

VERIFICATION OF THE FACT THAT GOLF ORIGINATED FROM CHUIWAN

**Ling Hongling, Professor of Physical Education,
Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou, P.R. China**

Chuiwan (“chui” means hitting and “wan” means ball in Chinese) was a game in ancient China. When playing, the competitors would drive the ball into each of a series of pits dug in the ground. The game was quite similar to modern golf, so Mr Hao Gengsheng called it Chinese golf.¹ But how much alike the two games are and whether there is any relationship between them are the questions that call for further study and discussion.

Chuiwan has a long history in China. According to *Wan Jing*, a book published in 1282 AD, “Both Emperor Huizong of the Song Dynasty and Emperor Zhangzong of the Jin Dynasty liked to play Chuiwan. They kept the balls in silk bags and while playing, they used coloured sticks”.² This shows that early in the 12th century the game of Chuiwan was played in the imperial courts as an amusement. In fact, the game had long been played among the masses. It was merely introduced to the palace for the emperors’ entertainment. Chen Wanli, the author of a book entitled *Pottery Pillow*, selected many pottery-pillow paintings as illustrations, two of which are about children playing Chuiwan.³ In Figure 1, the child is holding in his hand a spoon-shaped stick called “Shaobang”, while in Figure 2, the child is waving what seems to be a metal-tipped stick called “Pubang”. Based on the two figures, a conclusion can be safely drawn that the Chuiwan game had already prevailed and was very popular among the ordinary people in the Song Dynasty. Otherwise, the painters would not have taken it as the topic of painting on pottery-pillows to solicit customers.

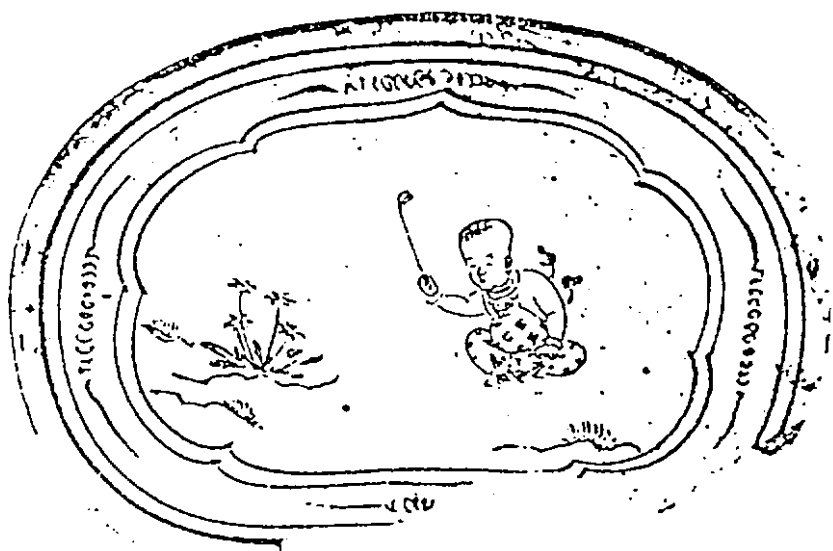


Figure 1



Figure 2

In *Dongxuan Records*, written by Wei Tai of the Song Dynasty, there is a vivid description of how a certain county magistrate in the Nantang Dynasty taught his daughter to dig goals in the ground and drive a ball into them.⁴ Therefore the earliest historical record of Chuiwan dates back to the 10th century AD (or 943 AD) rather than the 12th century.

In the newly published *A Picture Collection of China's Ancient Sports Relics*, there is a colour image of the mural painting still preserved on the wall of a Water God Temple in Hungtung County, Shanxi Province (Figure 3).⁵ In this picture we can see the first man from the left is half squatting, putting his left hand on his left knee, while he is holding a stick in this right hand and is about to drive a ball horizontally with it.

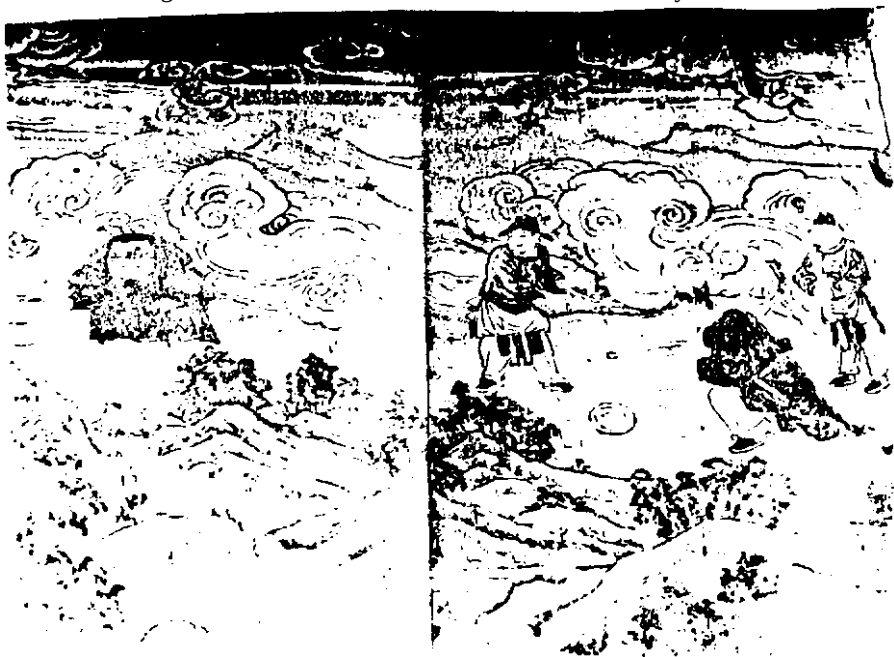


Figure 3

The third man from the left is holding a curve-topped stick waiting for his turn. The second and the fourth men are standing there with their front garments rolled up high, each of them holding a hammer-shaped stick. And the second man is pointing to the goal as if showing the direction that the ball should be driven to. They evidently look like assistants serving in the course.

The half-squatting posture of the player and his way of hitting the ball horizontally would no doubt prevent him from aiming exactly at the goal. Meanwhile, such a curve-topped stick is not suitable for the player who intends to drive a ball when he himself is taking a standing position. This shows that it was impossible for the Chuiwan game to avoid these defects during its initial stage. But we still can see from the mural that all the partners are deeply interested in the game, not a bit less than their modern counterparts.

We can not find any sign-flags in the mural. Thus we may infer that the playground at that time was so small that the players considered it unnecessary to have them.

Another noticeable thing in the picture is the pit in front of the third man from the left. It doesn't look like a pit but a plate embedded in the ground, as shown by the circular lines drawn on the inside of the plate. It has been mentioned above that in the days of the Nantang Dynasty, people already knew how to dig ball pits in the ground. But here in this picture, the players are using a plate. This might have been the way before the ball pits were introduced in the game. If so, we may assume the time that the mural painting reveals would be even earlier than Nantang (943-958, to be more exact).

The latest documents about Chuiwan in China are probably the two paintings of the Ming Dynasty. The painting entitled *Emperor Xuanzong of the Ming Dynasty Is Playing* is the portrayal of Emperor Zhu Zhanji (1426-1435 AD) playing Chuiwan in the palace (Figure 4).⁶

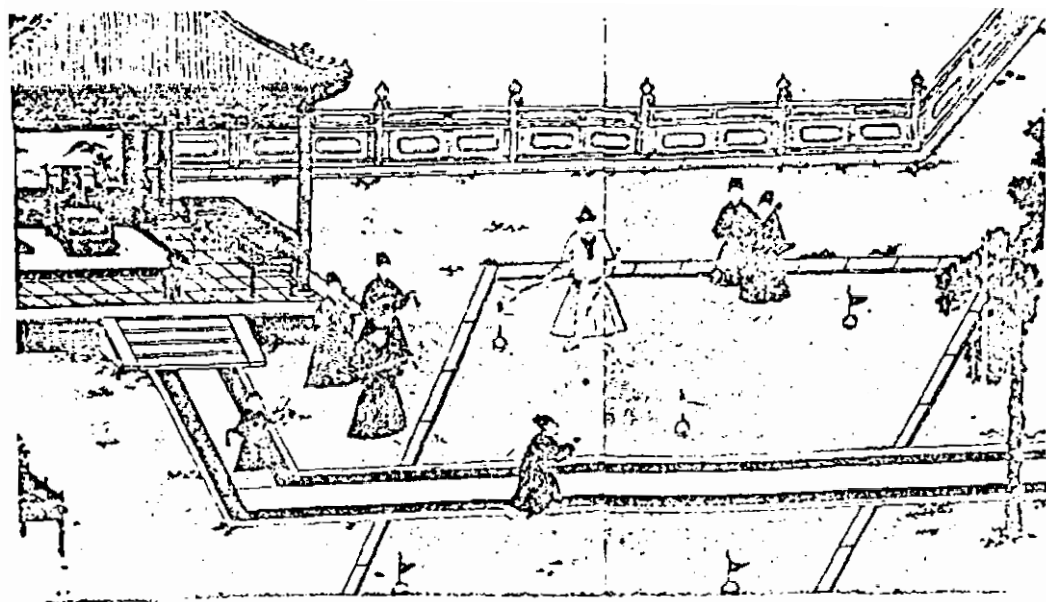


Figure 4



Figure 5

Though this shows only a part of the playground, yet the pits and flags are neatly arranged in the court, and there are many sticks both inside and outside the pavilion. The Emperor himself is holding a stick in each of his hands. He seems to be wondering why the ball he struck has gone only halfway. Maybe he thinks that both of his sticks are not suitable, and thus orders a boy eunuch to fetch another one for him. An elder eunuch is walking towards him with a ball in his hand, as if he is going to explain to the Emperor that the weight of the ball is responsible for how far the ball goes and advise the Emperor to change to another ball. In *Wan Jing* there is a rule for Chuiwan: “the weight of the ball is proportional to the size of the stick”. Now the elder eunuch has chosen a suitable ball and is presenting it to the imperial ruler. The detailed plot is so well conceived in the picture that we can imagine how ingenious and dexterous the artist was.

Another painting entitled *Beautiful Women Playing Chuiwan* was done by Du Jin (1465-1487 AD) (Figure 5).⁷ The ball in the picture is approaching the edge of the pit while all the three female players are watching the ball rolling.

As shown in the picture, the three beautiful ladies are competing and the two servant girls are shouldering the sticks at their service. There seems to be no apparent difference between them. If there is any difference at all, it might lie in the weight of curved tops of the sticks.

This interesting picture makes us so perplexed that we cannot help wondering whether the beautiful ladies are practising Chuiwan or just playing golf. Should somebody say “either will do”, I would think that everybody might agree with him. Because what this picture shows cannot be otherwise than that. Mr Hao Gensheng dubbed Chuiwan “Chinese Golf”. Isn’t this vivid picture strong enough to help verify the suggestion of the late famous professor of physical education?

From the comparison of *Wan Jing* and *Golf* (Chinese version), we can see that they largely coincide in equipment making, the way of playing, rules and so on. The only difference has been caused by time, which is quite permissible. As the two games are identical in content, we can safely say that Golf and Chuiwan are games of the same type.

Chinese Chuiwan has a long history. So far we have seen live paintings of Chuiwan, a book entitled *Wan Jing* and other historical records. They are the documents of the Five Dynasties and the Dynasties of Song, Yuan and Ming. However, the pity is that Chuiwan could not be found in any historical documents since the middle of the Ming Dynasty. Therefore, most people in China did not know what Chuiwan was. When Golf was first introduced into our country, it was naturally considered a foreign game. This is contrary to the historical facts. Once the whole truth of it is clarified, such a misunderstanding can be corrected immediately.

The earliest record of golf appeared in 1457 AD in Britain. It was during the reign of King James II, when the Parliament made regulations

to ban football and golf that the name of “golf” was first mentioned.⁸ However, the exact origin of it has remained a problem unsolved for a long time.

The historical background of both golf and Chuiwan has been largely made clear above. So we can probe into the question more realistically on this basis.

- (1) To differentiate the origin and development from the angle of historical reality – According to the ascertained dates of historical facts, the history of Chuiwan can be tentatively traced back to the year of 943 AD, while the earliest record of golf appeared only in 1457 AD. It shows a difference of more than five centuries. Since both golf and Chuiwan belong to the same type of game, after all there arises a question: which one is the originator? In this case, the priority of historical dates of the two games determines their relation of origin and development. Because the pottery painting of golf in Holland was about fifty years earlier than the first historical record of golf in Britain, the *Japan Grand Dictionary of Sports* asserts that “golf originated in Holland”.⁹ This formula of proof used to be valid. In the course of historical research, we have discovered that our Chuiwan was much earlier than golf both in Britain and Holland. Thus we can say that Chuiwan in China as compared with the golf-type games is no doubt a pioneer and this conclusion is tenable.
- (2) The book *Wan Jing* is the best medium of propagation – *Wan Jing* was published as early as 1282 AD. Any place a man could set foot on, the book had the chance to be brought into. Once it arrived there, it might give rise to golf. This is because *Wan Jing* would play the role of a textbook in the very game. After comparing the Chinese version of “Golf” and *Wan Jing* we have found that the two books are basically identical in contents. The reasonable explanation is that this must result from the propagation of *Wan Jing* from China to the West.
- (3) To examine history in light of the law of history – After all how did golf originate? In Britain, this problem of a missing link has not been solved yet. Although the time when golf appeared in Holland was somewhat earlier than in Britain, the link is still

missing. Chuiwan appeared in China over 500 years earlier than the time when the name of golf first emerged in Britain. Over the long years of the Middle Ages there were frequent cultural and economic exchanges between the East and the West. The invasion of the Mongolians to the West played an especially important part in mixing the peoples of Asia and Europe, bringing about the intercourse of oriental and occidental cultures. It is nearly impossible to estimate how far-reaching the influence was. Chuiwan was a popular game in China at that time. It goes without saying that this game could even be introduced to the Western countries unnoticed. If we make a comparison between the main types of the clubs (sticks) of ancient golf and Chinese Chuiwan, it is bound to be very surprising. The brassie, driver and spoon of golf and the Pubang (a metal-topped stick), Cuanbang (a plan-surfaced stick) and Shaobang (a spoon-shaped stick) were respectively almost identical. Aren't these three pairs of clubs (sticks) just similar to twin lotus flowers blooming on one stalk?¹⁰ The emergence of this phenomenon should be credited only to the effort of propagation of culture. Otherwise the sudden appearing of variegated shapes of golf-club would be tantamount to magnificent mansions springing up over-night from the ground, which is rather impossible.

Some of the different shapes of the stick of Chinese Chuiwan can be apparently traced to an historical origin, of which Shaobang is an example. In an opera entitled "She Liu Rui Wan Ji" (Anecdote of Shooting the Willow and Hitting the Ball) written by an anonymous dramatist of the Yuan Dynasty, there is a song. Here we quote a few lines:

The line horses gallop elegantly,
And the mounted players stoop gently,
Each holding a stick to hit a ball with its spoon,
Which shines high as bright as a full moon.
Down to the ground fall coloured balls,
Much like morning stars becoming sparse and sparse,
Down to the ground fall coloured balls,

Much like morning stars becoming sparse and sparse.
Hurrah! A tiny crystalline pearl flying straight,
I see it right through the very gate.¹¹

The plot of the opera unfolds around a decisive match of hitting a ball with Fan Zhong-yan (989-1052) as the referee, who was Minister of War of the Song Dynasty. His judgment had finally settled a dispute between two high-ranking officers contending for merit and appropriate award. Fan was really worthy of the repute of an outstanding minister “concerned about affairs of state ahead of others.” In this opera it is very obvious that the “Shaobang” is derived from the Rui Wan game. But we must make still further research into the crux whether this type of Shaobang was of any special use to the Chuiwan game. In the Preface of *Wan Jing*, it is noted “using Shaobang to drive a ball finally into the pit”. At that time it was not an ideal method to utilise concavity of a stick to control or influence the direction of a ball, so it was later eliminated. In the two treasured paintings of Chuiwan of the Ming Dynasty no longer can any vestige of the spoon-shaped stick be found. The spoon at first used in the golf game has also been changed ever since. The original concavity of the spoon has been replaced by a moderately slanting surface.¹² The newly modified slanting-surfaced spoon is suitable for achieving long high shots.¹³ No doubt it is a notable reform of “weeding out what has outlived its time and developing the new”. This new spoon in turn serves as an impetus to still further reforms of the golf game, such as to enlarge the course and to increase the degree of difficulty of obstacles in order to enhance the vitality of the game, hence golf has developed into a popular world-wide game. This is a most salutary contribution to mankind. However we must admit that without our ancient spoon-shaped stick “blazing the trail” there could not have been the birth of a new type of spoon to substitute a slanting surface for its concavity. But the name of “spoon” is still retained. Maybe this brief

process is sufficient to explain that the evolution of golf has a relationship of dependence upon Chinese Chuiwan.

In light of the above analysis from the three angles, we may safely deduce that it is due to the propagation of Chinese Chuiwan that golf has been able to emerge in the West as a mature game. Thus all the questions we have discussed above are quite understandable.

The famous historian R.B. Dixon asserts "That diffusion has been responsible for cultural development to a far greater extent than independent invention is certain, but occasional independent invention cannot, in the face of the evidence, be denied".¹⁴ Dixon lays special stress on evidence. It is an indisputable judgment based on materialism. We fully agree with Dixon.

History is always based on facts. Only in this way can we hope to clarify all the questions left over by history and to restore what actually occurred in history. This is the idea that our scholars of history and culture unanimously cherish and endorse. The author of this paper has put forth some historical facts as the supporting evidence of his research on both golf and Chinese Chuiwan and meanwhile has presented his preliminary opinions, but all this should be subject to further investigation and study both in fact and theory.

NOTES

1. Hao Gensheng: *Physical Education in China*, English edition, Commercial Press, 1926, p. 28.
2. Wan Jing of the Yuan Dynasty, from First Collection of Books.
3. Chen Wanli: Pottery Pillow, 1954, Zhaohua Art Publishing House.
4. Wei Tai of the Song Dynasty, Dongxuan Records, Vol. 12, from First Collection of Books.
5. Shao Wenliang: *A Picture Collection of Chinese Ancient Sports* (1986). People's Sports Publishing House, p. 156.
6. *ibid.*, p. 158.
7. *ibid.*, p. 160.
8. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, (1982). p. 242.
9. Reference for China's Sports (1958), Vol. p. 48.

10. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, printed in U.S.A. (1961), p. 976, Golf Club.
11. *She Liu Rui Wan Ji*, by an anonymous dramatist of the Yuan Dynasty, from *Ancient and Modern Poetic Drama*, Act 82.
12. *A Comprehensive English-Chinese Dictionary*, The Commercial Press (1948). p. 1208. Spoon
13. Same as 10, p. 2205, spoon
14. Joseph Needham, *Science & Civilisation in China* Vol. 1. p. 229 (This is a condensed form of the English version. The full Chinese text will be carried in the *Journal of the Northwest Normal University* in 1990).

Translated by Huang Xiqan