

# Archaeological Discoveries and Qin-Han Period Sports and Games

Bai Yunxiang\*

*Key words: Sports Games Qin and Han Dynasties*

Sports and games are created, developed and enriched by the people in their productive and living practices and dynamic components of the social life. The ancient sports and games in China had long history and long-lasting traditions and were important contents of ancient civilizations of China. The origins of the ancient sports and games could be traced to the prehistoric ages; through the development in the Three Dynasties, they reached the first climax in the Qin-Han period. About the sports and games of this period, historic literatures had already plentiful records; however, the archaeological discoveries in the recent one century provided us rich pictorial and physical materials. This paper tries to depict the activities of sports and games in the Qin-Han periods in a systematic and comprehensive way with the references of both historic records and archaeological discoveries and the research results of former scholars, and discuss the characteristics of the sports and games at that time.

## Cuju – The Ancient Football

Modern football (soccer) emerged and matured in Britain during the 1860s, but as a sport in the whole human history, football was originated in ancient China. International Football Association (FIFA) recognized China as the birthplace of football.

Cuju 蹴鞠, also known as Taju 蹋鞠, referred to kicking ball with feet. It is recorded in *Zhanguo Ce* (Strategies of the Warring-States) that “ Linzi (the capital of the Qi State in the Warring-States Period) is exceedingly wealthy and well supplied. There is no one of the people who does not play the Yu (a kind of windpipe), or the Se (a 25-string zither), or the Zhu (a xylophone) or the Qin (a seven-string zither), fight roosters or race dogs,

play with the dice or kick the ball (English translated by Bramwell Seaton Bonsall, unpublished draft). ” This reflected that in the reign of King Xuan of the Qi State (the end of the fourth century BCE), Cuju (kick the ball) was very popular in Linzi, therefore Linzi was recognized as the birthplace of Cuju game.

In the Qin-Han period, Cuju was diffused much wider; it was played not only in the society but also in the court. The father of Liu Bang, the founding emperor of the Western Han Dynasty, was an amateur of Cuju. In the Han Dynasty, Cuju had two main forms: one was a competitive sport with special play field – Ju Cheng 鞠城 (“ Ball Castle ”) and competing rules; the two teams in one game had six players each and two referees were arranged. This type of Cuju game was mainly played in the army. The other was a game for performing and recreating, mainly played in the civilians and the court. This type of Cuju game has many pictorial materials



Figure 1. Cuju Scene (from Stone Relief at Nanyang)

\* The Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, 100710  
Email: baiyx@cass.org.cn

seen on the stone reliefs found in archaeological excavations, and in these Cuju playing scenes we can see the musical bands accompanying (Figure 1). It is noticeable that women players are usually seen in the Cuju playing scenes of the stone reliefs, and their appearances are more than that of men players. Of course, this is mainly because these scenes were carved for showing performance, they indeed reflected the fact that in the Han period, Cuju was also a favorite game for women, and this could be seen as the origin of women football sport. The ball used in Cuju game might be stitched with leather pieces and filled with felt, hair or something else, and its diameter might be 25 to 30 cm as the scales Cuju scenes suggested.

### Wushu (Martial Arts)

As a sport practiced for fighting, performing and exercising, Wushu might have its origin in prehistoric periods, but it was developed and got matured in the Qin-Han period. The Wushu sport in the Qin-Han period could be roughly classified into Quanshu (‘Fist Skill’, barehanded play) and weapons exercise.

Quanshu was also called as Bian 卞 or Shoubo 手搏 in the Han Dynasty, and the special written works about Shoubo appeared at that time. The barehanded plays were vividly depicted in the stone relief images of the Han



Figure 2. Three-player Combat Performance (from Stone Relief at Nanyang)



Figure 3. Sword Dancing (from Stone Relief at Zhengzhou)

period, such as the three-player combat performance scene on a stone relief image unearthed from Nanyang City, Henan Province (Figure 2) and another scene of two-player fighting on a stone relief image unearthed from Chenpeng Village, Nanyang.

In the Qin-Han period, along with the professionalization of warriors and the demand of warfare, the weapon exercises were promoted to a rather high level. Archaeological discoveries showed that in this period, the weapons used in weapon exercises were in much diversified types and styles. Sword dancing and fighting were one of the most traditional events of weapon exercises; the sword dancing on the famous ‘Feast at Hong Gate’ reflected that this dancing could be performed singly or doubly, and some kind of formulas or rules had been established. Special written works on sword fighting, such as *Jian Dao* 剑道 (the Way of Sword) with 38 chapters, appeared in the Han Dynasty. The lacquer-painted sword fighting scene on the bronze plate unearthed from a Han tomb at Luobowan, Guixian County, Guangxi Province and the sword dancing scenes on the stone reliefs unearthed from Nanyang, Zhengzhou and other places (Figure 3) all reproduced the sword exercises of the Han period.

The weapon exercises reflected by the pictorial materials also include the fighting with long-shafted weapons and the fighting between opponents with long-shafted weapons and short weapons and the barehanded ones against ones with long-shafted weapons. For example, a stone relief unearthed from Hanshan in Xuzhou, Jiangsu Province showed a scene of fighting between a warrior with a spear and another with a hooked halberd (Figure 4), a stone relief unearthed from Miaoshan in Tongshan County, Jiangsu Province, had a scene of halberd holder fighting against sword holder

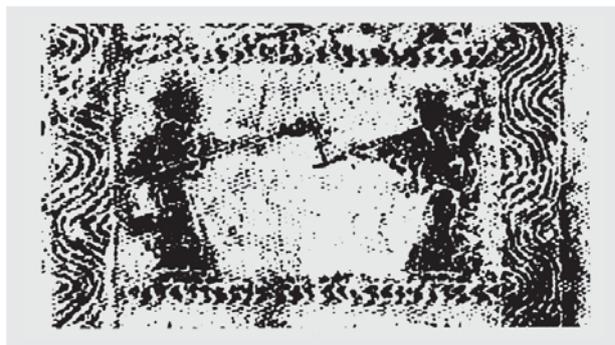


Figure 4. Weapon Exercise Performance (from Stone Relief at Hanshan, Xuzhou)

and hooked halberd holder, and a stone relief unearthed from Nanyang had a scene of a spear holder fighting against a barehanded opponent.

### Equestrianism

Equestrianism refers to horse racing, horseback acrobatics or other related sports. The equestrianism in China was originated along with the horse riding which began in later period of the Shang Dynasty. The Qin-Han period was the first climax for the development of cavalry in China, and equestrianism also became popular and flourishing at this time.

Horse racing, also called as “Chizhu 驰逐 (Scudding and Chasing)” or “Zou Ma 走马 (Running Horse)” in ancient times, was rather popular in the Warring-States Period; in the Han Dynasty, horse racing was prospering and became a type of gambling not only favored among the people but also in the court; it was favorite of Emperors Wudi, Xuandi and Chengdi of the Western Han Dynasty. The Horse Racing Scene on an impressed brick showed two horsemen riding with whips in hands

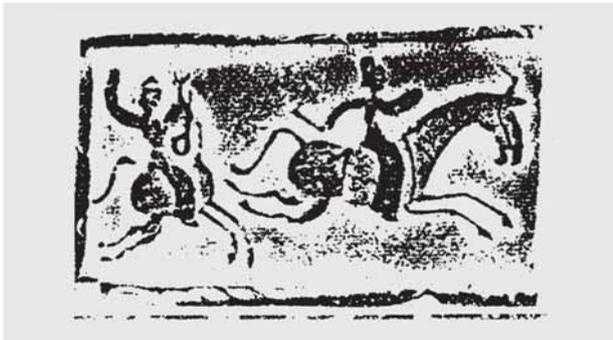


Figure 5. Horse Racing Scene (from Impressed Brick at Zhengzhou)

in a space of 8.5cm by 5cm (Figure 5). Figurines of mounted racer in match were also seen in pottery figurines of the Han Dynasty.

Another type of equestrianism popular in the Qin-Han period was horseback acrobatics, which was making poses or actions on the back of scudding horses. This sport was not only astounding but also entertaining: two images painted on a lacquered cosmetic case unearthed at Xianyang showed horseback acrobatics scenes at that time: one showed a rider standing on a stick in his hand on the back of a galloping horse, whose body was parallel to the horseback (Figure 6); the other showed a rider standing on left foot on the back of a galloping horse with right foot highly lifted and a whip in right hand, the whole figure of whom looked brisk and swift (Figure 7). In the images of stone relief tombs at Yinan, Shandong, scenes of horseback acrobatics were also seen: one showed a rider standing on the back of a galloping horse with a whip in left hand and a bola in right hand; the dresses and the body contours reflected that the rider was a woman (Figure 8); another showed a



Figure 7. Horseback Acrobatics (from Lacquer Painting on a Cosmetic Case unearthed from a Western Han Tomb at Maquan, Xianyang)



Figure 6. Horseback Acrobatics (from Lacquer Painting on a Cosmetic Case unearthed from a Western Han Tomb at Maquan, Xianyang)



Figure 8. Horseback Acrobatics (from Stone Relief at Yinan, Shandong)



Figure 9. Horseback Acrobatics (from Stone Relief at Yanan, Shandong)



Figure 10. Scene of Juedi (Wrestling, from the Back of a Fine-toothed Comb unearthed from Qin Tomb No. 70 at Fenghuangshan, Jiangling, Hubei)



Figure 11. Scene of Juedi (Wrestling, from Mural in an Eastern Han Tomb at Dahuting, Mixian, Henan)

rider in diving pose with only one hand grabbing the saddle and the other hand holding a short halberd, the whole figure of which looked breathtaking (Figure 9). The “Horseback Acrobatic Scene” on the Shaoshi Towers at Dengfeng, Henan showed two women acrobats performing on the backs of galloping horses, one of whom was standing on hands and the other was dancing with long sleeves waving, both looked swift and elegant.

### Juedi (Wrestling)

As a type of Wrestling, the main feature of Juedi 角抵 was scuffling barehanded, which can train people to get healthy, strong and enduring. In China, the origin of wrestling could be traced as early as in the Spring-and-Autumn Period before the fifth century BCE, and it was known as Jueli 角力 in the pre-Qin period. Bronze plaque with figures of struggling wrestlers in openwork has been found in a Cemetery of later Warring-States Period at Zhangjiapo Village, Chang’an County, Shaanxi Province.

To win in wrestling relies not only on physical strength but also on skillfulness. After the unification of the Qin Dynasty, private possession of weapons was strictly prohibited, and therefore Jueli, the sport and martial art characterized by fighting barehanded, developed rapidly and its name was changed into Juedi 角抵. The lacquer painting on the back of a fine-toothed comb unearthed from a Qin tomb at Fenghuangshan, Jiangling, Hubei Province (Figure 10) vividly depicted the scene of Juedi performance in the Qin period. In the Han Dynasty, Juedi developed so largely and became so flourishing in the society that the people in later times misunderstood that Juedi was originated in the Western Han Dynasty. It is recorded in historic literature that during Yuanfeng Era (110–105 BCE), Emperor Wudi of the Western Han Dynasty held two times of Juedi performing conferences and entertained foreign envoys with Juedi performances. In the Eastern Han Dynasty, Juedi performance was still a program for the court to receive foreign guests; most of the pictorial materials about Juedi sport found archaeologically so far were that of the Eastern Han Dynasty, such as the scene of Juedi in the mural of Tomb No. 2 at Dahuting, Mixian, Henan Province (Figure 11), which left valuable records of the Juedi sport at that time.

After the Qin-Han period, Juedi was still popular in the society. During the Three-Kingdoms Period and the Western Jin Dynasty, Juedi completely developed into competitive sport and its name was changed into

Xiangpu 相扑. In the Tang Dynasty, this sport was introduced eastward into Japan, and the name Xiangpu 相扑 (Sumo in Japanese) was kept to the present as well as the dresses of the wrestlers.

### Board Games

Board games may not be able to build people's bodies but they are good for the training and development of people's intelligence; moreover, just as the physical sports, board games are also intensively competitive. The earliest board games in China might have emerged in the Shang-Zhou period; in the Qin-Han period, the board games represented by Liubo 六博, Seqi 塞棋 and Weiqi 围棋 (Go) developed into a very high level.

Liubo, a board game played by throwing dices and moving pieces, as historic literature, was originated at the end of the Xia Dynasty and became popular since the Warring-States Period. During the Qin-Han period, Liubo became the favorite board game from the court to the common people. A pottery Liubo board unearthed in the architectural remains of Shaofu 少府 (Chamberlain for the Palace Revenues) in Weiyang Palace of the Western Han Dynasty might have been used by the Shaofu officials and another Liubo board unearthed from brick kiln site to the south of Beigong (North Palace) might have been used by the brick makers. Liubo boards and other game equipments were frequently found in burials of the Qin-Han period. For example, lacquered wooden Liubo boards were found in cemetery of the Western Han Dynasty in Jinqushan, Linyi, Shandong (Figure 12); bronze Liubo board was found in a Western Han tomb at Putuo, Xilin, Guangxi. Dices used in Liubo game were also unearthed without accompanying boards, such as a tetradecahedron stone dice found in the mausoleum yard of Qin Shihuang at Lintong, Shaanxi and an octadecahedron bronze dice found in attendant pit of Prince Qi of the Western Han Dynasty at Linzi, Shandong (Figure 13). In Tomb No. 3 at Mawangdui, Changsha, Hunan, an intact Liubo kit was unearthed: the kit container was a lacquered case, in which a square Liubo board, a wooden dice, 12 large ivory game pieces (six of which were white and six were black), 18 small gray ivory game pieces, 42 counting chips, ivory knife, horn-made scraper, and so on were encased (Figure 14). Scenes of Liubo game playing were usually seen in archaeological discoveries, such as the Liubo playing scene in the mural of a tomb of Wang Mang's Xin Dynasty found at Yanshi, Henan (Figure

15) and the stone relief images and molded bricks found in Sichuan, Henan and other provinces. Moreover, figurines showing Liubo playing scenes of this period were also unearthed in many places, such as a set of green-glazed pottery Liubo game playing figurines unearthed at Zhangwan, Lingbao County, Henan Province (Figure 16), which reproduced the scene of Liubo game playing in the Eastern Han Dynasty.

Also in the Qin-Han period, Seqi 塞棋, another board game similar to Liubo, was also very popular. Seqi, also known as Gewu 格五 or Curong 蹙戎, emerged in the Eastern Zhou period and became popular in the Qin-Han period. In the historic literature of this period, "Bo 博 (Liubo)" and "Se 塞 (Seqi)" were always mentioned together, and the basic difference of these two games was whether the moves of the pieces were decided by casting dice or counting chips; that was, Liubo's moves were decided by the result of throwing dices or counting chips, which might be won by luck; but Seqi's moves only by players' order and plans, which was a typical chess game won by strategy. Their boards were in very similar designs and modern archaeologists cannot tell them from each other; a pair of painted wooden figurines seated across a board unearthed from Tomb No. 48 of Mozuizi Cemetery of the Western Han Dynasty at Wuwei, Gansu Province might be showing the scene of playing Seqi (Figure 17).

Weiqi 围棋, also known as Yi 弈 in ancient times,

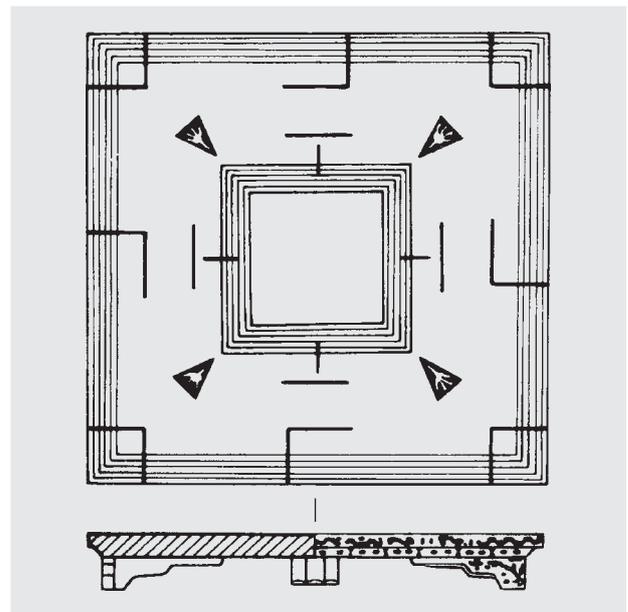


Figure 12. Lacquered Liubo Board (from Western Han Tomb No. 31 at Jinqushan, Linyi, Shandong)



Figure 13. Bronze Dices (From Accessory Pit of Prince Qi's Tomb at Linzi, Shandong)

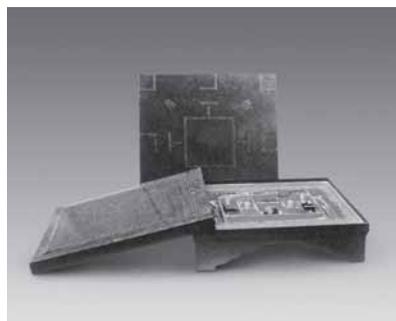


Figure 14. Lacquered Liubo Kit (from Western Han Tomb No. 3 at Mawangdui, Changsha, Hunan)



Figure 15. Scene of Liubo Game Playing (from Mural of a Tomb in Xin Dynasty of Wang Mang, 8-23 CE)



Figure 16. Pottery Sculpture of Liubo Game Playing Scene (from an Eastern Han Tomb at Zhangwan, Lingbao, Henan)



Figure 17. Wooden Sculpture of Seqi (from Tomb No. 48 of Mozuizi Cemetery at Wuwei, Gansu)

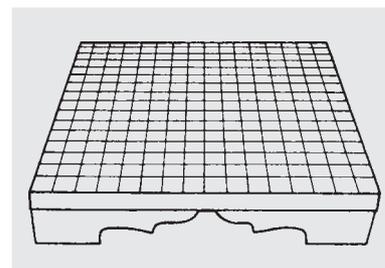


Figure 18. Stone Weiqi (Go) Board (from Eastern Han Tomb No. 1 in Wangdu, Hebei)

might have been originated in the times of Emperors Yao and Shun, and became popular board game in Qin-Han period. So far, no Weiqi pieces of Qin-Han periods have been found yet, but its boards have, such as a stone Weiqi board with iron legs found from Tomb No. 6 at Xianyang, Shaanxi; a stone Weiqi board unearthed from Eastern Han Tomb No. 1 at Wangdu, Hebei was in square plan with four short legs and 69 cm on each side and 14 cm in height; the board pattern was a grid comprising 17 by 17 intaglio lines and in the center and the four "star" points near the four corners, a tetrafoliate design was engraved (Figure 18). Through the evolution in the Three-Kingdoms to the Southern and Northern Dynasties, the Weiqi board changed into a grid composed of 19 by 19 lines with 361 points (intersections) and introduced into the whole Northeast Asia.

### Tou Hu (Pitch-Pot)

Besides of the sports and competitive games introduced

above, in the Qin-Han period, there were also many entertaining and leisure games which were related to sports, such as angling, kite flying and swing playing, and one of the most popular such games was Tou Hu 投壺 (Pitch-Pot).

Pitch-pot refers to a game of throwing arrows into a pot in special shape and a given distance, the scores of the players got depended on how many arrows he threw into the pot. This game was popular in the pre-Qin period, and usually used as entertainment in the feasts or reception held by officials or scholars, in occasions of which a series of redundant procedures were executed. In the Qin-Han period, pitch-pot was still performed in feasts or other gatherings. The pots used in pitch-pot game, usually in the shape of straight mouth, thin and long neck, protruding belly and ring foot, were found occasionally in Qin and Han burials, the typical cases of which were the green-glazed pottery long-necked pot unearthed from Tomb No. 8 of the Western Han Dynasty at Sijiangou,

Jiyuan, Henan and the bronze long-necked pot unearthed from a tomb of Wang Mang's Xin Dynasty at Dongyang, Xuyi, Jiangsu, and so on. The arrows used in pitch-pot game were also made specially for the game with bamboo or wood; five bamboo arrows were found in a bronze pot unearthed from a Western Han tomb at Yaoziling, Yongzhou, Hunan.

The concrete procedures and rules of pitch-pot game were noted in historic literatures, the most detailed one of which was *Liji* 礼记 (Book of Rites): the pot was placed between the two players, and the distance between the pot and the two players should be two and a half arrows (about 2.1m); beans were filled into the pot to prevent the arrows thrown in from bouncing out. Each player was issued four arrows, and threw one every time; two players threw arrows to the pot alternately, each successful entry gave one point to the player who had thrown it. When both players finished their arrows, one round was over and the points were counted by the *Sishe* 司射 (lit. "Shooting Supervisor", the referee in the game). Three rounds finished one game, and the loser would drink as penalty. The "Scene of Tou Hu" on the stone relief unearthed at Shagangdian, Nanyang, Henan (Figure 19) vividly depicted the pitch-pot game. After the Han Dynasty, pitch-pot was still popular in all of the regions until the Ming and Qing Dynasties.

### Conclusion

The sports and games of the Qin-Han period were developed from that of the pre-Qin period. The unified empire accelerated the diffusion and communication of sports and games in different regions; the development of social politics, economy and culture, especially the military affairs, urged the prosperity of sports and games; the diversity, popularity and maturity of sports

and games at this time reached an unprecedented climax, which was the first climax of sports and games in ancient history of China. At that time, besides of the events mentioned above, archery in many types, weight-lifting, aquatic sports and exercise therapies represented by *Daoyin* 导引 art were also very popular, but we have not had enough relevant archaeological materials to explicate them.

Comprehensively seen, the sports and games of the Qin-Han period had clear features of the time.

First, they were very practical. Many sports and games were related to military affairs and trainings. In the Qin-Han period, many sport events were seen as "Jiqiao 技巧 (skill)", such as *Cuju*, *Wushu*, equestrianism and *Juedi*; in the classified catalog recorded by *Hanshu*, the book *Cuju* was cataloged into *Bing Jiqiao* (Martial Skill). It was explained in this chapter that "the so-called *Jiqiao*, refers to the skills training barehanded struggling, fighting with weapons, shooting using bows and crossbows, and all of that aiming on wining in attacking and defending". It is clear that these sports and games were developed at that time not only for body-building but also, and more important, for training powerful army. Just because of this, martial arts and equestrianism were important indeed for they could directly train the skills for warfare, and *Cuju* was also systematically organized in the army.

Second, they were entertaining and enjoyable. Many sport events and games were used as performances. In the Qin-Han period, many sport events were called as "*Baixi* 百戏 (miscellaneous performance)", such as *Cuju*, *Wushu*, horseback acrobatics, *Juedi* and so on. Historic literature noted that *Cuju* game was frequently held in Western Han court; Emperor *Wudi* of the Western Han Dynasty held two times of *Juedi* performing



Figure 19. Scene of Tou Hu (Pitch-Pot, from Stone Relief at Shagangdian, Nanyang, Henan)

conferences in Shanglin Park, and used it as entertainment to please foreign envoys. The pictorial materials about the above-mentioned sports and games found archaeologically, including Cuju, Wushu, equestrianism and Juedi, all have strong flavor of performing; many “scenes of Cuju game” even showed accompanying musical bands, which strengthened these sports and games’ nature for entertaining and enjoying.

Third, they have strong flavor of amusement, some of which even became types of gambling. Board games themselves, which were mental exercises, have had the functions of entertaining and leisure. Pitch-pot was actually a kind of entertainment. It is noticeable that Liubo had very strong function of gambling, some people even got rich by this game. Moreover, the pictorial materials found archaeologically reflected that the board games represented by Liubo and other games such as pitch-pot had close relationship with feasting and drinking, showing these games’ functions of adding fun in banquets and parties.

These three features might be seen as the internal motive for the prosperity of the sports and games in Qin-Han period. Meanwhile, as an animated component of social lives, all of the sports and games were tightly related to the social development and lifestyles at that time. The demands of exercising and training warriors urged the development of Cuju, Wushu, Juedi and other sports; along with the cavalry battle changing into the central form of warfare, equestrianism with horse racing and horseback acrobatics as main contents developed rapidly; the prevailing custom of drinking stimulated the flourish-

ing of board games and entertainments such as pitch-pot; the zeal of the rulers and elite people represented by the emperors and the wide participation of the common people were the important social motive for the development of sports and games in Qin-Han period.

## References

- Bai, Yunxiang 白云翔. 2004. *Jianlun Shiwu de Qiyuan yu Zuqiu de Qiyuan* 简论事物的起源与足球的起源 (On the Origins of Objects and Football). In Xie, Weijun 解维俊 [ed]. *Zuqiu Qiyuan Di Tansuo* 足球起源地探索 (Exploring the Birthplace of Football). Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju. pp. 5–11.
- Cui, Lequan 崔乐泉 [ed]. 2000. *Zhongguo Gudai Tiyu Wenwu Tulu* 中国古代体育文物图录 (Album on Ancient Sports art in China). Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju.
- Henan Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics 河南省文物研究所. 1993. *Mixian Dahuting Hanmu* 密县打虎亭汉墓 (Han Dynasty Tombs at Dahuting Village in Mixian County). Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe. Color Plate XXIV.
- Hunan Museum 湖南省博物馆 *et al* [ed]. 2004. *Changsha Mawangdui er, san hao Hanmu* 长沙马王堆二, 三号汉墓 (Tombs 2 and 3 of the Han Dynasty at Mawangdui, Changsha). Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe. pp. 16 and 162–6.
- Jiang, Yingju 蒋英炬 *et al* [ed]. 1982. *Shandong Han Huaxiangshi Xuanji* 山东汉画像石选集 (Album of Han Stone Carvings in Shandong). [Jinan]: Qi Lu Shushe. Figures 19, 120, 363 and 436.
- Xiao Chen (China Daily). 2004. *FIFA Boss Hails China as Football Birthplace*. [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-07/16/content\\_348993.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-07/16/content_348993.htm). Accessed on October 1, 2009.

Note: The original paper, published in *Kaogu* 考古 (Archaeology) 2008. 7: 54–69 with 32 illustrations, is written by Bai Yunxiang 白云翔. The abridged version is prepared by the author and translated into English by Ding Xiaolei 丁晓雷.