A Shorter Version of the Re-dating and Re- Interpretation of the Pre-Han Confucian Go Passages

By Peter Shotwell © 2010

This is a short version of the recently revised Appendix V of my 'Speculations on the Origins of Go' article in the e-library of the American Go Association www.usgo.org/bobhighlibrary. It is an adaptation of a new section in the update of my first book, Go! More Than a Game *(Tuttle 2003-10), due out in late 2010*.

Introduction

Two characters, *bo* and *yi*, were used to designate board games by the writers of the oldest go literature. As will be examined more fully at the conclusion of this article, it has generally been thought that the first referred to *liu bo*, a dice game, and that the second referred to go. The two terms appeared in three pre-Han Confucian Classics, and for more than two thousand years the general opinion of historians has been that the authors 'thought little' of the games, as, indeed, a superficial reading would seem to indicate. These negative feelings have been confirmed by many early comments in regard to *liu bo*, but that has not been the case with go. In fact, a very different picture emerges if the real dating of the passages and their contexts is considered. The conclusion seems to be that the early Confucians were only using go to illustrate the complexities of the proper duties of filial piety. These revealing attitudes also throw some light onto the possible development of early go.

Considering the dating of the go passages, some scholars believed the authenticity of 548 BC for the existence of go playing that was recorded in the *Zuo Zhuan,* a history of the state of Qi and surrounding areas in northeast China. This early analysis led some to posit a dubious development based on divinatory practices that began in the Zhou dynasty sometime after c. 1046 BC. (See Appendix III for details). Others doubted this date and theorized that go came much later. In any case, the next go passage seemed to appear in the *Analects* of Confucius and so was dated by some to be 'before' 479 BC, when he died. Again, others thought the

game came later. The two mentions supposedly by *Mencius* were assumed to be written 'sometime before' 289 BC when he passed on. Still other contentious writers have doubted that *yi* referred to go and that the game dates only from the Han period after 206 BC.

A Re-dating and Re-Interpretation

However, a 1998 re-dating of early Chinese literature by E. Bruce Brooks and his wife Taeko in *The Original Analects* and on their Warring States Project website (www.umass.edu/wsp) has made it possible to speculate with some hope of accuracy about when and why these first mentions of go were written. (1)

The Brooks achieved their results by demonstrating changes in the emphases and characters of the two Sages as shown in the texts of the 'One Hundred Schools,' and matching these up with verifiable social, political and historical events. There has been controversy over the Brooks' dating, but not about the passages that contain the remarks on go, and the Brooks kindly reviewed my original article for accuracy.

The Brooks date the *Zuo Zhuan* entry to 330-312 BC and demonstrate that it reflected the writers' 4th century BC views of 6th century BC culture. Thus, the basis of the story existed, and who knows if was around since the writers—one who may have been Mencius—had better sources than us, but in any case, it seems that the scene was constructed to simply illustrate the conflicting duties of filial piety that a minister owed either to his king or his father.

Ning He is dealing with his ruler not carefully, as he would at go [yi]. *How is it possible for him to escape disaster? If a* [go—yi] *player lifts his stone without definite object, he will not conquer his opponent. How much more must this be the case when one tries to take a king without a definite object? He is sure not to escape ruin. Alas that by one movement a family whose heads have been ministers for nine generations should be extinguished!* (2)

His father's ghost had laid a heavy burden on him to overthrow the king and he struggled with the consequences, made the wrong choice, and was killed for his efforts. (The full story is in Appendix V).

As buttressed by the new dating and an examination of the contexts, it seems that the other three passages were written with the same intent, not by Confucius or Mencius, but by 'staff writers' of the Confucian schools in the neighboring state of Lu before a rival Confucian thinker closed them in 249 BC. Looking closely at the contexts of the writings within the evolving thoughts of the schools (and the apparent increase in go-playing skill), it becomes apparent that go was not necessarily disparaged, but, in imitation of the *Zuo Zhuan*, merely used as a tool to examine the complex and often contradictory duties of filial piety.

Following the *Zuo Zhuan*, it is surprising that the earliest employment of go was from the writers of the *Mencius*, and not from the writers of the *Analects* of Confucius. This first 'Mencius' statement appeared c. 280 BC, at least a decade after its purported author's death. Next, the 'Confucius' mention appeared in c. 270 BC, more than two hundred years after that Sage's demise, and the second 'Mencius' comment followed in c. 260 BC.

Because the writers of the *Mencius* tended to follow the thoughts of the *Analects*, the Confucian passage will be looked at first:

The Master said, "Hard is it to deal with who will stuff himself with food the whole day, without applying his mind to anything good! Are there not gamesters [*bo*] *and* [go—yi] players*? To be one of these would still be better than doing nothing at all."*

The *Analects* were written in AB form so it couples with the preceding passage that discusses the suitable length of mourning for one's parents. It concludes that one year of mourning is better than no mourning, but not as good as three years. In other words, it seems to say that doing 'something' is better than doing 'nothing.' Playing go is better than not performing the rites, or if the parents are alive, better than only responding to one's desires like an animal and ignoring them.

But this passage also seems to be a dig at the Primitive Daoists who did not think that doing 'something' was always better than doing 'nothing.' Doing something was what the Sages did when they separated us from the original 'days of perfect nature' when everyone was equal and all walked around 'patting their bellies,' or—once that had happened—by serving a bad ruler (as Confucius did in this section).

The first Mencius quote, too, deepens in meaning when the context is considered. A disciple asks 'Mencius' why he is friendly with a certain

government official, which makes the man suspect in this Confucian's eyes. The Sage explains:

Now between Chang and his father there arose disagreement, he, the son, reproving his father, to urge him to what was good. To urge one another to what is good by reproofs is the way of friends. But such urging between father and son is the greatest injury to the kindness, which should prevail between them.

But, most important, Chang is not guilty of the five unfilial acts, the second of which . . .

. . . is gambling [bo] *and* [go—yi] *playing, and being fond of wine, without attending to the nourishment of his parents.*

Turning the sentence around, it is apparent that without attending one's parents, gambling and go are unfilial acts. In other words, addictive playing, gambling and drinking leading to neglect of parents, is the focus of attention, not moderate play.

Twenty years later, in *Mencius Book VI*, which many critics have called the most developed and explicit piece of discussion that early Confucianism provides, there is suddenly real meat to chew on the bones of go. Unfortunately, no one has taken the time to digest it. The most influential analyses that have changed the way we think about Mencius and his analogical arguments by writers such as A.C. Graham and Kwong-loi Shun carefully pick apart this book, passage by passage, but they both skip over the one that discusses go.

Book VI opens with 'Mencius' arguing with a probable Daoist who seems to think that human nature is neither good nor bad, and that it is external influences that mold it either way. The Mencian writer defends the position that human nature is naturally good, but can be persuaded to do bad things. He uses a whole series of analogies, most notably of a mountain whose forests have been chopped down. 'Is its denuded state its true nature?' he asks. This is followed shortly by:

Now [go—yi] *playing is but a small art, but without his whole mind being given and his will bent to it, a man cannot succeed at it.* [go—Yi] *Qiu is the best go player in all the kingdom. Suppose that he is teaching two*

men to play. The one gives to the subject his whole mind and bends to it all his will, doing nothing but listening to [Go—Yi] *Qiu. The other, though he seems to be listening to him, has his whole mind running on a swan which he thinks is approaching, and wishes to bend his bow, adjust the string to the arrow, and shoot it. Although he is learning along with the other, he does not come up to him. Why?*

Readers would have known that the previous employments of go concerned filial piety. Thus, they would have seen the analogy of listening to one's parents and obeying them, while appreciating how the use of go also expands this basic tenent to say something about the fundamental nature of man and how it serves as an illustration of the evolving complexity of Confucian thought.

At first glance, the Student-Who-Has-His-Mind-On-Other-Things might seem to be an oblique reference to those Primitive Daoists who wanted to do nothing but pat their bellies. But there also seems to be a reference to those who have not properly studied the Way because they have not listened to their teacher. Outwardly, they may look as if they have been following the Path, but inwardly, they are as lost to the rest of us as the mountain that once had its forests.

Thus, in both the *Analects* and the books of the *Mencius* that were written in this period, (and which was reflected in the changing curriculum of the Lu Confucian School), there is an increased emphasis on *study*—in other words, an increased focus on the importance of external influences on the basically good natures of people. (Xun Zi, who closed the two Confucian schools in 249 BC after Lu was completely subjugated by Qi and whose doctrine became dominant in subsequent Confucian thought, seems to have believed the opposite—that man's basic nature is bad—but this can also be molded by study. See Appendix V for an extended discussion.)

In short, go seems to be becoming respected enough to illustrate the higher principles of evolving Mencian thought, which began to promote the idea of man as a rational being, capable of independence from the gods and Heaven. The discussions of 'external vs. internal' and 'what-appears-to-be vs. what-really-is' have been amplified in this go passage by the idea that students, study, and a teacher will help mold good hearts. In ancient China, this was the organ that was swayed by Confucian moral arguments.

***Bo, Yi* and the Early History of Go**

For a long time, a question has hung over any discussion of the Confucian passages about go as to whether *bo* referred to *liu bo*, a dice game and *yi* referred to go. One author writing in 2006 in the prestigious *Journal of the American Oriental Society* even tried to demonstrate that the phrase *bo yi* referred only to *liu bo*. (3)

However, the Han writer Yang Xiong (53 BC–18 AD) wrote in *Fang Yan*, the earliest 'local speech dictionary,' that in the South, go was called *qi* but in the Qi-Lu area, it was called *yi*. It seems significant that it was in this small area that the only four mentions of the game in that period were written and that these were used for a purpose.

Also, the *Zuo Zhuan* and second *Mencius* passage use *yi* both in the beginning and in Master Qiu's name, while the first *Mencius* and the *Analects* passages use *bo yi*. Using *bo yi* as a bound noun-noun—i.e. two games—makes sense where it was used, but would have made no sense if used in the other two. Also, in the extensive literature about *liu bo*, (whose rules are still unknown), there is no mention of someone picking up a piece and pondering over strategies. And that passage is still the source of a go-related proverb in modern China.

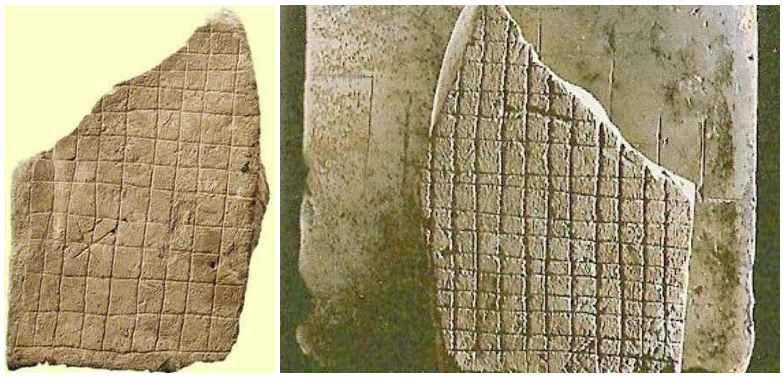
Moreover, it seems unlikely that these writers would use a game the Confucians condemned for the drinking and gambling that it inspired, as a look at the Wikipedia article or its appearance along with the sing-song girls in the wild party of the 4th century BC poem *The Summoning of the Soul* will testify to. If the writers of the *Mencius* frowned on such unfettered non-ritual behavior, why would they use *liu bo* as an exemplar in the second passage? It would certainly confuse readers! (4)

Two Immortals caught up in a frantic game of liu bo

Thus, it seems that the only reason for calling *yi* anything but go is the lack of written descriptions and archeological evidence. However, in Appendices IV and V of the *Speculations* article, I constructed some arguments that possibly could explain this. In these passages, and at least one earlier one (written by a Mohist c. 350 BC—see Appendix V), *yi* is never explained, which can only mean that everyone knew about it and probably respected it, as indicated by the first and last Confucian passage. However, it seems that the c. 500-300 BC Daoists of the Dark School (see the main article) such as Sun Zi and their Mohist counterparts recognized no great strategies in the game, so perhaps it was a pastime that was regarded like we regard checkers—every child learns to play, but who talks of strategies and deep meanings? There are master checker players, but philosophers certainly don't write about them, or bother to explain the rules, especially considering the times of heavy war and the burning of the books that succeeded the go writings before the Han pacified the empire. The first mention of go after that period comes from around 141 BC and is highly favorable, and reflects an increase in skill ('To play but one game of go [qi] is insufficient to know wisdom'). (5) Coincidentally, this is the same date—only 120 years after the second 'Mencius' passage—as the oldest go board yet discovered.

And the reason that so few go sets and so many *liu bo* sets have been found is perhaps because *liu bo* was a divine game that was also used for divination, while this never happened with go (See Appendix III). Thus, an uncomplicated game like small board go, played on perishable and disposable boards or on the dirt with pebbles (or beans) would likely not have survived.

Below is the one that did since it was scratched out on a roof tile in a guard house of the tomb of Emperor Han Jing Di (188-141 BC). The other side was illustrated in the Oct. 2001 *National Geographic* and has at least 19 lines, so could the one on the left be for 13x13? It is 7 inches at its widest point—larger than modern portable magnetic go boards.



Thus, it is reasonable to suppose a continuum of playing and an increase of skill in what was essentially a child's game played by adults, (much like our baseball and football whose much more recent origins are also shrouded in mystery). This game and the mystique that surrounded it started to bloom in the Han, despite occasional honest denouncements and the efforts of hack writers in the pay of the emperor to denigrate the game in the Yao myths, (as described in the main article). Play accelerated during the Three Kingdoms, was praised in poetry by c. 600 AD, and emerged as a highly technical skill that represented the highest ideals of the amalgam of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism that occurred around 1000 AD. This was when the first go strategy books appeared and popular knowledge of the mysteries of the game began to spread, a trend that has continued to the present.

Footnotes

(1) *The Original Analects: Sayings of Confucius and His Successors*; E. Bruce Brooks and A. Taeko Brooks; Columbia University Press; 1998

(2) All translations are from James Legge's *The Chinese Classics.* There are many versions, both in print and as e-downloads. Page numbers vary.

(3) Y. Edmund Lien; 'Wei Yao's Disquisition on *boyi'; Journal of the American Oriental Society* Vol. 126, No. 4 (Oct.—Dec., 2006 p. 567)

(4) For comments on the utter dislike of *liu bo* by the Confucians, its methods of play and its role in divination, see Y. Zheng 'Preliminary Remarks on the Games of Liubo and Saixi' and 'Divining from the Game

Liubo: An Explanation of A Han Wooden Slip,' both in the *China Archaelogy and Art Digest* issue on Fortune, Games and Gaming, Vol. 4, No. 4, October-December 1999. Available in .pdf from the Chess and Games Library at http://history.chess.free.fr/library.htm.

(5) Liu An; *Huai Nan Zi* (*Book of the Prince of Huai Nan*)

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