

DOERS AND DREAMERS: WEI QI PLAYERS AND POETS

By Peter Shotwell

This essay originally appeared in the American Go Journal in an abbreviated form. Most of the basic material and translations—but not the conclusions—come from Dr. Chen Zu-yen's, 'The Art of Black and White: Wei-ch'i' in Chinese Poetry' (The Journal of the American Oriental Society Dec. 1997; pp. 643-653). Dr. Chen is the brother of famed Chinese professional Chen Zude and his article is highly recommended for anyone interested in the history of go in China. It can be downloaded from www.Northernlight.com for a small fee. The commentary I have made is only a small (and highly speculative) addendum to this work, whose scope and erudition is unique in the English language.

In China, the 'styles of expression' of playing *wei qi* and the writing of poetry (and the other arts, for that matter) have long been considered to be similar. For example, some of the well-known comments about the two great Chinese *wei qi* players of the 18th century, Shi and Fan, have poetic underpinnings. The poet Teng Yuan Sui wrote:

Fan Si-pin's style is wonderful and lofty, like the divine dragon shifting shape—its head and tail are indistinguishable. His opponent, Shi Ting-an, is accurate and strict as an old steed galloping along without a misstep.

He also wrote:

Shi was like the ocean in great flood, containing much that is profound. Fan was like the high mountains, with aspirations that were lofty and marvelous.

Li Ruzhen, a famous go-playing scholar of the time, said:

Fan's attitude to go is like Duke Mu of Wu's to generalship: he does not follow the ancient methods, but is all conquering.

In contrast, Shi, who rigorously studied *wei qi* theory, wrote a poem in which he said,

To answer without thinking leads to many defeats.

The poet Yuan Wei wrote on Fan's gravestone:

Only Shi could match Fan, but the sun could set over Shi's moves of defense while Fan, smiling and lighthearted, could exchange jokes with his friends, or go to sleep between the moves of his opponent. (1)

To the Chinese reader, these lines call to mind the great 8th century poets, Li Bai (also called Li Bo) and Du Fu. While both were matchless lyricists, Li Bai wrote no *wei qi* poetry and purportedly drowned drunk, attempting to embrace the image of the moon in a lake. His style is thought to express the 'Daoist/Buddhist' theme of contentment through non-involvement—in other words, he was a 'dreamer.'

Du Fu, on the other hand, represents the more serious 'Confucian' approach, which stresses that true happiness comes through fidelity and devotion to duty. Besides being a studious player, he wrote many *wei qi* poems and (unsuccessfully) attempted to participate in public life and devise military strategies. He was a 'doer.'

However, this dichotomy between 'doers and dreamers' is not as simple as it often seems.

Early Daoism was much different than the later form it took which was transported to the West by early missionaries. Instead, there was a philosophical 'opposition' between Confucianism and this Daoism that ran long and deep in Chinese culture, but not the kind that we are accustomed to think about.

Beginning in the 5-3rd century BC, the 'Dark School' of early Daoism's warrior/philosopher writers presented an entirely different approach to life than the Confucians, who became dominant after the ascendancy of the Han Dynasty in 206 BC. It was Confucian writers who rewrote history (on behalf and at the instigation of their emperor-employers) and, as the centuries rolled on, helped recast

Daoism into a mystical nature religion headed by a pope-like figure which was hardly worthy of the attention of gentlemen scholars and government officials. (2)

As Chad Hansen and others have argued recently, early Daoism was a practical and flexible way of dealing not only with warfare, but with life in general—politics, business and even the bedroom. It was for getting one's way perhaps through rebellion and for dealing with those one didn't know and trust. Its tenets formed the basis and strategies of nearly every revolt in Chinese history—the Yellow and the White Turbans and even the recent Falun Gong.

Confucianism, on the other hand, was for dealing loyally and submissively with family and emperors and those one knew intimately. Emphasizing these qualities of Confucianism has been the traditional reaction to rebellions as the Chinese government has demonstrated recently by its official reaction to the Falun Gong.

The result was that Daoist influences remained largely hidden in written records and is probably the reason that so little is known about its obvious influence on such 'dark matters' as go strategies. Matters of war (*wu*), at least publically, were for mercenaries and not for men in the civil sphere (*wen*). Yet, everyone played go and everyone knew of the techniques that later became encapsulated, for example, in the '36 Strategies' and have been used most recently, and often unconsciously, in international business negotiations. (3)

Nevertheless, despite the early disparagement of go playing by the early Confucians, the game came to be favorably commented on as an art form suitable for *literati* in poetry after c. 500 AD. Ironically enough, this could not take place until poetry itself began to be considered and written as an art form.

Two other factors entered into the feelings and symbolism surrounding go and its representation in poetry during and after the Tang Dynasty, c. 700 AD. One was the blending of the Earth and Sky forms of *feng shui* so that go playing, as a matter of manipulating *feng shui* on the go board, became looked at as a 'pure' activity that was mirroring the sacred activities of the Heavens. This was a process that was perhaps aided by the popularity of go in the Tang court, and the influence of the Tang court astrologers, who, as Edward Schafer suggested, might have added two extra lines to the 17x17 lined boards to conform with their innovations of the ancient systems. (4)

More important was the general blending of Heavenly Buddhism, mystical Daoism and Confucianism, which encouraged the development of an all-encompassing 'Neo-Confucianism.'

Coincidentally, it was at this point that some of the old Daoist texts began to be recognized for what many originally were—secret military instruction manuals. Some of these manuals were direct instruction for particular situations, such as Sun Zi's *The Art of War*, which was thought to be a later forgery by the *literati*—something not remedied until 20th century archeological finds of the work.

The mystical *Dao De Jing*, on the other hand, was accepted as practical advice by at least one general, who, for example, interpreted the saying, 'the best action is no action' to mean that emperors who avoided repressing the populace (and government officials) and avoided oppressing conquering expeditions were the ones who survived the longest. (5)

With this background in mind, and accepting that most good Chinese poetry is ambiguous and can be read in several ways, it is interesting to look at what might be happening when images of *wei qi* appear in poetry such as *Watching Wei Qi Games* by Su Shi (1037-1101).

In front of Five-Old-Men Peak,
Was a place left by the White Crane.
Tall pines shaded the courtyard;
The breeze and sunshine were pure and lovely.

I was visiting alone,
And hadn't met a single gentleman.
Who was it playing *wei-ch'i*?
Outside the door, two pairs of shoes.

No human voice was heard,
But occasionally I heard stones being put down.
Sitting across from each other over the lined board
Who understands the flavor of the scene?

Fishing with an unbaited hook
Are the wishes for bream and carp?
My little son is close to the Way,
He puts down stones casually.

Victory is surely pleasant,
But defeat can also be enjoyed.
Leisurely and unhurriedly
This is the way for the moment.

At first glance, Su's poem seems to be another 'dreamy' Daoist/Buddhist endeavor which is stressing the virtues of non-involvement.

On the other hand, playing a game of *wei qi* is also a matter of victories and defeats, and 'inner peace' usually comes from winning. Ironically, however, this attitude is usually associated with the 'Confucian' 'mode' of 'doing.'

Su Shi began life as an ardent reforming Confucian and ambitious courtier, but then lost out in a factional struggle with corrupt enemies, who convinced the emperor to exile him three separate times to the miserably hot, humid and malaria-infested southern island of Hainan. This poem was written during his last banishment, after he had become an ardent Daoist.

In the first three quatrains he seems to remember happier times, when he visited the White Crane Daoist complex of temples in the coolness of Mount Lu, where he began to be attracted to the Way of Daoism, and, as he wrote elsewhere, became inspired to learn to play *wei qi*.

The scene of the poem then shifts to what seems to be his reflections on accepting the small pleasures of his new life. However, using the story of an ancient king, who was out looking for a prime minister and met a sage fishing with an unbaited hook, gives pause. Since the sage knew who and for what purpose the king was looking for, what was the man thinking about, if not bream and carp, when he at first turned down, but then later accepted, the king's ardent request to lead the government?

There are also deep hints of other things going on beneath the surface of the next lines. For one thing, Su Shi's son is playing in front of their miserable thatched hut with a local magistrate, who is therefore a representative of the Emperor.

Dr. Zhen noted that Su's son being 'Close to the Way' referred to the Confucian *Book of Rites*:

If one knows what is First and Second, he approaches the Way.

It also refers to the Daoist saying,

From the One comes the Many.

This in turn refers to the proverb:

If you know the difference between sente ('first hand' in Chinese) and gote, you are approaching the Way of wei qi.

So how is Su's son 'coming close to the Way' in his playing? 'Leisurely and unhurriedly' is the way to win *wei qi* games—and multi-generational political struggles. Is this what Su Shi really learned on Mt. Lu? Has he finally escaped his worldly concerns into a 'better world,' as the last five lines seem to suggest? Many of Su's other exile poems bristle with resentment over the life he had lost. One spectacular example tells of how he, who had once lived in palaces, was now 'following the ox-droppings' that marked the path out to his new home.

Six hundred years later, in the late 18th century, Dr. Zu-yin noted that the poet Chi Yun seemed to criticize Su Shi.

Su Shih wrote,

*Victory is surely pleasant
But defeat can also be enjoyed.*

Another poet, Wang An-shih (who led a similar up-and-down political life and was first a rival and then a comrade of Su), said,

*After the fighting, two boxes take back the Black and White
On the board, where are the losses and gains?*

. . . Looking over their careers, they could not put these words into practice. Still, their words are worthy of deep reflection.

Chi Yun said these thoughts inspired him to write his own *wei qi* poem for an inscription of a painting of the Eight Immortals. Two of the Immortals were playing *wei qi* while five looked on and commented on the game. The eighth one slept soundly, his head resting on a gourd.

*On the board and beyond it, both men ponder—
Still the concern for profit and loss of the human world.*

*How can they compare with the 'Silly Immortal—stupid and senseless,
With spring breezes and butterflies, deep he is in dreamland.*

On face value, Chi Yun's poem seems to follow the same thoughts as his observations about Su Shi and Wang An Shi. However, there are other possibilities.

The last line of Chi Yun's poem refers to a famous dream of the Taoist Chuang Zu. When Chuang Zu awoke from his nap, he said he had no way of knowing whether he was a man who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or if he was still a butterfly who was dreaming he was a man. The 'Silly Immortal' will soon wake up, so is Chi Yun's poem really saying that the escape from worldly speculations and desires can only be temporary, even for the Immortals? Like Su Shi and his son, Chi Yun and his family also had to live under an emperor and be careful of what he said. Before he died, he quipped enigmatically,

*I am old now. Reviewing my own life, I could not put the words
I wrote into practice either. Talk is cheap after all.*

FOOTNOTES

(1) Fan and Shi were born a year apart in the same town. They played many matches during the course of their lives, the most famous being the 'Ten Games of the West Lake,' which, according to John Fairbairn, were not played near Hangzhou, but in Pinghu in Zhejiang Province. Fan seems to have been the superior player, but not by much. For the sources of these translations, the story of their lives and some examples of their games, see Zhen's essay; John Fairbairn's homepage at <http://www.harrowgo.demon.co.uk> and his work at <http://www.msoworld.com/mindzine/news/orient/go/go.html>; and Count Daniele Pecorini and Tong Shu; 'The Game of Wei-Chi'; Heian International Inc. (Graham Brash, Singapore); ISBN: 981218015X ; 1991.

(2) Ironically, at first, the Daoists and their related Schools, the Legalists and Mohists, supported the unification of China under Qin Shi Huang c. 220 BC as a path to peace, while the Confucians clung to their Warring States' feudal supporters. Later, when the Han consolidated their empire after 206 BC, Confucian loyalty and piety were seen as an advantage to holding the empire together. See the last section of Shotwell; 'Speculations on the Origins of Go'; *The Go Player's Almanac 2001*; R. Bozulich, ed.; Kiseido Press; 2001; pp. 43-64, the revised edition of which is posted elsewhere on this website.

(3) Chad Hansen; *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought: A Philosophical Interpretation*; Oxford Univ. Press; 1992. For the Chinese government reactions to the Falon Gong, see articles over the last several years in the NYTimes by Craig Smith. For the often unnoticed use of the 36 Strategies in Chinese commercial dealings with Western businessmen, see: Tony Fang; *Chinese Business Negotiating Style*; International Business Series; Sage Publications; 1999. His description of the relation of early Daoism to Confucianism seems slightly flawed, perhaps because of his Confucian sympathies.

(4) I have misplaced the exact reference.

(5) *The Dao of Peace: Lessons from Ancient China on the Dynamics of Conflict*; Wang Chen; Ralph Sawyer (trans.); Shambala; 1999.