

Liu Guang-Han Teaches Go

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This article (the first of a new series) reports new information on several historical points mentioned in the book *Eurogo* Vol. 1, written by Franco Pratesi with help from Klaus Heine, Theo van Ees, and Guoru Ding for the part on Shu Tong.

The starting point of this study is a series of articles on Go that appeared in Holland in 1929. These were discussed in *Eurogo* (pp. 28 - 285). As the Dutch series did not mention the author, we speculated that the writer could be someone in the Dutch diplomatic service. This hypothesis can now be shown to be wrong: Theo van Ees, who introduced these articles, has recently found that the series had been written by Commandant Lancelin and was first published in France in the popular science magazine *La Nature*. This was in 1928 and 1929, a few months before the publication of the Dutch translations. This discovery also solved the problem of the unfindable articles from *La Nature* published in 1880, which were mentioned in a fundamental bibliography by Craig Hutchinson (see *Eurogo*, pp. 100-101); it is now obvious that this date was incorrect.

Of course we would like to know more about this Commandant Lancelin, and Theo van Ees has found some information that will be published in a later part of this series. We have not found any report on his stay in Japan, however he states clearly that he had been there. He was familiar with the Japanese way of life and - most important for us - with the Go environment. His account of observing Japanese clerks while playing is rather impressive. Firstly, he was surprised by their great addiction to the game: at work, when the boss was away, the clerks took out their game sets and played, ready to put all the equipment away quickly when the boss came back. Even more surprising for any European observer was how they were able to reconstruct exactly the complex board position of any interrupted game.



According to Commandant Lancelin, people learn the game in a traditional way, from one teacher over the course of many years. The whole learning process consists of learning by heart sequences of moves that are useful in a given position on the board. When the player finds the same position in a game, he knows at once how to play, without any reflection. There is no knowledge of general strategic principles; only tactics are taught.

“In Japan there is a true brotherhood of Go professionals, who earn their living by giving lessons for money, and maintain their fame in public contests, of which the results are of great significance for them. Repeated victories allow them to increase both the number of their students and the price of their lessons. Thanks to these professionals, Go has kept this half-secret character, discouraging Europeans from fathoming its mysteries. This fostered the image of Go as a very difficult game, whose practice requires long study under the direction of excellent teachers. They take great care never to explain the general principles in their lessons, as Mr. Ly did for us, but restrict themselves to the teaching of specific moves. This mode of education has the advantage that it can be protracted indefinitely. It is a common belief that one can study Go for twenty years and still have much to learn. This is so because the very large number of moves allows an almost infinite variety of combinations.” (La Nature, 1929, nr. 2802, p. 130).

Commandant Lancelin tells us that he learned to play with this Japanese method, but then something exceptional occurred: he found a young Chinese man in London who was a much stronger player and used a new teaching method. His teaching was much more suitable for a European player, who looks for logic and general principles rather than learning a lot of moves by heart.

Here is the actual report on this event, directly translated from the French article (La Nature, 1929, nr. 2800, p. 34).

“We have to apologize to the Japanese readers of La Nature for having used a radically different method to teach our European countrymen the principles of the game of Go. The Chinese revolution is to blame for this. We had begun to take Go lessons in Japan, and we reached the strength of a player who had been studying for six months when we met Mr. Ly. [...]



Mr. Ly was a young dinner-jacket wearing Chinese man, attaché to the Chinese Republic's embassy in London. Seeing us with a game of Go in our hands, he offered to play a game and, with a smile, captured all the stones placed by us on the board, without any exception. Then he began to talk and, in one hour of conversation, made us understand the object of the game and its strategy much better than our Japanese professor had succeeded in doing.

Today we present the fruits of this conversation to the readers of La Nature. Mr. Ly was certainly revolutionary, and his explanations of Go were also perhaps a little so. For what it is worth, they seem much more accessible to the European brain than the traditional rules of play.

For Mr. Ly, the tactics of the game of Go are summed up in four principles.

1. One must surround (the opponent).
2. One must get out (of the enclosures set around).
3. One must cut (the enemy lines).
4. One must connect (his own pieces in rows).

It is exceedingly simple, but implementation is not always easy, and it is possible, even after one understands these principles very well, to be crushed by the least Japanese bank employee who, without caring about understanding, will put each of his pieces as his teacher has taught him.”

As indicated above for Commandant Lancelin, we would also like to know more about this revolutionary Mr. Ly.

The Republic of China was established in 1912, after the Qing Dynasty was overthrown in 1911, and its government was controlled by the Northern Warlords from 1912 to 1928; the capital was then Beiping, the old name of Beijing. In Chinese history this is usually called the Beijing Government (1912-1928). During the Northern Expedition (1926-1927), the Northern Army was defeated. After that, China was controlled by the Southern power, and the government was moved to Nanjing in Southern China until 1949. Mr. Ly was probably sent to London by the Beijing Government (1912-1928).

A name with the French spelling ‘Ly’ may correspond to several Chinese family names. The Department of Foreign Affairs published 82 issues of the official ‘Foreign Affairs Bulletin (FAB)’ from July 1921 to April 1928. Guoru Ding studied those and found that there was only one person whose family name started with the letter L ever assigned to London. His full name is Liu Guang-Han.

Liu was first assigned as an attaché to the Chinese Embassy in Vienna, Austria, on January 27, 1926 (FAB No.57, March 1926), and he was transferred to the General Consulate in London for counsellor training on April 7, 1926 (FAB No.59, May 1926). Finally, he was transferred to the Chinese Embassy in London as an attaché on September 26, 1927 (FAB No.75, September 1927). There is no other information about him.

Liu Guang-Han is a very popular name, because both characters Guang and Han are very common in Chinese. A Google search gets more than 37,000 hits, so it is hard to find useful information; a search

in the archives of the Institute of Modern History in Taiwan, Academia Sinica, produced no results.

At that time, Liu Guang-Han was not the only one in London to show interest in teaching Go to foreigners. It is impossible not to think of Shu Tong and Daniele Pecorini, who had published a book on Go in Italy in 1927 (Eurogo pp. 273-277), and then in London in 1929, with the title 'The game of Wei-chi' (Eurogo, pp. 267-270). In this book, in addition to a lot of technical information on the game (without sequences of moves to memorise), other topics such as history and bibliography are dealt with. Moreover, the game is compared with politics, with the conclusion that a larger spread of the game may even improve the conditions for promoting peace in the whole world. Further interesting new information about him has recently been found by Guoru Ding and Theo van Ees, and this will be reported in the following articles in this series.