

CHINESE PUZZLES

FRANCO PRATESI, not content with the mysteries of the birth of the tarot, has become interested in Chinese cards, and has found, like others before him, that the evidence of his senses does not quite conform to what has been published in accepted accounts. Prompted by finding three packs in the Florence 'Museo di Etnologia', he has raised three somewhat basic questions which he wishes to refer to cognoscenti other than Sylvia Mann and myself, who have already offered him what little we know. The packs in Florence are nothing out of the ordinary, despite two of them having been deposited in 1902. If I understand his difficulties aright, they are as below. The question is: can anyone help? The Chinese people who have been asked seem to know nothing of these, their 'own' cards!

The 'money-suited' cards.

The basic question here might be expressed as 'How many coins does a pack represent?'. The lowest suit patently represents single cash from 1 to 9 (and another card represents $\frac{1}{2}$ cash). In a money-based system, we might expect the next higher suit to represent tens of cash; in fact, it is strings of cash. But how many cash in a string? Some say 1000, some 100: either is equally possible and/or improbable. Then we go on to the suits of myriads and/or myriads of strings. But just how many CASH are represented here?? And has Prunner (*Ostasiatische Spielkarten*) translated the Chinese names of the suits correctly, and has he used the German à in the same sense as the English abbreviation @? If Prunner is right, there are some very large changes of base-value between the suits, and the highest card represents an enormous number of cash - or has he got it all wrong???

The domino pack

The Florence 1902 example is much the same as sold in Chinatown shops today. There are 4 sets of each of the 21 dominoes, using 1 to 6 spots (the Chinese do not use the 'blank'). The puzzle here is the oft-quoted comment (endorsed by John McLeod *et al*) that the games played with the domino cards are the same as those played by Chinese with their domino tiles. BUT there are 32 tiles, instead of 21, as a result of the duplication of the 'Civil' series. Although, according to R C Bell, Chinese domino games are known which use more than one set of tiles, how can the games with the tiles and cards be 'the same'???

Chess-cards

In the Chinese version of chess, there are 16 men on each side: an emperor, 2 each of five other pieces (including the 'cannon') and 5 pawns: a total of 7 different figures. Most Chinese chess-suited packs have cards representing the 7 figures as such, and contain multiples of this basic number: usually 28, 56, or 112. But there is one type of pack, the 'Tam Cúc' of Vietnam which has precisely the composition of the Chinese chess set, comprising 32 cards. Franco Pratesi wonders if there are any games with these cards which emulate a game played with the actual Chess pieces. Myself, I can not see how this could be, since Chinese chess is a board game, but perhaps someone knows better?

Although Chinese games are of undoubted antiquity, documentation in English is of no great age. The primary source is possibly W H Wilkinson who wrote the section in the O'Donoghue catalogue, and gave George Clulow more help than he got credit for. And even Prunner nodded: it would be nice to get the TRUTH!