Preliminary Remarks on the Games of Liubo and Saixi 博塞議

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In the Spring and Autumn period, liubo 六博, also called haozi 博戲, a forerunner of Chinese chess (xiangqi 象棋), was described in comparative detail in Kongzi jiaoyu 張孔家語 (Family sayings of Confucius) and other works. Liubo is often paired with another board game, saixi 賽戲 (also called guan kan 管算) in Warring States texts, such as the "Pianju" 漢書 section of Zhuangzi 莊子 ("bo-sai yi yin 捕塞以陰"), revealing that these ancient prototypes of xiangqi were current in the Spring and Autumn period. By the time of the Western Han dynasty both liubo and saixi were flourishing, and the excavation of a liubo set from Han dynasty tomb no. 3 at Mawangdui fulfil 墓於服 serves as an indicator of the high level of development attained by the game.

1. The Origins and Development of Liubo and Saixi

In "Summoning the Soul" 招魂 in The Songs of Chu 楚辭 [1] there are references to jade decorated dice and ivory liubo pieces, according to the Liu Chen Annotated Edition of that work [2]. The complete liubo set unearthed at Mawangdui tomb no. 3 (Figs. 1, 2, 3) demonstrates that high quality...
crafting went into the production of a liubo set. The levels of craftsmanship also suggest that the game had already undergone a long period of development. In the "Liang Hui" section of The Analects, we find the following passage: "The Master said: 'If a man stuffs himself with food the entire day, and never uses his mind, things will be difficult for him. Do we not have gamblers and chess players? There can be virtue even in these pursuits.' Confucius believed that even the playing of board games was a beneficial activity — at least it was better than remaining idle, and the passage also confirms that liubo was popular in the Spring and Autumn period.

"Mu Tianzi zhuan" records that King Mu of the Western Zhou played the liubo game for three days with Dike Jing and Guo, [3] and although this is an apocryphal work sometimes attributed to Guo Pu, it is clear that liubo had made its appearance in the Western Zhou. "Yin benji" (The Annals of Yin) in Shi ji (Records of the Historian) mentions that this game (the "bo" game) was played during the reign of Emperor Wu Yi of the Shang dynasty. [4] However, no archaeological evidence of the game exists from before the Eastern Zhou dynasty. Warring States examples of boards made of wood have been unearthed from Chu tombs H197 and M314 (Fig. 4) at Yutangshan in Jiujiang, Hubei province, and from a tomb at Fangmen in Panzhou, Yunnan. A stone board from the Warring States tomb in Anshi province was also unearthed. From these examples, it is clear that the Qin dynasty had recovered and promoted the game, and that two examples of boards have been found in liubo, which can be attributed to the Qin dynasty and have been recovered from tombs nos. 11 and 13 at Shuihudi in Yunnan, and in Hubei (Fig. 5).

The Spring and Autumn period was a time of great intellectual ferment and in the philosophical battles of the day chess was acknowledged by all thinkers as an integral component of their philosophy. The game underwent major developments in this period. Although the unification of China under the Qin hindered the development of these games and few remains of the game have been found in Qin tombs (and these may possibly date from an earlier period), it is certain that the game had become popular in the early Han dynasty. Many examples of pieces and games have been found in Western Han tombs. [See Table 1] There are also many textual references to the game at this time. In his work Yi chi (The Precedence of Chess), the Han dynasty scholar Ban Gu describes the state of chess in his times and laments: "Confucius spoke of bo-yi (bo-e) chess games, but today bo (bo) games [of chance] flourish while yi (yi) chess (a game of skill) is rarely played. Bo is extensive in its meaning, and the term yi cannot embrace its scope." [5] Weiqi was thus not the only form of chess played in the Han dynasty and many other games were included in the category of bo-e chess games, notably liubo and sai-ti.

"Sai-ti" developed on the basis of liubo, and so the two games were often collectively termed bo-sai 博塞. Sai-ti, also called "gessu", became as popular as liubo in the Han dynasty. The only difference between the two games is that a piece (bo-yi or qiong) was not thrown when playing sai-ti. Cheng Xuan's (Chu Xuan) section of the "Zhuangzi" (Niu) clarifies this point: "Throwing the dice is called bo and not throwing the dice is called sai". In recent years, Chinese historians have recommended the liubo gaming board (bo-sai) and the dice for gambling (as well as for divination), was removed from the game. Sai-ti was a much more difficult game to play than liubo, and, like chess, winning the game required intellectual skill.

II. A Comparison of the Liubo Set Found in the Han Tomb at Mawangdui and Other Liubo Sets

The liubo gaming board unearthed by archaeologists from Han tomb no. 3 at Mawangdui 马王堆 is the most complete set unearthed by archaeologists. Since 1949, Chinese archaeologists have discovered liubo items in several dozen tombs [See Table 1] and these cover a wide geographical spread - Hunan, Hubei, Guangdong, Guangxi, Yunnan, Beijing, Shandong, Guanxi, Sichuan, Anhui and Jiangsu. However, only one set has been unearthed from Western Han tomb M8 at Fenghuangshan in Jiangling county, Hubei province, and Western Han tomb M1 at Jing'-shun in Linyi, Shandong province, is reasonably complete. Apart from these sets, the liubo game in play is depicted on a number of illustrated stones of the Han dynasty and through the medium of clay figurines [See Table 2]. Other unearthed items are fragmentary, consisting either only of boards without pieces or pieces without boards. Yet the liubo set found in tomb no. 3 at Mawangdui in 1972 is complete [See Fig. 1]. The contemporary names of the board and pieces were provided in the inventory of funerary goods (qige), but it is also proven that the set comprised a "wooden board" (bo-sai) and "12 ivory playing pieces" (bo-e che): e.g. i.e. "one wooden disk" [See E.42 "baowu" (bo-xu) 花, the inventory states that there were only 30), "20 ivory..."
LIUBO AND SAIXI

The differences between the games of liubo and saixi go beyond the mere fact that liubo is played with a dice and saixi was not. The boards on which they are played vary in that the shapes of right-angle grooves on a liubo board point counter-clockwise (to the player's left), e.g. that found at Mawangdui (Fig. 8), while those on the saixi board, such as that found in the Western Han tomb in Xilin 西林 county in Guangxi, point clockwise (to the player's right)(Fig. 9). Although this might simply reflect a mistake on the part of the artisan, it may also reflect an attempt to distinguish between the boards used in a game of chance and those used in a game of skill. Unfortunately, no texts discuss this aspect of the two games, and the subject requires further evidence and study.

Fig. 8 Line drawing of liubo board found in Han tomb no. 1 at Dafengzou, Yuncheng, Hubei

Fig. 9 Line drawing of saixi board found at Xilin, Guangxi

From illustrated stones and clay or timber figurines depicting the two games being played, we have some insight into the differences between liubo and saixi. Porcelain figurines unearthed at Lingsao 礼子 in Henan (see Fig. 10 on following page) depict two seated men facing each other and engaged in a game of liubo. Their hands are raised in animated poses and they gaze at each other. They seem to be engaged in an animated discussion, with neither party relenting, and they have none of the calm we associate with scholarly gentlemen.
In fact, almost all illustrated stones and relief bricks depicting the liubo game reveal it to be a heated game (see Figs. 11, 12). Another passage in Summoning the Soul makes this clear. There is a fierce struggle to win the game as one would expect of a game of chance or a gambling past-time.

By way of contrast, timber figurines depicted playing saixi unearthed from a western Han tomb at Mozuizi in Wuwei, Gansu (see Fig. 13 on following page), are shown to be engaged in a tranquil and noble past-time and no dice can be seen on the board. The black and white contrastive colours of the figures lend them a certain refinement. They wear long gowns and have their hair wound into tight buns, suggesting modesty and an antiquarian scholarly spirit. The figure on the left has his hand extended before him as he deliberately goes to place a piece on the board; the figure on the right of the board has his right hand placed on his knees while his left hand is extended to chest level, as though he has just made a move in what seems to be a very polite manner. Both men are absorbed in concentration on the game, as they contemplate their next moves.

Chang Renxia’s Study of Han Dynasty Painting 清華藝術研究 [14] contains an example of an illustrated stone from Shandong, the precise provenance of which is not provided, which shows two figures absorbed in a game in which the L shapes on the board point in a clockwise direction (see Fig. 14 on following page). Like the figurines just described, the men appear to be absorbed in a refined and restrained game of mental skill, and it seems to be another illustration of a game of saixi. The game has none of the raucous atmosphere which accompanied liubo, and saixi seems to have been regarded as a game that embodied virtue and courteousness, as indeed it is described in Bian Shao’s 比肩 Han dynasty prose-poem (fu 詩) titled Saixi Saixi, [15]

From the evidence provided by illustrated stones, I would argue that saixi, rather than liubo, better represented the synthesis of China’s ancient material and spiritual civilisations. Among the writings of the Warring States philosophers attacks on saixi are rarely seen, and the frequent coupling of the two games as a single term bo-sai is best explained as based on the fact that the two games so closely resembled each other in form, and that this linguistic portmanteau worked to the detriment of saixi.

IV. Evaluation by the Ancients of Liubo and Saixi

In his “Prolegomenon of Chess” Ban Gu pointed out quite clearly the drawbacks of the game of liubo—the game depends upon the toss, and there is no special skill in its play: the better player can be unsuccessful, while the poor player can enjoy good luck... The key to winning liubo was in throwing the dice, and the more skilled player was often unable to win. The game was thus neither fair nor cultivated. The stimulus and opportunity imparted by the game gave it appeal to risk-takers and the indolent, and this explains its immense popularity in ancient times. As a result, in the writings of many of the literati of the day it was often derided and its ban was sometimes mooted by officials because of its amenability to gambling. Opposition to liubo is expressed in a number of ancient texts.

In Kongzi jianyu 孔子家語, the following passage occurs:

“I hear you do not play liubo. Is this true?” Duke Ai asked Confucius.
“It is true”, Confucius answered.
“Why is this?” Duke Ai asked.
“Because there are two winners”, he replied.
“If there are two winners, then why not play?” asked the duke.
“Because both win in relying on the evil Way”, he replied.

The duke was silent for a time, then asked, “If this is the case, then surely the gentleman is most suited to hold the evil Way in contempt”.

“Unfortunately gentlemen do not hate sufficiently the evil Way, as they also love insufficiency the way of goodness, and as the common people are insufficiently close to those above them”, Confucius replied, “There is a poem in The Book of Songs: ‘Not seeing gentlemen, their hearts were filled with fears, and so they go and see no further, and so they lack and see no further’: I am delighted to find that the love of the Way of goodness is of such magnitude in The Songs.”

The duke replied, “Excellent! And so the gentleman must cultivate beauty in himself and not cultivate evil. Only now do I understand what you say, having not heard these words before” [16].

Fig. 10 Painted pottery figurines depicted playing liubo from Han tomb in Lingbao, Henan

Fig. 11 Illustrated stone depicting liubo game from Han tomb in Puxian, Jiangsu

Fig. 12 Line drawing of illustrated stone depicting immortals playing the liubo game from Han tomb in Chengdu, Sichuan

Fig. 13 (left) Timber figurines unearthed from Western Han tomb at Mozuizi, Wuwei, Gansu
Fig. 14 (right) Line drawing of two game players from illustrated stone found in Shandong
Confucius despised "that which was not regulated by the rites and greed that was uninformed by dislikes". This attack on boxi was an extreme position, maintaining that the game could destroy concepts of human kindness and love, give rise to evil and conceal the desire to harm others. He was firm advocate of refraining from gaming, in order to avoid conflicts with social etiquette. Duke Ai was also filled with praise for Confucius' insistence that "the gentleman must cultivate beauty and not cultivate evil."

In Chapter 19 of Yanshi jiazu 颜氏家訓[17] titled "Zoyi" 遵義, there is a similar passage:

"The family injunctions state that a gentleman must not play boxi, in order that he does not assume the way of evil". In other words, the gentleman should not play boxi because it is intrinsically evil. Another passage in the same work reads:

"Do Confucians play boxi?" King Xuan of Qi asked Kuang Qian.

"No!" Kuang answered.

"Why?"

"Because the man who plays such games venerates the piece called the owl (xiāo 鷦)." Kuang replied.

"The winner must finish off his opponent's owl, and by so doing he also kills that which he venerates. For Confucians this is harmful in intent, and for this reason we do not play boxi."

In this context a "Confucian" is a general reference to a gentleman or educated man. Since such games set men up as opponents or enemies, they flout the rules of propriety, respect and acquiescence that should underscore relationships. The owl (xiāo) was the name of one of the six liubo playing pieces, which comprised one xiao and five san, roughly equivalent to generals (jiang 邑) and pawns (zu 卒) in today's Chinese chess (xiàngqí 象棋). The xiao or owl was also said to be the ancestral totem of Emperor Shun 舜, Han Feizi 韩非子 (jian 12)[18], makes the same point about the player of boxi having to kill that which he most venerates. In the liubo game the xiao piece was able to kill off the son of the opponent; at the same time the pawns were mobilised to kill the owl. The xiao was clearly the crucial piece in liubo, and on it victory or defeat depended. In the liubo game, a player had to lead his opponent into an ambush, force his opponent into strategically dangerous situations, capture his opponent's xiao and thus reduce him to nothing.

In his critique of the Confucian Mencius 孟轲 titled Ci Meng 刺孟 (cited in "Biography of Wang Chong" 王充記 in Hou Han shu 後漢書)[19] the Han dynasty thinker Wang Chong adopted a purely materialistic position:

When adults play games of chance, their behaviour is like that of children defacing a wall. But isn't the object of those who play games of chance to obtain food or eat? Those gamblers bet on their play may win a great deal of money and so have plenty to eat. This shows that at times there can be purpose in such play.

Even though Wang Chong here is taking issue with the ideas of Mencius, in his seeming defence of gambling there is contempt for the past-time, because he likens those who play games of chance to children who deface walls. Even the Daoists were opposed to games of chance as is clear in the passage from the "Pianmi" section of Zuoziang cited earlier[20] in which is recounted the story of Zang and Gu who lose the sheep they are tending. When questioned regarding why they failed to pay attention and keep track of the whereabouts of the sheep, Zang replied that he was reading inscribed slips while Gu was throwing dice. Here an action of value is contrasted with an action of no value to show that any form of action can produce an undesirable result. However, the contrast also underscores the Daoist deprecation of games of chance.

The liubo game was often depicted in ancient texts as leading people astray. In the Eastern Han dynasty, Hou Han shu 後漢書 describes how the sons of two wealthy households, Liang Ji 梁冀 and Xu Sheng 徐詠[21], were so infatuated with gaming that they indulged completely in the past-time and let their enterprises go to wrack and ruin, becoming laughing stocks for all time.

The Legalists moved towards prohibiting gaming. In the "Gushi" 四書 section of Guanzi 管子, we read: "On the gengxin 使信 of the third month, five regulations were issued by the government, the first of which banned boxi, aca. Here taken to mean gambling. Compiled in the Warring States period, this work records the thinking of Guan Zi on economics, politics, military affairs and philosophy. Guan Zi acted as prime minister in the state of Qi 齊, where he instituted a series of measures on clean government, which included the ban on gambling. In the chapter of Guanzi titled "Sicheng" 四稱 is recorded a conversation between Guan Zi and Duke Huan of Qi 齊桓公, beginning with a remark by Guan Zi:

"He brought in his own actors, accumulated musical instruments, was infatuated with boxi... so it can be said that in ancient times there were also unprincipled rulers".

"Well put", Duke Huan responded[22].

We can see that not only at that time did philosophers regard gambling as a pernicious practice, but rulers shared the same perception and issued bans on gaming.

V. Conclusion

Examining ancient texts, we find that most references to liubo discuss the form of the game, the mode of play and the attendant social phenomena, but contemporary writings praising the spirit and style of the liubo game are very hard to find, and in their attitude to gaming all the classical philosophers seem to have been in agreement.

The liubo game flourished for centuries throughout the Spring and Autumn, Warring States and Qin-Han periods, but it seems to have been especially popular in the Han dynasty when it was played by all moneyed social strata. The occupant of Han tomb M3 at Mawangdui, the Marquis of Dai 戴侯成, was representative of the official-landlord class. From the precious objects buried in his tomb, we can see that he sought to recreate an aristocratic paradise in the afterlife, and the liubo game was one of the treasures he sought to take with him.

Notes:


[8] "Qiu, written 秋 or 落, was an ancestral form of dice."

[9] Xiangqiu nianli 象棋年代, "A discussion of the liubo set unearthed from Western Han tomb no. 3 at Mawangdui 箕馬王墓第三號漢墓出土的棋具, WW. 1979.4."

[10] Fu Yu, written 傅予, "A discussion of gaming boards of the Qin-Han period, the boxi game and gaming board pattern mirrors", 經濟時期的棋具, 博弈棋及博棋紋樣, KX. 1986.1, reproduced in Articles
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Key to elements of chess board cited in Table (1): (i) yang (black); (ii) ying (white); (iii) playing pieces (chessmen); (iv) board; (v) chessboard; (vi) playing pieces; (vii) chessboard; (viii) playing pieces; (ix) chessboard; (x) playing pieces; (xi) chessboard; (xii) playing pieces.