

THE SLOW WAY WEST: OR HOW BADUK TRAVELLED FROM CHINA TO EUROPE—

CHAPTER 1

Theo van Ees

tvanees@xs4all.nl

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Introduction

The history of baduk is long. According to most experts it is the oldest board game that is still played in our times. It is safe to say that it has been played constantly for more than two millennia. The game was invented in China and gained popularity in the highest classes. Around 600 AD it spread East to Korea and Japan, where it also knew substantial growth. The spread eastwards was halted by the natural boundaries of the Pacific Ocean. To the South-West baduk came as far as the mountain ranges of the Himalayas, where the game is found in Tibet, Nepal and Sikkim. The game however didn't migrate across the mountains to India. To the West it is found in Mongolia, but it didn't find a way further into Russia or Iran.

The interesting question is now why the spread of baduk stopped. Of course the natural barriers such as mountains, oceans, deserts and uninhabited taiga were formidable obstacles, but those could be overcome. China wasn't totally isolated. From the earliest times all kinds of cultural and commercial exchanges between China and Europe existed. From the conquests of Alexander the Great (356-323 BC), the Romans and Genghis Khan (1162-

1227) all kinds of cultural relations between East and West emerged. The Romans had a strong liking for silk and they got it through commercial interaction with China. The overland merchant way to China was via a network of connected cities and oases, that we now know as the 'Silk Road' or the 'Via Serica'. Along this dangerous road, more than 4,000 km long, all kinds of trade and cultural exchanges are found through the ages. In the towns on the way people from different origins settled and this was an important source of cultural exchange. Buddhism went from India and Islam from Arabia to China, chess from China to India and Europe (the origin of chess is still highly debated, so maybe it started from India), jade and silk from China to Europe and lapis lazuli from Afghanistan to the rest of the world. Art, religions, new ideas and knowledge, but also gold, ivory, porcelain, horses and exotic plants and animals, all travelled along that road, transported by soldiers, pilgrims and merchants.

The Roman board game "XII scripta" is found in Uzbekistan and Chinese backgammon seems to be inspired by the Romans. Playing cards and dominoes, Chinese inventions, reached Europe in the 14th century.¹

¹Schädler, Ulrich; *Some games travel, some games don't*, p. 15. In: 2nd ICOB 2003 : the 2nd International Conference on Baduk. - S.l. : Department of Baduk Studies, Myong-Ji University, 2003. - p. 11-22.

How far did baduk travel?

Western frontier

In China's Far West in the heart of the Gobi desert lie the 'caves of the Thousand Buddhas' at Tun-huang. It is the greatest of all Central Asian Buddhist rock temple complexes, a centre for prayer and thanksgiving. It served from Han times on as China's gateway to the West, the last halt in China. Here the Silk Road split into a northern and southern route and all travellers coming to or from China by land had to pass through Tun-huang. In its heyday more than thousand grottoes were used as temples and chapels, where pilgrims asked for a safe journey through the desert or gave thanks for safely arriving here. Unlike other oasis towns along the way Tun-huang and its temples more or less survived unharmed through the ages.

It was here that Sir Aurel Stein, a great explorer and discoverer in Central Asia, in 1907 laid his hands on an important library of age old manuscripts, which had been hidden in a cave some ten centuries before. They are now in the British Museum in London. The most important find was the oldest printed book: the Diamond Sutra, printed in 868. ²

More important for our purpose was the find of the manuscript of the Qi Jing (Classic of Weiqi) ³, the earliest manuscript on baduk. The text was composed ca. 550, and the manuscript was transcribed between the 6th and 9th century. The end of the description has the signature of a Tibetan monk,

so it is possible that baduk was known in Tibet.

Even further to the West in a 7th century tomb in Astana, near Turfan in the Sinkiang Uighur Autonomous region, the first baduk painting was found. It shows a woman playing on a 17x17 board placing a stone with her index and middle fingers. ⁴



Tang lady

So we can say that baduk travelled certainly to the most western frontier of China and maybe farther to Tibet. Here the trail stops for the moment. That is how far West (at least information about) baduk travelled over land.

But why did baduk not travel farther? Why didn't it leave the Chinese sphere of influence?



²Hopkirk, Peter; *Foreign devils on the silk road : the search for the lost cities and treasures of Chinese Central Asia*: Oxford university press, 1985. Chapter 12. Tun-huang - the hidden library, p. 156-177.

³idp.bl.uk/database/oo_scroll_h.a4d?uid=1861942536;bst=1;recnum=10528;index=1;jimg=1

⁴Lo/Wang, p. 189, 191-193. *Spider threads roaming the empyrean : the game of weiqi*, Andrew Lo and Tzi-Cheng Wang. In Asian games. - New York : Asian Society, 2004. - p. 186-201.

Theories

In the 2nd ICOB proceedings, Ulrich Schädler published some thoughts about the spread of board games. We should not only look at the games themselves, but also study their wider cultural background.⁵

He also tells us that games spread through contact between people.

*Games do not travel by themselves. ... It consists of a set of rules and comes into existence only at the moment, when one or more players apply these rules, that is: play the game. Thus games resemble parasites: they need human beings to survive and to spread. People leaving their natural habitat for example will take their games with them, just as they take other traditions ... with them. The game will at first be played by the same people in their new home, but with contacts to the indigenous people increasing it will slowly become known also to the new neighbours.*⁶

*On the other hand people from outside, be it travellers, missionaries, merchants or soldiers, having temporary contact with a certain region or people from that region may get to know a game, like it and bring it back when they come home.*⁷

In a recently published catalogue of an exhibition of 'Asian games' we can find two extended articles on the cultural background of baduk in China and Japan.⁸

From all information I have gathered it is clear that in the early period Go was for the greater part a pastime for the elite.

*Although it is likely that commoners also played weiqi, it was the elite who adopted it as a game of high culture. The famous weiqi players and games of antiquity already were listed in compendia by the Ming period, a historiographical tradition that has continued down to the present and parallels that of chess.*⁹

And maybe because it was just played by the elite it didn't spread outside China.

*Given the hold that weiqi exerted on the Chinese elite for two millennia, it is not surprising that the game spread to the surrounding regions over which China exerted its greatest cultural influence — namely, Korea and Japan. ... It was played on a limited scale in Nepal, Sikkim, and Tibet, but did not spread westward, more probably because, although no less intellectually demanding than chess, its pieces lacked the figural imagery that makes chess so compelling. If its appeal outside East Asia remained restricted by its cerebral, even abstracted nature, within its homeland weiqi inspired a rich cultural legacy.*¹⁰

So the abstract nature of the game could be an obstacle for appreciating and learning the game outside China's influence.

Schädler also mentions some of baduk's inherent properties which could have hindered its spread, as contrasted with the rapid spread of chess from the 9th century onwards. He names dynamism (speed), variability and gambling, which, according to him, are missing in baduk and are properties very much

⁵Schädler, op. cit., p. 17

⁶Schädler, op. cit., p. 17

⁷Schädler, op. cit., p. 18

⁸*Asian games : the art of contest*, edited by Colin Mackenzie and Irving Finkel. - New York : Asian Society, 2004.

⁹Lo/Wang, op. cit., p. 196

¹⁰Lo/Wang, op. cit., p. 199

liked by European games players. To sum it up:

*The game did certainly not meet the taste of the players of board games neither in India and Arabia nor in Europe. These were interested in short, quick games with a lot of movement going on and the possibility of gambling (...)."*¹¹

Herbert Giles, the famous British diplomat and sinologist, explained why it was so difficult for a foreigner to learn the game.¹²

Skill in wei-ch'i implies the astuteness and versatility so prized amongst the Chinese. They could hardly believe a man to play wei-ch'i well and yet be possessed of indifferent abilities as a practical man of the world. It would amount to a contradiction of terms. (...)

Up to the end of 1874 we had frequently alluded to it in conversation with educated Chinese, and had always found them loud in its praises. At the same time it was freely declared to be far too difficult for foreigners to learn. (...)

If anything, it was meant that the sole means of communication being the Chinese language, too great difficulty would be experienced by the teacher in making the intricacies of the game sufficiently clear to the learner. For,

*inasmuch as only educated men know Wei-Ch'i, and no educated men can speak a word of English, the alternative would be a pidgin-English-speaking servant, and then it would be necessary first to make him understand the principles he was undertaking to explain.*¹³

So it boils down to a communication problem. Without speaking Chinese it would be impossible to learn the game, as none of the literati spoke English.

My explanation why baduk didn't go westwards is simple: the people who played the game didn't leave China. They were scholars and high officials who formed the local and central elite. So people along the Silk Road had not much chance to see the game played and hence the game didn't travel. On the other side it was difficult for foreigners inside China to come into contact with the literati. There was a language barrier that efficiently blocked the diffusion of the game.

Acknowledgement

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□

¹¹Schädler, op. cit., p. 21-22

¹²*Wei-ch'i, or the Chinese game of war* by Herbert A. Giles. - Temple Bar, 1877. - Vol. 49, No. 194, p. 45-57.

¹³Giles, op. cit., p. 27

¹⁴*Eurogo* is a set of three volumes by Franco Pratesi covering the history of the game in Europe. senseis.xmp.net/?Eurogo.