

HOME PAGE	TODAY'S PAPER	VIDEO	MOST POPULAR	TIMES TOPICS	Register Now
 Search All NYTimes.com <input type="text"/> <input type="button" value="Go"/>					
<h1 style="margin: 0;">World</h1>					
SPORTS					
AFRICA	AMERICAS	ASIA PACIFIC	EUROPE	MIDDLE EAST	

Did China invent golf? 'It kinna' be,' Scots say

By Patrick L. Smith
Published: Tuesday, February 28, 2006

HONG KONG — Famously, they gave the world gunpowder.

They also came up with the wheelbarrow, the umbrella, printing and paper, phosphorescent paint and something called land sailing. Nowadays, of course, they give us practically everything in great, cheap quantities.

But golf? Did the Chinese invent golf and export it westward centuries before any Scottish shepherd ever thought of making a game out of his forlorn fate?

Say something quickly in a lilting brogue. "It kinna' be," for instance.

That is, roughly speaking, the Scottish position on the matter: It cannot be.

But the Chinese have a compelling argument that it was they, indeed, who first played the game, and a museum in Hong Kong now plans to display the evidence in an exhibition that is to open in a few weeks' time.

You have to see this stuff to believe it. Then you have to be careful what you say, because just who gave the world golf is a matter as tricky as any fairway at St. Andrews, the Scottish town in the Kingdom of Fife that bills itself as "the home of golf."

"The Autumn Banquet" is a Ming dynasty scroll that shows a member of the imperial court swinging what looks like a golf club at what looks like a golf ball with the apparent object of putting the ball-like sphere into what looks like a hole in what looks like a green.

The Ming painting, rendered in mineral pigments on silk by one Youqiu, has the Chinese playing chuiwan - literally "hit ball" - as early as 1368. Up at St. Andrews Links, they say the first recorded mention of golf was in 1457, when it was banned by an act of Parliament under James II.

The second exhibit in Hong Kong is a reproduction, but as an historical document it is key. It is of a mural found in a temple dedicated to the water god in Shanxi Province and dates to the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368). And there they are again, courtiers swinging the sticks.

Along with the wall painting comes a book, "Wan Jing", or "Manual of the Ball Game," which was published in 1282 and stands as the first known guide to the game that seems a lot like golf. Apart from various rules and regs - "the playing surface must not be flat" - "Wan Jing" notes that certain Song and Jin dynasty emperors liked "hit ball," which moves the date back to the early 12th century.

Tom K.C. Ming, the chief curator at the Hong Kong Heritage Museum, which will unveil the paintings on March 22, offers an assessment of all this that is modest to the point of diplomatic delicacy. "With these documents we can say chuiwan is quite similar to golf," Ming said the other day. "There's a green, there's a hole. When we saw the equipment we were quite surprised at how similar it is."

Ming's exhibition, "Ancient Chinese Pastimes," will show the chuiwan paintings for what is thought to be the first time outside the mainland.

His caution on the question of golf- Is it ours or theirs?-reflects his awareness that certain prideful sensitivities are at stake in the country where men wear (what look to be) skirts.

But Ming is not the acknowledged authority on the subject in China. That distinction goes to Ling Hongling, a professor of physical education who taught at Northwest Normal University in Lanzhou, Gansu Province.

Ling is apparently retired, university officials said when contacted by phone, and could not be reached for comment. No matter: His scholarly writings say it all, as straight as a 240-yard drive.

Golf originated in China, the professor asserts, and the earliest reference can be traced back to the Nantang dynasty, five centuries before the parliamentary act the Scots cite.

In support of his thesis, Ling invokes an array of evidence beyond the paintings due to go on display in Hong Kong: other art works, songs, an account of a 10th century county magistrate teaching his daughter "to dig holes in the ground and drive a ball into them."

Plainly, Ling has done his digging, too. Typical of his finds is an opera entitled "Anecdote of Shooting the Willow and Hitting the Ball," a tale of bureaucratic rivalry that revolves around a match refereed by a famous Song dynasty minister of war who lived from 989 until 1052.

In this work we find reference to "a stick with its spoon" and "a tiny crystalline pearl flying straight." As anyone familiar with the old nomenclature knows, a spoon is the ancient equivalent of a 3-wood.

Ling may be a scholar, but he writes with nationalistic gusto in a vocabulary worthy of a Maoist ideologue. Seeking truth from facts, as the Great Helmsman used to urge his followers, Ling says it is "historical reality" that the Chinese not only invented golf but then went on to show westerners how to play it.

It was, he believes, done by way of that 13th century book, borne by the Mongols toward Europe. "'Wan Jing' is the best medium of propagation," Ling says. "Any place a man could set foot on, the book has a chance to be brought into. Once it arrived there, it might give rise to golf."

As evidence, Ling notes the similarity between three clubs used in chuiwan and three in the game's early years in the West - the brassie (a 2-wood, approximately), the driver (the 1-wood, then as now) and that spoon Ling found in the opera and in some of the paintings.

"Aren't three pairs of clubs just similar to twin lotus flowers blooming on one stalk?" Ling asks in a flourish.

Well, maybe. But there is some unscholarly surmise in Ling's account, and this is where the Scots begin their counter-argument: Nothing, in the end, can be proven.

In the Chinese paintings, they point out, what look like holes might be targets-plates stuck in the ground. Can't have that and call it golf. How many holes did they play? What were the rules? None of it is known, they say on the tees at St. Andrews.

"Our view is that the game of golf as it evolved into its 18-hole format was first played here," explains Mike Woodcock, an official at the St. Andrews Links Trust, which manages the land on which the town's six courses lie.

Defensible, but not quite what the Scots used to put on the market.

As to the notion that the Chinese came west and taught the game, the Scots are having none of it. "Quite a few stick-and-ball games were played in a number of places in the late medieval period," Woodcock says.

It is not lost on anyone that the museum exhibition coincides with the appearance of a map showing that a famed Chinese mariner, Zheng He, may have discovered America 80-odd years before Columbus saw the place.

That document now awaits scholarly verification. If it is authenticated, we may have to ask just what Zheng's ships carried across the western oceans. Spoons and brassies and balls that looked like pearls?

[More Articles in World »](#)