WE PLAYED LIUBO LAST NIGHT!

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A MYSTERIOUS GAME

Board games, like animal species or human languages, can become extinct. Examples of board games which have disappeared and whose origins remain obscure are numerous. Among them, the Chinese game Liubo is one of the most intriguing. This game was played in ancient China, at least as early as the Zhanguo era of the 4th century BCE and maybe as early as the 7th century BCE. Liubo is mentioned in the *Analects* of Confucius, who lived around 500 BCE. Apparently it was very popular during the Han dynasties (207 BCE-220 CE), when the best players were well respected and belonged to an organization. The game later vanished, probably outshone by the Chinese adaptation of Nard (a Backgammon ancestor) coming from India and Persia when the Tang rulers (618-907 CE) reopened the Silk Road. The very last reference dates from the Song time (before 1162 CE), where it was referred to simply as an "old game."

Archaeological evidence is not scarce, and there are quite a few literary references. The *Gu bo jing* (*The Book of the Old Stick Game*) from the Later Han times (23-220 CE) described the rules. Unfortunately this work is lost, and its content is only known from later references. The original rules are nowhere else described. Especially intriguing is the board, whose pattern is found in other artefacts, such as the famous "TLV" mirrors, for example. The board's cultural significance is fairly well explained and understood, but it still resists delivering any clue on how it could have been used for play! Interested readers are invited to refer to the excellent reconstruction in Röllicke[1] (1999), which I used for support for this article. Many other theories have been advanced to explain what kind of game Liubo was. Murray (1951) does not refer to it directly by name[2], but seems to evoke it with "*Luk tsut k'i*" or the Six-Men Game, which he presents as an alignment game much like Morris. For many, Liubo is the forerunner of Xiangqi, the Chinese Chess[i]. Today, most authors and specialists, for example, Lhôte[3] (1994), Parlett[4] (1999), and Li[5] (1998), believe, with reason, that Liubo was probably a chance game, a sort of race game with captures.

The Liubo board and its classical "TLV" pattern, which is also found on Han bronze mirrors.

Following on from the fundamental work done by scholars, orientalists, and archaeologists, this article presents merely the viewpoint of a game player. The purpose is simple: game playing. I propose a speculative reconstruction of the rules in the same spirit as those done for the Egyptian and Mesopotamian games of Antiquity. Although the resulting rules are entirely artificial, my hope was that they would lead to some interesting observations. My first step was to make a board and the necessary pieces and sticks. Then, every point of the rules was carefully play tested. Surprisingly, the results delighted my partners and me.

EQUIPMENT

The board is characterized by the "TLV" pattern that is also found on bronze mirrors from the Han dynasty. The "V's" can be recognized in the four corners of the board. The "L's" are the hooks in the middles of the sides. Their orientation seems to suggest counter-clock wise movement, as for many other race games, such as Indian Pachisi, Korean Yut, and

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[i] This presentation is often made on Internet sites presenting the history of Xiangqi. I think it is exaggerated, however, some influence of Liubo on Xiangqi should not be discarded too quickly (marking of the board, presence of a river, presence of a King and 5 Pawns, …)

so on. The "V's" and "L's" are distributed on the periphery and cut the periphery into 12 angled segments (*qudao*), of which those in the corners are angled. These segments have been related to the *shenggou* cosmological system and the foundations of the Chinese calendar. To this system also belong the North-South and East-West axes of the board. The "T's" surround the large central square, and they could be used to indicate supplementary stations. The *Fangyan* from Yang Xiong (53 BCE-18 CE.) confirms that stones were moved on angles and line segments over the board. In addition to the line segments, there are four small circles. Finally, the central area, the "water", is reminiscent of Earth encircled by the sky with its constellations. This was most probably a goal to be reached.

All this allows at least 28 numbered stations distributed around the center of the board, plus an extra station in the central square. The number 28 has great astronomical resonance as it is the basis of the lunar calendar and is the number of Ancient Chinese zodiacal constellations. The board was also used for divination, as is the case for many other race games in other civilizations. A wooden slip was excavated in a tomb at Yinwan in 1993 presenting a Liubo-like diagram along with a chart of characters addressing several oracles. A full explanation of the divining process has been recently proposed in Zeng[6] (1999). Although there is no reason for the moving sequence to be identical for both the game and the divination, Zeng's work does shed some light on the allowed positions and the paths between them.
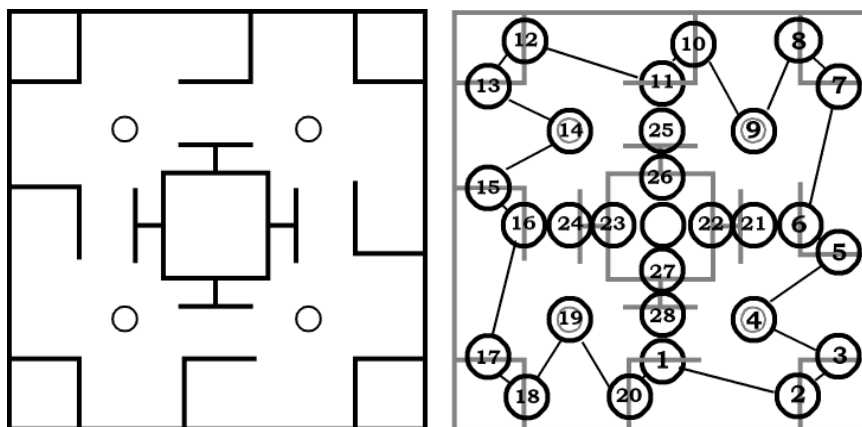
An attempt to see a circuit on the Liubo pattern.

The game material comprised two sets of stones, or *qi*—six white and six black—made from ivory, bone, bronze, or jade, and six split bamboo sticks presenting flat and beveled faces. Sometimes the material includes one or two complex 18-sided dice as an alternative to the bamboo rods; 20 additional pieces, the *zhishi qi*, or "fish"; and several counting tickets. The tickets could have been rewards earned during the game. The role of the fish is less clear— perhaps they were records of capture, or maybe they were used in another dice game entirely. I have chosen to ignore them in the first attempt to reconstruct the game.

It is clear that movement was not determined by a haphazard throw of all six sticks. Instead, the sticks were arranged in a manner reminiscent of the famous hexagrams of the Tao philosophy and the *Yijing*, or *Book of Changes*. These hexagrams, made of six continuous or broken lines, representing the *yang* and the *yin* principles, respectively, are a key component of Chinese astrology.

SUGGESTED RULES

1. The game is for two players. One player takes the white stones, and the other takes the black stones. Each player starts with his six stones in front of him, the board being empty.

2. The stones are moved according to the throw of the six sticks, in which flat sides represent *yang* and convex sides represent *yin*. The sticks are thrown and read as two separate groups of three.

3. One counts 3 points per yang, 2 points per yin, and subtracts 5. An equivalent way is to count 1 more point than the number of yang shown. Therefore, the point count for a group of three sticks varies from 1 (all yin) to 4 (all yang).

4. It is compulsory to move two stones at every turn, one for each stick group. It is not allowed to move the same stone twice, except if this stone is the last controlled by its owner.

5. All stones enter the board on the same point (referenced with a "1" on the diagram above). The stones move counterclockwise around the board. The first count includes the starting "1" point. Stones can pass each other.

6. A stone that lands exactly on one of the first two cardinal points, "6" or "11", can, on the next turn, move directly across the board towards the opposite cardinal point, rather than continuing to follow the counter-clockwise circuit: from "6" it can go to "16," and from "11" it can go to "1." The stones continue moving counter-clockwise after crossing the board. The route across the board, including the central square as a station, is only six steps, whereas the roundabout route is 10 steps, so these shortcuts reduce the distance by four steps.

7. If a stone lands on a station already occupied by the opponent, the enemy stone is withdrawn from the board and given back to its owner. He will have to re-enter it again.

8. Two or more stones from the same side can occupy the same station. However, both may then be taken at the same time if the opponent lands on them.

9. A stone that stops on the central station can be promoted to an *owl*, which is distinguished by standing it up. A player is only allowed one owl at a time, so subsequent pieces entering the central station will not be promoted while the first owl remains.

10. The owl can be moved by one or two groups of sticks. The two numbers should be played separately, and it is forbidden to move the owl back and forth. The owl can move clockwise or counterclockwise, or cross the board in any direction without having to land first on a cardinal point and can even turn at right angles when it crosses the center.

11. A stone taken by the owl is withdrawn from the game and kept as a prisoner by the taker.

12. If an opposing stone takes the owl, the owl owner loses the game immediately.

13. The owl owner also loses the game if, after his play, the opponent has five regular stones on the board and the opponent himself does not have an owl.

14. If the opposite owl takes an owl, the game is not lost. The owl is degraded, removed from the board, and given back to its owner, who will have to re-enter it as a mere stone.

15. When a stone completes its loop and lands on or passes first station ("1"), it stays on board and begins a new loop. At this time a prisoner is freed and given back to the player who completed the loop, who may reintroduce it to the board on a later turn.

16. A player makes an immediate extra throw after throwing a 1-1 or a 4-4, or after completing a full loop with a stone, or after promoting a stone into an owl.

17. A player wins by holding prisoner all six opposing stones. This is considered as a "large" victory.

COMMENTS

- Rule #2 : Assuming that the sticks should be read three by three, they form two trigrams. That could explain the role of the auxiliary surface, the boxi, often represented beside the board and between players. It could have been used to arrange in order the 2x3 sticks. The 2x3 sticks offer 2x8=16 possibilities. This would fit with the 18-sided die that is known to be an alternative to the sticks. The die has 16 numbered sides plus two special sides at its poles, engraved with ideograms for special functions. The numbered sides of the dice model the throw of the sticks, although the probabilities are not exactly the same in both processes.
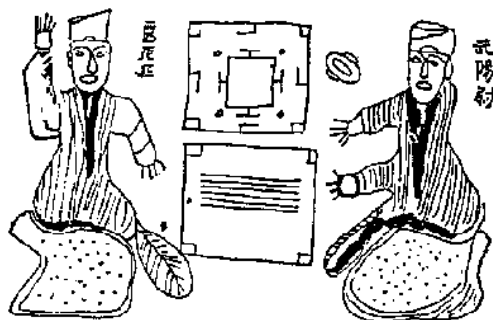
Drawing showing two players at play. The boxi *is seen beneath the Liubo board.*

- Rule #3 : This way of counting is completely hypothetical. I have tried to accommodate the 3 and 2 points system traditionally employed for the Yijing divination process. The possibilities range from 1 to 4, with 1 and 4 three times less probable than 2 and 3. For my rules to work, it is necessary to have 1 achievable.

- Rule #4 : Play testing has shown that it is not suitable that a single stone moves using both groups of sticks.

- Rules #5 to 8 : The principle of a single entrance is copied from Yut, the Korean race game, called Nyout by Culin[7] (1895), Murray (1951), Bell (1960), and their followers. It is my personal intuition that Yut could be connected with Liubo. I find intriguing their common astrological symbolism, their apparent role in divination, the fact that each player has the same number of pieces as sticks, and their geographical proximity. Also, the Yut board has exactly one central region surrounded by 28 positions that are exactly arranged as in this reconstruction. This may be a coincidence, and I am not saying that Liubo was the ancestor of Yut. It could just as well be the opposite, or both may have emerged from an older game.

- Rule #9 : This is inspired by comments of "*Zhao hun*" poem in *Chuci* by Hong Xingzu (living under the Song), which quoted the introduction of *Gubojing*: "When a stone gets in the water, it is stood up and is called an owl"[8] (Fu, 1986). There are other interpretations of this passage, which do not corroborate the way the owl is obtained. These other interpretations are related to the use of the 18-sided die, where the owl promotion is obtained by pure chance. However, several special things occurred then in the "central water," like "eating fishes," which probably meant getting a reward. I consider this promotion mode as a valid possibility. In addition, it makes the play interesting because the control of the central square becomes essential. No text never mentions more than one owl per player, so this is invention for playability.

- Rule #10 : It is logical, and confirmed by play testing, for the owl could move more easily than regular stones in order to catch them.

- Rule #11 : This was inspired by many citations that led to an understanding that the powerful owl piece was eating the stones.

- Rule #12 : The owl is both powerful and fragile. There are several allusions again. For instance, in the *Han Feizi* it is said, "In order to win, he must kill the owl." This is an attractive feature of the game. The owl owner has an obvious advantage, but he is always under threat, and may have to decline a capture if he cannot place his owl in safety. Was the owl a model for the Chess king?

- Rule #13 : This is an attempt to accommodate a recurring comments, like the following in the *Zhanguoce* (*Strategies of the Arguing Realms*): "If the owl is not able to defeat five opposite stones, clearly, then it has lost." Practically, that means that the owl owner, who is leading the game, must pay attention at the beginning of the game. The danger is over a soon as he has captured a few stones.

- Rule #14 : No text supports this rule, but it is necessary if one allows both players to possess an owl simultaneously. Such a capture cannot be the end of the game because it is rather easy to capture an owl with an owl. As a result, it turns out that the game is subject to very pleasant changes of fortune. The first player to promote to an owl does not have a guaranteed victory, for there is often the possibility for his opponent also to obtain an owl. The two owls never stay too long, and the second player has a real chance to seize the lead if he can capture the first owl.

- Rule #15 : This is a free interpretation of an obscure passage from Hong Xingzu's comments, which refers to "two fishes returned back." My understanding is that captured stones could be freed if something was achieved. That thing could have been completing a full run: in the *Yiwen leiju* (557-641) it is said "stones must have gone over all ways on the board in order to succeed."

- Rule #16 : These conventions are the results of extensive play testing. They make the game more dynamic.

- Rule #17 : This is inspired again by the Hong Xingzu commentary: "If a party won six fishes, then that was the large victory." My interpretation is too make a direct connection between the fishes earned and the stones captured. Another support for this rule is logic. Indeed, the natural purpose of the game to capture all the opposing stones in order to win.

CONCLUSION

To my knowledge, this set of rules constitutes the first published attempt of a full reconstruction of Liubo. The result is a game belonging to the vast category of race games, or, more adequately, *running-fight games*, as the goal strictly is

not to win a race but to make captures along a track. The play is varied and not simple because there are several ways of winning or losing. I think this is plausible because had it been straightforward, the method of play would have not been lost. Of course, the whole thing is pure speculation, and the actual method of play may have been quite different. For example, the various proposed reconstructions for Senet, or the Royal Game of Ur, are quite different, although they are all of them, based on solid arguments. Bell's reconstruction of Aztec Patolli[9] (Bell, 1960) appears now completely off track in light of what is known of the Bul family[10] (Verbeeck, 1998).

A first observation, which surprised me, is that it is very natural and effortless to play on the Liubo board. I was expecting difficulties in memorizing the location of the different stations and possible paths, because, for years, I had been puzzled by the geometrical markings, unable to see any pattern for a game. Actually, everything becomes clear as soon as one starts to play. Doubting readers are strongly encouraged to reproduce my experiment and judge for themselves! Secondly, it has been shown that it is possible to take into account, more or less, most of the disparate clues that remain from literary sources.

Regardless of how closely these rules match the genuine rules, it can be confirmed that the Liubo material affords a very attractive and pleasant running-fight game. Last but not least, it has been a great satisfaction to see how modern players, completely unaware of Liubo's history and significance, have enjoyed this game. I can only wish that Liubo equipment can be soon produced for the pleasure of board games lovers.
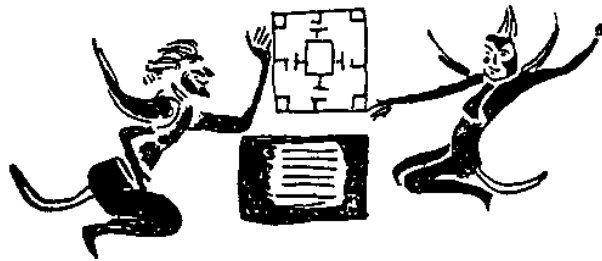
Two Immortals in a living Liubo play. Drawing on a tomb stone.

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[1] Hermann-Josef RÖLLICKE, « Von « Winkelwegen », « Eulen » und « Fischziehern » - *liubo* : ein altenchinesisches Brettspiel für Geister und Menschen », *Board Games Studies*, n°2, 1999.

[2] Harold James Ruthven MURRAY, *A History Of Board-Games other than Chess*, Oxford University Press, 1951, re-edition Oxbow Books, 2002.

[3] Jean-Marie LHÔTE, *Histoire des jeux de société*, Paris, Flammarion, 1994.

[4] David PARLETT, *The Oxford History of Board Games*, Oxford University Press, 1999.

[5] David LI, *The Genealogy of Chess*, Bethesda, Premier Publishing, 1998

[6] ZENG Lanying (Lillian L. TSENG), « Divining from the Game *Liubo* : An Explanation of A Han Wooden Slip », *China Archaelogy and Art Digest*, « *Fortune, Games and Gaming* », Vol.4, n°4, October-December 1999.

[7] Stewart CULIN, *Korean Games : with notes on the corresponding games from China and Japan*, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphie, 1895, re-edition, New York, Dover, 1991.

[8] FU Juyou, "Lun Qin Han shiqi de boju, boxi jianji boju wenjing. In: Kaogu xuebao 1, S. 21-42, 1986. I had no access to the original source. I have worked on a free translation of extracts kindly communicated by Thierry DEPAULIS. However the exploitation I made from that material engages my responsibility only.

[9] Robert Charles BELL, *Board and Table Games from many civilizations*, Oxford University Press, 1960 et 1969 ; re-edition New York, Dover, 1979.

[10] Lieve VERBEECK, Bul : A Patolli Game in Maya Lowland, *Board Games Studies*, n°1, 1998.