", accusing the scraps of causing "abuse and suffering to animals in the name of entertainment".

The stallions are encouraged to fight by the presence of a female horse, who is kept metres away from the clashing pairs by a villager armed with little more than a stick.

The horse which successfully defends its position close to the female is declared the winner.

Animals Asia has said the female horses are sometimes "induced into season through the injection of hormones".

In Tiantou, hundreds of spectators gathered just metres away from the battling equines - without any barriers separating them from the action.

The animals squared up to each other like boxers before unleashing a flurry of backwards-directed kicks and bites. Most did not appear to sustain any visible injuries.

Onlookers scrambled to escape when pairs of bucking mares periodically galloped towards them.

Others shouted: "Fight, Fight!" as the animals clashed but most insisted the contest was not cruel.

"Sometimes the horses will be injured but it won't be very serious, they have thick skin," said Di Zhai, a 16-year-old spectator. "

Some travellers from Chinese cities, which have seen a rise in concern for animal welfare in recent years alongside a growth in pet-ownership, seemed more concerned.

"It's horrible to see the horses get injured, I don't like to watch," said 14-year-old Ma Jiasui, who had travelled to the village from a nearby province as part of a tourist group.

However, she added: "It's the Year of the Horse, and my surname means horse, so its special to see horse fighting this year."

The contests are held year-round but peak following the start of the Lunar New Year - the most important annual festival in China, which fell on Friday.