

HYDE'S ASSISTANTS ~ BOTH INADEQUATE

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In a previous issue (BGJ 130, p. 26) we have seen that in his book of 1694 Thomas Hyde came near to first describing Go to European readers, with enough detail to let them play it. This he did with the help of two persons, who unfortunately were not expert enough. Let us try and expand the bit of information provided by Hyde about them.

William Gifford

Thomas Hyde wrote that he owned a Go playing set, brought to him by Mr. Gifford, who had been a merchant active in Asia, where he had also been Governor of Fort St George, in Madras.

Fort Saint George is an exact reference; the place is Madras, now Chennai, one of the first British colonies in India. The fort was built on 23rd April (Saint George's day) 1639 by the East India Company that had obtained a piece of land from the local king.

Around the fort, the colony of George Town developed as the place of white people, whereas the rest of the colony was named 'Black Town'. The trading centre that grew here was open to merchants coming from several countries of Europe and Asia, including China.

Madras was the sort of place where anything could be found or ordered, but at the same time it is difficult to imagine people there wasting their time, playing a difficult game of pure skill, with no gambling involved.

The political situation was far from quiet at the time. Local traditional authority was divided among several groups, which fought each other. The various European

nations involved (especially Portuguese, Dutch, English, and soon afterwards French too) were each trying to displace the local trade conquests of the others.

The 'official' members of the East India Company were competing for their trade with independent interlopers, working individually or as unofficial groups or companies. Moreover, it may be surprising to know that hard internal battles were fought among the leaders of the East India Company themselves.

In the specific case of Governor Gifford, we obtain the general impression of a Governor more honest and dynamic than average. Some information indicates positive activity by him to improve the local conditions for trade. For instance, we have indications that early on he founded a bank in Madras.

Further information on the main events and the personages involved can be found in reference works. Let us summarise from one of them (Burgess James, *The Chronology of Modern India*. Edinburgh: Grant, 1913), keeping its chronological format.

In 1681 the Court of Directors orders the dismissal of Streynsham Moster, Governor of Fort St. George, and on July 3 he is succeeded by Mr. William Gyfford, till July 25, 1687. In 1683, Mr Gyfford, Governor of Madras, is directed to control Bengal also, and he is there from August 8, 1684 till January 26, 1685, Mr. Elihu Yale acting for him at Madras. In 1684, Mr Gyfford, Governor of Fort St. George is made President of the Coromandel and Bengal settlements. In 1686, April 12, King James II by Charter grants permission to build a mint at Madras. In 1687, July 25, Mr Elihu

Yale succeeds Mr. Gyfford (dismissed) as Governor of Madras till October 3, 1692.

It is easier to find information on this Elihu Yale, because one of the most renowned universities of the USA was named after him; a whole book has been devoted to his life: (Bingham Hiram, *Elihu Yale: the American Nabob of Queen Square*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1939).

Obviously, we often find Governor Gifford quoted in the part of book devoted to Yale's stay in Madras. The relationship between Governor Gifford and member of staff, Yale, appears to have been fine. On the other hand, Gifford's later stay in Madras was comfortable enough, thanks to Yale, the new Governor.

Of course, we can only partially reconstruct the life of William Gifford. However, it must be acknowledged that the single event that is of interest for us is a hardly noticeable one in his life. We cannot hope to find a history of Madras, or of the East India Company, in which information is provided on the Go set that Gifford offered to Thomas Hyde!

Whatever the detail, the Governor eventually was able to present a game set to Hyde, but it is evident that his knowledge did not include the corresponding software.

Shen Fuzong

Hyde's main information had been provided by a Chinese native. His name – Shin Fo-çung according to Hyde – is differently written, with Shen Fuzong or Fu-zong as the commonest version.

It seems that there is no record about him in Chinese history books, all the information about him originates from Europe (Ding Guoru, personal communication, 2002). Considering his life, this is not too surprising because he

came to Europe as a young man, together with Jesuit Philippe Couplet, and died only ten years later, during his travel back home.

In Europe, however, the visit of the converted Chinese was not unnoticed. He especially left traces in England, where he was welcome at the King's court and was the first to make a catalogue of the Oriental archives in the Bodleian Library. During his stay in Oxford, opportunities to explain the elements of Go to Hyde were of course frequent.

This Chinese converted to Christianity was also the subject of a painting by Sir Godfrey Kneller, which was kept among the preferred art works by the King and is still part of the Royal collections.

The sitter (Michael Alphonsus Shen Fu-Tsung) was born of Chinese Christian parents and came to Europe at the instigation of Father Philip Couplet, Procurator of the China Jesuits in Rome. After leaving Macao in 1681 they travelled together in Italy, France, and England. Shen Fu-Tsung left England in 1688 for Lisbon where he entered the Society of Jesus. He died near Mozambique on his way back to China in 1691.

Shen Fu-Tsung seems to have been a well-known figure at the English court and his portrait was painted for James II. The first reference to the work is by the naval surgeon, James Yonge, who saw Shen Fu-Tsung at Windsor Castle in July 1687, describing him as 'a young, pale-faced fellow who had travelled from his country and become a papist (his picture being done very well like him in one of the King's lodgings)'.¹

When James II visited Oxford in September 1687, Shen Fu-Tsung was the subject of conversation at the Bodleian Library, where the sitter had apparently

helped to catalogue the Chinese manuscripts. On that occasion James II remarked that 'he had his picture to the life hanging in his room next to the bedchamber'



The Chinese Convert
by Sir Godfrey Kneller, 1687¹

The painting can be categorized either as a religious picture or as a portrait. The composition succeeds on the basis of the unaffected sense of design and the directness of the characterization. The fact that the sitter looks upwards and away from the viewer suggests divine inspiration. According to Horace Walpole, 'Of all his works, Sir Godfrey was most proud of the converted Chinese.'

¹ Credit: The Web Gallery of Arts, www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/k/kneller/chinese.html

This renowned painting may be 'read' from our point of view too. In the portrait we see a young Chinese who had taken the cowl. How could he be an expert in Go? Probably his education had other priorities, works on mercy, heaven's inhabitants, and so on.

At most he could have heard about it or avail himself of short descriptions of the game kept in the Bodleian Chinese archives that he was indexing. Unfortunately, it is evident – from the information communicated – that he never played a Go game with Thomas Hyde.