

PIONEER OF GO

Franco Pratesi

franco.pratesi@alice.it

Several pieces of information about the Chinese game of wei-chi had arrived in Europe by the beginning of the 17th Century, but for a detailed description people had to wait for Herbert A. Giles and his persistence. Unfortunately, his description is not easily available, even though he published it twice, in 1877 in *Temple Bar*, and in 1882 in *Historic China*, a miscellaneous collection of his studies.

Part can then be found reproduced in the book *The Game of Wei-Chi* by Pecorini and Shu, London 1929, with introduction and appendix by Giles himself. It was in a recent reprint of this book that I read the description by Giles, a few years ago. He interestingly states in the introduction, 'I am extremely interested to hear that a book on Wei-Ch'i is being published, as I was the pioneer, many years ago, in introducing this game to this county. To learn to play Wei-Chi as an amusement is an easy task: I taught my young children. To become a master is an affair of years'. Actually, taking the date into account, 'this game to this country' might be read as 'this game to the whole world except the Far East'.

In particular, Giles had two merits — he gave us the first description of wei-chi and at the same time he clearly explained why this had been so difficult to achieve (thus clarifying why tradesmen and sailors had not previously been capable of learning and explaining the game). This is worth repeating as a summary in my own words, as I published earlier in *Eteroscacco*, 1997, no. 78, p 27-28, as

I was agreeably impressed by this description!

'Wei-chi is the game of mandarins, who cannot be expected to learn barbarian languages nor to deal with foreigners. A few Chinese servants actually can speak some pidgin English and play the go-between for any trade or ordinary affair. However, this does not help in our case, since no Chinese servant will ever be able to understand wei-chi. Thus, only a man such as Giles, General Consul in China, then professor at Cambridge, could eventually be able to learn this extraordinary game from China.'

Later on, I could actually verify that the importance of Giles's contribution had already been outlined twenty years earlier by Theo van Ees (*Go tijdschrift*, 1978 vol 15, no. 5, p 32). He concluded that the difficult situation in communicating with the Chinese, 'fortunately did not prevent him from publishing his findings.'

Indeed, he could not publish everything he had written on the topic. I found that a manuscript on wei-chi is kept in the John G. White Collection of the Cleveland Public Library (which as far as I know is the richest chess collection in the world). It is recorded in the Library catalogue as follows: Giles, Herbert Allen, 1845-1935. - Game of go / by Giles. - [188] - Holdings: Cleveland/John G. White Coll. - Call Number: [q] 789.86M G392.

It could simply be the original draft of the article he published in *Temple Bar*— it could contain more detail. In the beginning of April 1999 I asked the Librarian and — due to

works and repairs in the Library — only in the first days of September did I have a copy in my hands — five months awaiting but eventually a happy glance into this historical document has been possible! To see Giles's handwriting and diagrams has been for me the second and greater emotion induced by his account of the game, coming from more than a century ago.

Let us examine briefly this old instruction manual for playing *wei-chi* that has been kept so long forgotten as a manuscript. Its dimensions are 15x25 cm, 51 pages. The structure is based on diagrams, each on a whole page, drawn using a ruler for the board and compasses, with red and blue or red and black inks, for the stones; these diagrams are reproduced at the end in a reduced form and without text, two within a page. On each diagram the whole 19x19 board is shown, even if usually several different groups of stones are drawn on it as separate examples. Every diagram is then followed by one or more pages of text, illustrating its different examples. I will now follow this pattern and outline the contents, after numbering the diagrams.

1, No less than ten ways of connection, including 'tiger's mouth' and double picket (our bamboo joint). Interesting for its name may also be the 'cow's tongue' that we may better know as the horse's head'.

2, 3, 4. Each with an opening, followed by a page of text.

5. Two further openings which however we might rather consider as simple examples of *comer joseki*.

6. Six examples of 'stealing' — *ko* positions for us — and the fundamentals of *ko* fighting are

outlined in three following pages of text.

7. Three game positions — the first move is searched for either connecting or attacking the adversary. A special reason for connecting groups is here stated as deriving from (Chinese) counting rules, according to which 'the owner of the fewest number of garrisons [living groups, I suppose] scores one for each garrison the adversary has in excess of his own'.

8. Two examples of what we call *semeai*, with all black and white liberties indicated (here the object of attack).

9. Nine examples of 'making eyes', namely how to defend in life-and-death positions.

10. Eight examples of attack in simple life-and-death situations — filling up or putting out the eyes of the adversary'.

11. Eleven examples of life-and-death cases. In order to insert so many examples in a single board all the encircling black stones are not marked in the diagrams.

12. Five examples of life and death, the first being the 'turtle with its head drawn in'.

13. *A-C* show the progress of a ladder, called here 'twisting', *D* indicates the way of capturing we call 'in a net'.

14. Six examples of various kinds, often involving connections. *A* shows 'stabbing' (maybe peeping?), putting one stone adjacent to the tiger's mouth for entering it on the following move. All 'are given merely to familiarise the beginner with the correct moves under certain circumstances'.

15. Ten endgame positions.

A general comment may be useful. In no part of these descriptions has one grounds to expect something 'new' for our go didactics, more than a century later. The fact of writing elementary instructions for the game is already a great merit to be ascribed to our pioneer! The jargon he uses, directly taken from the Chinese, is maybe the 'newest' information for us to read.

In particular, the part on the openings appears more clearly outdated, since it is based on the initial placement of four stones on the corner star points (two black and two white crossed). We find here that a usual way to go on is first to 'complete the circle'. In addition to the four initial stones, the initial moves (about twenty) are all on the third line, with regular intervals

between black and white. Only after that some contact play can reasonably begin.

The description left by Giles contains enough technical details for playing the game. At most, we may feel the absence of a whole game reported. More details were then provided by Korschelt from Japan and, thereafter, Japan became the main source of go knowledge in Europe and America with rare exceptions. Now, the Japanese root of our go literature is evident — more difficult to trace is its Chinese root, and one of the reasons is that Giles's descriptions practically remained unknown, while the later book by Pecorini and Shu was too isolated to support an on-going Chinese connection.