A LATIN ENGLISH DESCRIPTION

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Thomas Hyde (Billingsley, Shropshire 1636 - Oxford 1702) was a renowned scholar, expert in Oriental languages. He was at the same time University Professor in Oxford, chief Librarian of the Bodleian Library and official Interpreter of Oriental languages to the King.

His interests were many but, different from other scholars, they fortunately included the history of board games. With him we thus find both useful requirements present: attention to our topic, high-level education, allowing to approach the original sources.

Actually, most civilisations, to begin with the ancient ones, have used their own board games, some of them forgotten — often only their names are kept. It is thus hard to understand if a given game was present among different populations, how its name and rules changed, or in which direction it passed from one region to another.

Hyde studied this specific subject in depth, with many discoveries from the original sources. Moreover, he took the opportunity to enlarge his knowledge of exotic board games, whenever a foreign envoy visited the Court and he was officially engaged for assisting in the conversation.

Working on historical and linguistic bases, Hyde provided us with a milestone work, *De ludis Orientalium libri duo*, Oxford 1694, which can be considered as the first treatise in Europe on board games and their history. Obviously the language is Latin, the universal European language at the time, but frequent

quotations have been inserted in a lot of ancient and Oriental languages.

The merits of this great work have been acknowledged by most historians of games, who often have used it for their own descriptions or investigations. For our game (let me use its current name of Go, even though here clearly out of place) already Edward Falkener, in his book of 1892, reproduced most of Hyde's information, which was also quoted by W.D.Witt in his bibliographic notes of 1931. More recently, attention to Hyde's text has been called by Theo van Ees (Go. Tijdschrift van de Nederlandse Go Bond, 1981. Jrg. 19, nr. 3, p. 14-16). Of course, Hyde's description could not be absent in the several articles on early European Go literature written by Jaap Blom, summarised and updated in *The Go Player's Almanac 2001*, published by Kiseido.

It may be useful to double check Hyde's text again, for some additional detail and comment. The section devoted to Go is relatively small, only seven pages, 195-201 in volume two. However, the very fact that a specific section is present is rather surprising, because nobody in Europe knew anything about this game, in addition to the undefined news coming from the Jesuit missions and a few other sources.

With Hyde, the situation is for the first time different. The information provided by him on Go is not incidental as before (and as it will usually occur also later on, with travellers to the Orient). In those cases, information is provided on the culture of the country, religious

beliefs, traditional habits, ways of dressing, eating, getting married, burying and honouring the dead, and so on. If some information is added to typical games, it usually cannot be more than a passing mention. On the contrary, Hyde is writing an all-embracing treatise precisely on board games!

For each game, Hyde usually investigates both current and unusual literary sources. In this case, he behaves differently: he got in touch with a Chinese, who was familiar enough with the game and could explain it. Let us summarise his description, with comments added in square brackets. Already the place in which Go has been inserted (owing to similar characteristic features) may be significant, just after discussing Draughts, and Ludus Latrunculorum, the much discussed — and little known — board game of the old Roman civilisation.

Hyde's description of Go actually begins within the previous section, with some general information outlining its frequent presence in China among high public figures, dignitaries and magistrates. People expert in the game are honoured, as also mentioned by Purchas, because it improves political and diplomatic skill. Hyde himself owns a playing set, brought to him by Mr. Gifford, a merchant active in Asia, where he had been Governor of Fort St George, in Madras. Thanks are given him for such a big favour.

Hyde notes at once that, in the case of Go, descriptions in the literature are inadequate and moreover not concordant. He begins by reporting a few quotations — Semedo in Italian, Trigault and Legatio Batavica in Latin — but soon introduces his new source, without copying further descriptions available of the same kind. [We know that some lack of definition was already present in the original description by Matteo Ricci and that many later versions became incoherent, due to mistakes inserted while reprinting and especially while translating in other languages.]

Hyde is proud to announce from the beginning that he is able to give a better description of the game, both more complete and truer. [It is significant that this great expert of board games had performed a specific search for improving existing descriptions, and eventually became aware that his contribution was remarkably improving our knowledge of the subject.]

His information has been provided by a Chinese native, Shin Fo-çung, an educated person. [An essential problem for us is understanding the education level of this informer. Hyde himself gives a witness, 'non indoctus', not uneducated. Of course, the same witness would have been more convincing if expressed with the corresponding positive term, such as 'doctus'or educated — indeed, there can be several degrees of education included, and left indistinct here, between these two expressions. However, if he was able to write and especially to give a description of Go, he should have received a better-than-average education.]

Then Hyde provides a few diagrams, main Chinese words involved, and a new description of the game, all coming from his Chinese informer.

This game is a game of war and in particular the board reproduces the battlefield between Chinese and Tartars. The game is usually played by Chinese dignitaries with 360

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glass stones [let me here call them so, instead of discs or soldiers, as found in the book] on a board of about two feet, correlated to the dimensions of the stones, so that its edge corresponds to a chain of 18 of them.

Two different names are provided for the game, either Hoy Kî or Wei Kî, with the same meaning of circle, or circular, or circuit game. Actually the meaning may be better intended here as encircling, which is connected with the game rules, according to which a stone encircled or surrounded by four adversary ones can be captured.

A diagram (with a stone surrounded by four enemy ones) is used to show this way of capturing, and at the same time for introducing the concept of an eye, indicated with its Chinese name of Yèn. It is explicitly stated that players tend to produce this figure and thus to build eyes — any player wishing to win the game should do it.

Another diagram indicates a kind of simplified initial position [here outlined on a reduced 3 by 3 goban] with white stones in the central position of left and right edges and black ones in the same position at top and bottom. There is an initial position with alternate placement of two stones for each player in opposing corners [fortunately we do know this historical position, correctly described in many other sources, otherwise the corresponding diagram here could be misleading]. Then players continue, with the aim of building eyes and capturing enemy stones.

In particular, each player has 180 stones and takes them from a little vase, one by one. It is not necessary that they be all entered initially on (the mid of) the board. The game usually begins around the central

part of the board and playing skill consists in placing stones, and then promoting [?] them, so that they can easily surround and capture enemy stones.

The probability of capturing and winning is the same for both players, because stones are added one by one in turns, where each player thinks they may be useful for capturing some of the enemy stones, which process can begin before the stone placement is ended.

As a matter of fact, this game represents two armies competing for a given region and enemies take every opportunity to surround and capture all enemies, as well as individual ones. As stated above, eyes are formed and stones captured whenever they have no escaping path free, with exclusion of the diagonal directions. It is thus necessary to occupy and close all escaping ways.

If an eye has to be formed and stones on the board are not enough, new stones are taken from the container to that aim. If many enemy stones occupy a region of the board, it is better to lead own stones in another part. However, the enemy will follow him by alternatively placing his stones, so that battles may develop either by direct attack or by laying traps.

When the result cannot be changed, the winner says: Game over, Huán leáo. As it occurs for the term Wei, also the Chinese term Huán can have various meanings — the end, or to end, or ended — and the distinction is only possible through the construction of the sentence; leáo is instead just a particle indicating the past tense.

Then players count both occupied territory and surviving stones. If the regions of the two players are clearly

different, then it is enough to count the stones. A player having the larger territory says: I have these points, you have less, and thus I win. However, even if a player has less territory, he wins if having more surviving stones. [The traditional Chinese way of counting together free intersections and those occupied by own stones can be understood here, once one knows it already.]

From the description, it is apparent how the game is entirely of pure skill, without any intrusion of chance or fortune. No doubt that everybody should consider it among the allowed games.

It is also noteworthy that the character indicating the game has been written in two different ways by the Chinese informer. This can be seen by comparing the character in the text with that written within the diagram of the board. Hyde indicates this difference so that nobody believes it to derive from an inaccuracy of his own.

If a few further comments are allowed on the description, there is no clear explanation that the way of capturing explained may be, and usually is, applied to whole groups. Whereas the concept of building eyes for winning is clear, there is no suggestion that having two connected eyes implies safety for any group. The concept itself of connection is not explained, even if one of the diagrams could have been used for it. There is no indication of ko situations, or similar topics, rather secondary, but nevertheless required before coming to actual play.

When indicating that surrounding stones are closing the exit ways (and thus leading to capture) it seems in reading this text that, in the contrary case, these escaping ways could actually be used for moving away the stones to the next free intersections. In other words, a way of playing by placing stones in a first stage and moving them in a second one is not explicitly excluded, and in a couple of sentences seems to have been intended.

In conclusion, the channel found by Hyde was the best possible one: an Oriental person familiar with the game explains it to someone who knows nothing about it, but is at the same time an expert in similar games. It is thus true that Hyde's description is remarkably more advanced with respect to previous ones. What was still lacking for playing the game had been reduced to a couple of points. In order to explain them clearly enough, Hyde needed just to have the additional opportunity to play a couple of games by person. It is a pity that just a few additional lines of text would have been enough for having the game played in Europe, two centuries before it actually has been!