

Chapter 1

Ancient Chinese Football

Bram Cohen

The very first sources that refer to kicking against a ball come to us from the Chinese. At the time of the Western Han dynasty (206 BC–24 AD), Liu Xiang wrote his *Analects of Tactics*, in which he described *zu-gu*,¹ the football of the Chinese people. For a long time, it was thought that *zu-gu* (*zu* means ‘shooting with the foot’; *gu* means ‘ball’) was played from around 500 BC on. But archaeologists have not remained idle. Numerous historical writings, inscriptions and remains have been found from the period predating the fifth century BC. These sources show that the Chinese were playing football nearly 5000 years ago.

A part of these writings and inscriptions contain legends that attribute the introduction of football to the mythical Yellow Emperor Huang Di, who ruled around 2690 BC. One legend describes how the Yellow Emperor cut off his own head and ordered his subjects to play football with it. Huang Di introduced his subjects to writing, music, bows and arrows, carts, boats, earthenware and the breeding of silkworms. We might as well add football to that list of accomplishments. In the city of Xi’an in the northwest of China, one can find stone balls, as works of art and as burial artefacts, that are just under 3000 years old.

We know next to nothing about the rules of the very earliest form of Chinese football. What we do know is that football had a certain significance as a cult activity.

During the Zhou Dynasty, which came to power in the eleventh century BC and lasted roughly 700 years, it was no longer just the notables who played football,

Bram Cohen—*De Geschiedenis van het Voetbal* [The History of Football], Amsterdam 1996, pp. 5–8.

¹ The transcription from the Chinese is arbitrary. *Tsuh-kuh* (the usual English transcription) is transcribed here as *zu-gu*.

B. Cohen (✉)
Amsterdam, The Netherlands

but also the common people. They must have played the game with considerable fanaticism, because the rules were tightened up to prevent it from degenerating. The players used a ball made from eight pieces of leather that were sewn together. The ball itself was filled with feathers and hair. The air-filled ball was invented later on.

It definitely was not waywardness that inspired the Chinese to play football: during the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD) soldiers were ordered to play football to improve their physical strength and enhance their discipline and military enthusiasm. Such measures were taken in response to the incursions by northern peoples.

The same period saw the development of a football idiom, as well as books written about *zu-gu*. *Jucheng* meant pitch, *jushi* goal, *li* or *chang* the rules of the game, *zhang* the referee and *ping* the linesman. These are all concepts that are familiar enough today, but which we have only known since the end of the nineteenth century. In *Yantielun*, the historian Huan Kuan describes how football was played by soldiers in the streets. The soldiers probably contributed to football's popularity among the common people.

These writings about *zu-gu* show that the rules of the game were brought in line with the Chinese conception of the cosmos. According to this conception, the universe was round and the earth quadrangular, and so the ball needed to be round and the pitch quadrangular. Twelve months meant twelve goals, and as the year had 24 solar signs, each team numbered twelve players.

The Chinese could not get enough of it. Football flourished until the end of the sixth century AD. During the Han Dynasty, the Chinese still regularly played football in honour of the Emperor's birthday. *Zu-gu* became a game—a form of entertainment that many people participated in—but at the same time it was subject to growing athletic professionalism. Winning teams received a silver goblet and valuable fabrics, while the losers could count on *schadenfreude* and sometimes even a good hiding.

But not everyone was happy about football. Officials condemned the game and had nothing good to say about the highly paid (!) players, who in their opinion were nothing more than hooligans. We might as well leave aside whether this was the first time people expressed concern about the loss of a civilised preserve of gentlemen amateurs.

During the Tang Dynasty (618–907 AD), improvements were made to both the ball and the players' gear. *Zu-gu* underwent further popularisation and professionalisation. People did not always stick to the team of twelve any more, occasionally playing with sixteen men to a team.

In the following 300 years, *zu-gu* was professionalised and regulated to such an extent that according to some historians, this was the cause of football's declining popularity among the Chinese around 1200. Teams that could consist of as many as 24 or even 32 players gave demonstrations at the Imperial court. These court players also mingled with the people and showed them their skills. In this period, the air-filled ball was perfected by the introduction of a primitive ball pump.

Incidentally, the players were not all men. The Mongols defeated the Chinese and founded the Yuan Dynasty in 1279, which lasted for close to a century. The Mongol Emperor Shizu encouraged his subjects to play *zu-gu*, and not just the men—women could join in on the game as well!

This highly developed, regulated game gradually disappeared from the scene after the Mongolian defeat and the Chinese return to power. Fewer and fewer people still played the game. The rulers at the time of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) might have been able to breathe new life into *zu-gu*, but they preferred a kind of football that was played on ice and that did not involve goals.

The Chinese sometimes had the curious habit of simply quitting with something. They were on the verge of conquering the world when, plagued by internal troubles, they suddenly turned around and went home. The Portuguese, with whom they had come face to face, were left behind in a state of bewilderment. This is more or less what happened to *zu-gu* also. Around 1500, very few Chinese were still playing football. The ball had lost its appeal. It was far more common—later in England and France—for football to be temporarily played less due to political and social factors, only to return in all its splendour later on.

Postscript

There were three kinds of *zu-gu* (or *CuJu*) in Chinese history: the direct game, the indirect game and the free game. The *direct game* was widely accepted in the Han dynasty. There were 12 players in each team, and there were two goals in the field. They played the game like a battle. The team which scored most was the winner. This kind of play was used for military practice, for example for the training of soldiers. The *indirect game* was popular in the Tang and the Song dynasties. There was only one goal in the field. The players kicked a leather ball through a hole in a piece of silk cloth which was strung between two 30 feet long poles. A remarkable feature is that while they played, the ball should not drop on the ground. The team that scored the most was the winner. This kind of play was usually for diplomatic performances and the entertainment of the royalty. The *free game* was the most popular one and had the longest history. There was no goal in the field, the players kicked the ball freely, and the game's most important factor was the skill of the players; the most attractive one was the winner.

The *direct game* is similar to the basics of modern association football; the *indirect game* is somewhat like the modern training form of 'foot volley' (tennis football—keeping the ball in the air. The *free game* in fact is a free-style and jury type of football, purely showing one's technical skills.

[R.S.]