

Discussion on the Origin of Polo

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Abstract: The cultural history of polo is extensive, yet its origin remains a subject of debate within academia, lacking definitive consensus. This paper aims to synthesize previous research findings and compare various theories of origin, based on extensive examination of historical literature. Through this comprehensive review, it seeks to further investigate the birthplace of polo and advance the research process regarding its origin. Among the prevailing theories of origin concerning polo, the Persian theory presents relatively substantial evidence. Additionally, unearthed artifacts suggest potential connections between the origins of polo and the Saka and Tuhuoluo peoples, warranting further investigation. Research into the origin of polo not only enriches theoretical studies in our country but also provides new theoretical support for reviving Chinese polo culture and fostering comprehensive and harmonious development within our sports culture.

Keywords: Polo, Origin, Cultural Exchange, Silk Road

1. Introduction

Ancient polo, besides being a sport, was a cultural phenomenon and one of the most prominent aspects of ancient Chinese sports culture. The extensive history of polo and the exploration of its origin hold significant importance in understanding the development of ancient sports culture. Despite multiple theoretical studies on the origin of polo, various factors have hindered the formation of a unified consensus. This paper compares historical literature to analyze the origin of polo, aiming to enrich theoretical studies in our country and provide historical evidence and theoretical support for the revival of Chinese polo culture, thereby promoting comprehensive development in our sports culture.

2. Current Status of Polo Origin Research

Polo, with its long history, has been a subject of scholarly discussion on its origins since the 1950s, yet a definitive consensus remains elusive. Within current academic discourse, there are three credible hypotheses regarding the origin of polo: the Persian theory, the Tibetan theory, and the Central Plains theory. To provide a clearer understanding, a brief overview of these three mainstream theories of origin is presented.

The Persian theory of origin gained recognition from European historians of sports as early as the 19th century. Scholars like H.E. Chehabi and Professor Allen Guttman have dedicated specific writings to this subject. They propose that polo might have evolved from nomadic tribes active in ancient Turkey and Iran, regions that were under the dominion of the Persian Sassanian Empire in

Central Asia. Chinese scholar Xiang Da supports this viewpoint, citing references such as "The land had Polo-lins, and beneath them were ball fields" [1], and "According to the translation of the Persian term 'gui' as 'qú yōu qiè' in Tang phonetics, the character '毬' was possibly used to translate the Persian 'gui'" [2], to substantiate this claim. Luo Xianglin aligns with Xiang Da's perspective and further supplements his views in the work "Study on Polo in the Tang Dynasty" [3]. While the argument proposing the Persian origin of polo by Xiang Da and Luo Xianglin carries merit, it also has its shortcomings and has been critically analyzed by later scholars. Following the research of Xiang Da and Luo Xianglin, scholars such as Cen Zhongmian and Han Dan have also lent support to this viewpoint. Additionally, after German-American scholar Lauföl suggested, "The most interesting loanword in English is 'polo' [4] from the Tibetan language," many scholars proposed the theory that polo originated in Tibet. Mr. Yinfalu propose the theory that polo originated from the Tibetan plateau, citing linguistic evidence of the term "Polo" originating from the Tibetan language [5] and references in "The Records of What Feng Saw and Heard" mentioning the preference of the "Western Fan people" for playing ball, assumed to refer to Tibetans. Additionally, Chinese scholars Wang Yao and Han Guopan advocate for this theory. In the 1950s, Tang Hao rebutted both the Persian and Tibetan origin theories based on historical documents. He suggested, after analyzing references in Cao Zhi's "Famous Capital Ode" [6] and Cai Fu's "Ball Ode" [7], that polo likely originated from the Central Plains of China, potentially evolving from ancient Cuju [8].

In conclusion, the three mainstream theories on the origin of polo have their respective arguments and evidence. However, considering recent literature, the Persian theory appears to possess a higher degree of credibility.

3. Analysis of Mainstream Polo Origin Theories

The records in "The Origin of Projects" indicate that polo originated as a game during horse racing events held by tribes in ancient Persia and later spread worldwide. According to related literature from ancient Persia, polo was widely popular and favored by various societal strata, particularly the ruling class [9]. Given the enduring friendly relations between ancient Persia and China, it's highly plausible that China's polo originated from Persia. However, solely relying on these points is insufficient to support the Persian theory. Subsequently, this essay will delve into discussions about the time of polo's origin, the necessary conditions for polo, the etymology of the polo name, and the reference to the term "Western Fan" in the literature introduced by Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty. These analyses aim to assess the credibility of the Persian theory among the three theories.

3.1. Polo's Origin Time

When tracing origins, one cannot overlook the element of time. The records of Persian polo's origin are extensively documented in various articles. The Encyclopedia Britannica mentioned, "Between the 6th century BC and the 1st century AD, this game was initially played in Persia (Iran)" [10]. The History of Sports also stated, "After the Persian king Cambyses II (529-522 BC) conquered Egypt, polo began to be promoted there as well" [11]. The World's Ancient Inventions also recorded, "Polo may have been invented in ancient Persia (Iran) around 500 BC" [12]. From the above, it can be deduced that Persian polo emerged no later than the 6th or 7th century BC (during China's Spring and Autumn Period). Furthermore, Tang Hao mentioned that the earliest record of polo in Tibetan literature "is five centuries later than that of the Han ethnic group" [13], indicating that Tibetan polo's origin postdates Persian polo. Tang Hao also speculated that Tibetan polo was introduced into Tibet from the Central Plains of China during the late Eastern Han Dynasty to the Three Kingdoms period [13]. The author supports Tang Hao's viewpoint. Scholars proposing the Central Plains theory mainly rely on the analysis of Cao Zhi's "Famous Capital Ode," suggesting that China's polo originated

during the Eastern Han Dynasty, further suggesting polo's origin in the Central Plains. However, considering the aforementioned, Persian polo's inception significantly predates China's Eastern Han era. Therefore, regarding the earliest appearance of polo, among the three theories, the Persian theory holds relatively greater persuasiveness.

3.2. Necessary Conditions for Polo

To pursue excellence in any endeavor, the tools must be advantageous. Examining the origin of polo could commence by scrutinizing the requisite conditions for this sport. Polo, a sport built upon adept horsemanship, was mentioned earlier to have appeared in ancient Persia during China's Spring and Autumn Period. Yet, during this era, the equestrian skills of the Central Plains Han people remained relatively undeveloped: before the Warring States Period, Chinese historical records and classics never featured the character for "riding"; military engagements predominantly relied on infantry; early "Six Arts" activities encompassed archery but not equestrian archery; horses were not ridden but primarily used for pulling chariots; the "Hu Clothing and Archery" event occurred no earlier than 340 BC to 295 BC. Moreover, the horses used for polo must be of high quality. As the Central Plains were not renowned for breeding excellent horses, the region inherently lacked the fundamental conditions for the emergence of polo. From this, it is evident that during the thriving period of Persian polo, China did not possess the foundational conditions for playing polo. Regarding the Tibetan theory, the Tibetan empire was established only during the early Tang Dynasty, and its history of polo development is not as extensive as Persia's. Additionally, horse breeding was not its primary industry, leading to limited conditions for engaging in polo activities. Consequently, it can be surmised that polo most likely did not originate from the Central Plains or the Tibetan region.

3.3. Analysis of Polo Names

The central contention among the mainstream theories on the origin of polo lies in the etymology of the polo name. The viewpoint introduced by Mr. Xiang Da touches upon his perspective on the name "daqiu" (polo), indicating its genesis during the Tang Dynasty and its translation from Persian [2]. In response, Mr. Tang Hao pointed out that the character "qiu" (ball) had appeared as early as the Southern Dynasties period [14], thereby refuting Mr. Xiang Da's view on the name of polo. Scholars supporting the Tibetan theory generally assert that the term "Polo" originated from the Tibetan word "pulu" (ball), leading to the conclusion of polo's origin in Tibet. Other domestic and international proponents of the Tibetan theory conduct their arguments based on the premise that the English word "polo" is derived from a borrowed word in Tibetan. However, this form of argumentation poses inherent problems. Firstly, "polo" is a modern term rather than an ancient one. There is currently no evidence suggesting any association between the term "polo" and polo before the 19th century. Even if it is a borrowed word, it, at most, demonstrates a modern connection between the name of polo and the Tibetan culture, failing to prove its ancient origin. Secondly, solely investigating "polo" as the name for polo overlooks other terms used in historical records, such as the term "qögän" [15] for polo in the 1074 publication "Turkish Language Dictionary" and the local ethnic appellations like "Qiaogan" in Xinjiang, requiring inclusion in the inquiry into the origin of the name. Concentrating solely on "polo" appears rather biased. Finally, the determination of the origin of things should be approached through the analysis of unearthed artifacts, related historical documents, and historical events. Relying solely on pronunciation to ascertain the origin seems hasty. Presently, the discussions regarding the origin of the name for polo among the three theories all possess certain shortcomings. To embark on research from this perspective, one should initially compile the original names of polo from different regions and conduct comparative analysis in chronological order to derive more convincing conclusions. However, relevant literature documenting the original names of ancient polo

is currently scarce and requires further supplementation.

3.4. Interpretation of the Term "Western Regions" and its Implications

The primary contention of the mainstream theories on the origin of polo in the Tang Dynasty revolves around the interpretation of the term "Western Regions people" in Tang Dynasty literature. Although our investigation has traced the latest emergence of polo in China to the late Eastern Han Dynasty, the Tang Dynasty, as the era when polo thrived in China, holds significant importance in understanding the literary evidence regarding polo. The phrase from the "Records of Feng's Observations and Reflections" stating "heard that the Western Regions people are fond of playing qiu. Even tried it myself, and observed it on one occasion. Yesterday, as I ascended the Tower of Immortality, there was a group of Western Regions people playing qiu in the streets. They wished me to witness it. This made them suspect my fondness for it. Therefore, I acted to deter such thoughts. Contemplating this, the conduct of an emperor should not be casual. I have already burnt the qiu ball as a self-admonition [16]" stands as the earliest documented record of polo during the Tang Dynasty and has been a focal point for scholarly debate. In this article, we aim to interpret this phrase and attempt to explain the implied meaning of "Western Regions people" to further substantiate the Persian theory.

The expression "heard that the Western Regions people are fond of playing qiu" suggests that the polo played by the "Western Regions people" was highly renowned or had reached an advanced stage, as it came to the attention of Emperor Taizong. This aligns with Mr. Han Dan's explanation of the term "fond of" in "Study on the Origin of Polo in Persia," [17] affirming that the polo played by the "Western Regions people" had matured and was prevalent in their country. Given the longstanding history of Persian polo, which had existed for over a millennium by the Tang Dynasty and had evolved into a national custom enjoyed by various social classes, it can be inferred that Persia possessed the necessary characteristics to capture the attention of Emperor Taizong. Furthermore, as a nomadic kingdom, the Persian empire propagated its polo culture during its conquests, spreading to various regions such as ancient India and parts of Central Asia, thereby expanding the reach of Persian polo. Being a prosperous neighboring country to the Tang Dynasty, the probability of Persian polo reaching Emperor Taizong's ears was considerably high. Conversely, regarding Tibet, as mentioned earlier, Mr. Tang Hao speculated that Tibetan polo emerged between the late Eastern Han Dynasty and the Three Kingdoms period. Given its proximity to the Tang Dynasty in terms of time, it is evident that Tibetan polo was far less developed than Persian polo, lacking the conditions to capture Emperor Taizong's attention and induce his desire to witness it.

Although both Persia and Tibet were part of the "Eight Barbarian Tribes" in the Western Regions during the Tang Dynasty [18], according to the records in the "Records of the Western Regions" compiled by the Sui Dynasty's Pei Ju, the term "Western Regions" encompasses all the countries from Dunhuang to the Western Sea (Mediterranean Sea), divided into three routes. The central route passed through various regions, including Gaochang, Yanqi, Kucha, Shule, and Kangju, and reached Persia, culminating at the Western Sea. The southern route included regions such as Shanshan, Yutian, and Jibin, and also traversed through various countries, reaching the Western Sea. Notably, this account does not encompass Tibet as part of the "Western Regions." There is no record in Tang Dynasty literature referring to Tibet as "Western Regions," indicating that "Western Regions" does not denote Tibet but may indeed refer to Persia.

The ability of the Tang Dynasty to witness polo being played in the emperor's presence indicates a strong bond between Persia and the Tang Dynasty. During the Sui Dynasty, Persia paid numerous tributes to China, establishing friendly relations. Historical records indicate that Persia began dispatching envoys to China from the fifth century AD. When Persia was in dire straits, it sought assistance from the Tang Dynasty in 647 AD (Zhenguan 21st year) and 661 AD (Longshuo 1st year).

In 708 AD (Jinglong 2nd year), a Chinese official appointed Prince Pirooz, the son of the Persian king, as the Left Guard General [19]. From these records, it can be deduced that Persia had amicable relations with China. Even when Persia was in decline, it maintained regular contact with China. According to related documents, a large number of Persians immigrated to China during the Tang Dynasty and became a crucial part of commercial activities. Consequently, a "Persian residence" was specifically established in the western market of Chang'an for the rest and activities of Persian traders. Among these Persian traders, many were fond of polo and, while tending to their commercial activities, often organized matches and exhibitions on the streets of Chang'an. Therefore, the phrase "playing qiu in the streets" mostly referred to Persians in the literature. The phrases "desiring to let me see" and "suspecting that I love this" imply that the "Western Regions people" could discern the emperor's preferences and movements. To achieve this, besides maintaining friendly relations with the Tang Dynasty, interactions with Tang nobles, officials, and imperial relatives were necessary. The businesses engaged in by Persian merchants mainly catered to this class of people, making it natural for them to gather information. Considering these points, it can be concluded that the term "Western Regions" in Tang Dynasty literature likely refers to Persia.

4. Examination of Other Possible Origins

In addition to the previously discussed Persian theory, historical records and unearthed artifacts suggest the existence of two alternative origins for polo. In May 2006, the Ili People's Publishing House published 'The Horseback Games of the Kazakh People,' introducing a new perspective on the origins of polo. It proposed that polo might have evolved from an ancient equestrian stick-and-ball game [20]. The book claims that the Kazakh people have historical connections with the Saka people, who inhabited the Ili River basin, thus lending credibility to the record of games played by the Saka people. The ancient Saka people resided in Central Asia, an area abundant in horses, and the nomadic tribes residing there were adept horse riders. Hence, the emergence of polo in this region is plausible. Assyrian texts dating back to the mid-7th century BCE have also mentioned the Saka people. If the aforementioned claim holds true and their equestrian games existed during this period, the origins of polo could be traced back to the mid-7th century BCE. Moreover, an article titled '2800 Years Ago, Polo Was Popular in Turpan' published in the Guangming Daily on May 7, 2015, highlighted the discovery of a mallet and three ball-like objects resembling polo balls at Grave No. 1 in the Yanghai Cemetery in Shanshan County, Turpan, Xinjiang (Figure 1). Chen Xinyong from the Turpan Institute of Archaeology described the findings: 'All three leather balls were made from sheepskin, about the size of a fist, with an oval-shaped mouth and a red cross pattern at the bottom. They were filled with scraps of leather, wool threads, and other miscellaneous materials.' The 'fist-sized' dimensions of these objects resemble descriptions of polo balls found in literature. Dating reveals that these three 'polo balls' were from a period between 2800 and 2400 years ago, which places them around the early 8th century BCE, earlier than any previously suggested origin of polo. According to the 'Biography of Dayuan' in the Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji), the Yuezhi people once lived in the Shanshan area of Turpan, belonging to the Tocharian ethnic group. Therefore, it can be inferred that the people residing in this area around 2800–2400 years ago were of Tocharian descent [21]. If the identified artifacts indeed prove to be used for polo, this could substantiate the theory that polo originated from the Tocharian people, thus dating the origin of polo to as early as the early 8th century BCE."



Figure 1: Suspected Polo Mallet and Polo Ball Image (Source: Chen Xinyong, Guangming Daily)

5. Conclusion

To summarize the main points of this paper, the author aims to demonstrate that among the three mainstream hypotheses regarding the origins of polo, the theory proposing the transmission of polo to the Central Plains from Persia is the most historically plausible and has the highest credibility. Although the theories involving the Saka and Tocharian origins hold certain validity, further verification is necessary. Both Persian, Saka, and Tocharian cultures fall within the Western Regions cultural sphere. Therefore, regardless of which theory is valid, all indicate that polo represents a foreign cultural influence, deeply intertwined with the historical context of cultural exchanges between China and foreign civilizations. Exploring the origins of polo not only supplements the related research materials on polo but also provides theoretical support for the revival of China's polo culture, contributing to the comprehensive and harmonious development of Chinese sports culture.

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