

Welcome to the Water Margin Podcast. This is a supplemental episode.

In episode 3, we met Gao Qiu, a riffraff who rose to commander of the imperial guards thanks to catching the emperor's favor with his impressive skills at an ancient Chinese football game called cuju (4,1). That particular plot point gives me an opportunity to delve a little bit into a game that, over its history, was played by everyone from emperors to riffraffs and prostitutes, and rhapsodized about (and frowned upon) by some of China's greatest poets.

Before we continue, I want to put out there the disclaimer that I am by no means a historian or expert. The information I present here is what I've been able to find over the course of my research for this episode. I know that some of you out there ARE actual historians, so if something I mention here doesn't sound right, please feel free to write and let me know. I'm happy to correct the record.

So anyway, the name cuju is made up of two characters. The first character, cu (4), means to kick, while the second character, ju (1), means ball. So the sport is literally called kick ball.

There are several theories on the origins of the game. Some speculate that it began in the Paleolithic Age, when people threw stone balls for hunting, practice, and entertainment. Another theory says the sport came from the time of the Yellow Emperor, a mythical sage king from the third millennium B.C., as something his soldiers did to celebrate victory in battle. But since the Yellow Emperor gets credited with inventing Chinese civilization and basically everything in it, I think we should be skeptical of that. A third theory says it began in the Shang Dynasty, which reigned from 2070 to 1600 BC, as part of a rain dance.

The fourth theory, and the one that seems to have the most solid evidence, is that it started in the Warring States period, which ran from the 5th to 3rd century BC. As I touched on in episode 3, the first recorded mention of cuju (4,1) was in reference to this period. More specifically, it was in a text known as the "Strategies of the Warring States." We don't know who wrote this text or when. In fact, it's believed that the text is a compilation of writings by multiple authors over different time periods. We do know that the editor of the text was a Han Dynasty scholar who lived in the first century B.C.

In any case, the tidbit from this text that's relevant in the context of cuju is a reference from the chapter on the Warring States kingdom of Qi (2). In describing the people in the Qi capital, it said that they all played various instruments, engaged in cock and dog fighting, amused themselves with a particular board game that was all the rage at the time, and lastly, played cuju.

That brief passage formed the basis for FIFA to say on its ["History of Football" page](#) that, quote, "The very earliest form of the game for which there is scientific evidence was an exercise from a military manual dating back to the second and third centuries BC in China." I'm sure that declaration worked wonders for the feelings of the Chinese people, given our inclination for claiming to be the first to invent everything of importance. Of course, it's not like no other civilization could independently conceive of the notion of kicking a round object to and fro for recreation and exercise.

Anyway, however and however early the game of cuju began, we know that in addition to being a form of recreation, by the Warring States period, it also served as an exercise to help soldiers stay fit. By the Han Dynasty, which started in the 200s B.C, it continued to be a mainstay within the military, but also began spreading to the ruling class and the aristocracy. Liu Bang, the founder of the Han Dynasty, was apparently quite the cuju addict and promoted the sport. The imperial household began holding cuju matches in the palace and even built facilities specifically for the sport. These ancient arenas were described as rectangular fields surrounded by walls, and they were called ju (1) cities, or ball cities. Spectators sat on the south end of these stadiums, facing north.

There are competing theories on how the game was played during the Han Dynasty. Some think a lot of physical contact was allowed as the two teams vied to control the ball and tried to kick it into one of the other team's six goals. Another theory thinks that there weren't any goals at all, and that you won by basically getting away from the other team. The game also took on a performative aspect during this time. There is one format where players would show off their ball-control skills to a drum beat. They

could use pretty much every part of their body except their hands, and they would do moves like controlling the ball with their feet and their knees, kicking it while being airborne, or balancing the ball on one foot.

Fast forward a few hundred years to the Tang Dynasty, which started in the early 600s A.D., and we see some more changes in the game. First of all, the sport became less of a military exercise and more of a form of primarily entertainment. Also, the ball itself changed. Before the Tang Dynasty, the ball used in cuju had a solid core stuffed with animal hair and feathers. But in the Tang Dynasty, we start seeing balls with hollow cores filled with air. Oh, and by the way, I found sources that said before the balls filled with hair and fur, there's some evidence they used stone balls, which, yeah, ouch!

Anyway, another change in the game that appeared around the Tang Dynasty was the use of goals. But don't picture a version of present-day soccer where two teams are trying to kick the ball into each other's goal. Instead, there is only one goal. It's a circle about a foot in diameter, called an eye. The eye would be mounted on top of a 10-foot pole. Two teams of 12 to 16 people each would line up on opposite sides. One team would initiate and its players would pass the ball to each other, presumably without dropping it, with the aim of having it end up on the feet of the second-in-command, who would then pass it to the team captain, who would to kick it through the eye. And then the other team will get its turn. The winners got fabulous prizes, and the losers literally got whipped and were forced to put makeup powder on their faces. How's that for motivation?

Oh and by the way, cuju was mentioned in the works of many a Tang Dynasty poet, including names like Li Bai and Du Fu, who are basically 1A and 1B on the list of all-time great Chinese poets. Of course, Li Bai was writing about cuju in a critical manner, complaining about the aristocracy's infatuation with the game at the expense of important state affairs. But at least that also tells us that the aristocracy WAS obsessed with the game.

Moving along. By the time we get to the Song Dynasty in the 900s, the game had become even more widespread across all levels of society. And as we see in the Water Margin, everyone from royalty to street rats like Gao Qiu played the game. We have pictures of the founder of the Song Dynasty balling with some of his kin, as well as commoners playing cuju with each other.

During the Song Dynasty, the game itself continued to evolve. They stopped using goals again. Instead, you would have anywhere from a single player to a dozen or more arranged in a circle, and each person would show off their fanciest moves with the ball without dropping it. That's why in the Water Margin, it impressed the future emperor greatly that Gao Qiu was able to control the ball as if it were glued to him. So I guess cuju was more like hacky sack by this point. Hacky sacking your way to high government office. How's that for an unconventional career path?

There was something else of note that developed during the Song Dynasty. In the novel, when the future emperor told Gao Qiu to join him for a game, he mentioned that they were playing in the Clouds-High League. So I want to talk about what that is exactly. The Clouds-High League was basically a nationwide cuju association, with local chapters everywhere. And the strongest chapter was, not surprisingly, in the capital.

To join the league, you have to pass a skills test. But once you've passed, you can play in any local chapters around the country for free. Players in the league were divided into different tiers depending on their skill levels, and women were also allowed to join the league. In fact, for much of the history of cuju, it seemed that society had no qualms about women playing the game. As early as the Han Dynasty, women were already playing it, and that only increased during the Tang and Song, as well as the subsequent Yuan Dynasty. In fact, during the Yuan Dynasty, , female cuju performers were apparently a big entertainment draw.

However, I should note that the Clouds-High League as it is mentioned in the novel is an anachronism. The novel is set in the Northern Song Dynasty, but according to the sources I've found, the Clouds-High League did not come into being until the Southern Song Dynasty, which was the successor to the Northern Song. But, details, details.

Anyway, the game of cuju continued to thrive after the fall of the Song Dynasty. It became even more popular under Mongol rule during the Yuan Dynasty. Songs from that period make frequent mentions of civilians playing the game.

By the time of the Ming Dynasty, which followed the Yuan in the mid-1300s, cuju was more popular than ever, and that's when it became too popular for its own good. Apparently a big chunk of the aristocracy were so addicted to the game that they neglected their government duties. At the same time, brothels began using cuju to draw customers, capitalizing on the popularity of the game. And that gave the game a seedy reputation. So the first emperor of the Ming Dynasty banned government officials and guards from playing cuju, on the penalty of having their feet amputated. He did not, however, ban brothels from using cuju to draw customers.

When I came across this tidbit about the decline of cuju's reputation during my research, it occurred to me that this was also around the time when Shi Nai'an supposedly wrote the novel, and I can't help but wonder how much that affected the way Gao Qiu was depicted in the book. Was the emphasis on his cuju skills an attempt to further denigrate his character character, given the game's seedy reputation at the time?

When we roll into China's final dynasty, the Qing, the ruling Manchus pretty much just banned cuju outright to prevent their own officials from becoming obsessed with it. And that led to very few mentions of the game in written records from that era. I did come across one interesting thing though: Apparently the Manchus at some point combined cuju with their love of skating and created something

described as “cuju on ice,” and I just cannot see how that ends in anything less than comedy and bruised bottoms.

So that’s a brief overview of the history of cuju, much beloved, much scorned, and, at least in the Water Margin, a feasible means of career advancement. I hope you enjoyed this supplemental episode, and I’ll see you next time on the Water Margin Podcast. Thanks for listening!

Sources:

- [30 年蹴鞠文化研究进展及研究动态](#)
- [中国古代足球—蹴鞠的兴衰研究](#)
- [蹴鞠的文化解读:足球作为中国传统体育项目的初始论证](#)
- <https://zh.wikipedia.org/zh-hant/%E8%B9%B4%E9%9E%A0>
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