
Polo: A Cultural Code for Understanding the Silk Road

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This paper deals with the question of the origin of polo. Although it is a sport that has been mainly active in the West since the nineteenth century, it is well known that British troops in the northern part of Pakistan learned about the sport from the local people there. Most agree that the origin of polo is Iran. However, in this paper, rather than specifying a specific area as the birthplace of polo, it is argued that polo was a cultural phenomenon commonly found on the Silk Road. This is based on the fact that polo has been known for centuries in China, the Korean Peninsula, and Japan, as well as throughout Iran, northern India, Tibet, Central Asia, and the Uighur Autonomous Region. Yet, the transmission of polo cannot be traced chronologically according to the supposed propagation route. This cultural phenomenon has changed over a long period of time according to the local environment, and the change was caused by mutual exchanges, not by one party. Therefore, there are limitations to interpreting cultural phenomena linearly. Thus, the origin of polo could also be identified with another area, namely Baltistan in modern day Pakistan, instead of Iran. These results support the argument that to understand Silk Road civilization, a process-centric approach based on ‘exchanges’, not a method of exploring archetypes to find ‘the place of origin’, should be utilized. Polo is undoubtedly an important cultural artifact with which to read the Silk Road as a cultural belt complex, as well as an example of the common culture created by the whole Silk Road.

Keywords: Polo, Origins, Process, Silk Road, Civilization

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The Origin of Polo

The game of polo is connected with the development of Silk Road equestrian civilization. It was gradually refined and systematized from the nomadic lifestyle. In the process, it developed into a court game and was slowly passed on to women and to common people as folk games such as ground polo. One such example is changch'igi, or stick tossing game, performed by ordinary people on the Korea Peninsula during the late Chosŏn Dynasty (Kim 2004). Therefore, it would be reasonable to understand polo as a cultural complex formed on the Silk Road after a historical transformation process of exchange and compromise, not as a unique prototype. Persia, Turkey, Tibet, China, and Central Asia are central for those who want to find the original form of polo. There are literary resources, archaeological data, and traces of actual play in these countries (Laffaye 2009, 5). However, this cannot specify where polo originated. Rather, it is likely that it started simultaneously or collectively among Iranian and Turkic cultures in various regions of Central Asia.

One such version can be called buzkashi, which is still used in Afghanistan and Tajikistan where Persian is spoken (Azoy 1982, 23). The word 'buz' is derived from 'goat', and 'kash' from 'pulling', so buzkash means literally 'goat pulling'. It is a fight in which hundreds of horsemen gallop in a dust melee to take away the headless carcass of a goat. Similar traces can be found throughout Central Asia including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Mongolia as well as among the Uighurs. It is also widely spread in the Urals and Siberia, especially in the Altai, Tatar, Bashkir, Buryat, Khakas, and Tuba (Ubaidulloev 2015, 48). However, the names are variously called 'kokbura', 'kokpar', 'kokboru', 'kukpari', 'kukbure', 'ulak tartish', and 'oghlak tartish'. In the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, it is called kokpar tartu (Yabyshtaev 2011), and in the west of Mongolia where the Kazakhs reside, it is called 'tulam bulaatsaldakh', according to a conversation with Munkhbat Otgonjargal (a graduate student from Mongolia at Keimyung University).

Using Kyrgyzstan's national epic the *Manas* as a reference point, this wild and dangerous men's contest could date back as far as the 3rd century CE. In the *Manas*, a scene of training in which the main character rides a horse and exchanges a goat to protect women and property from enemies is recorded in detail (Ackap 2017, 276-280). It is presumed that the content of the *Manas* was formed between the 9th and 12th centuries, when the Kirghiz migrated to their present land through unwavering struggles. However, the *Manas* encompasses an enormous time span of 1,300 years, from 250 to 1,500 CE (Margulan 1971, 87), so it is not easy to determine the history of the game. There is also the opinion that buzkashi began with the Turko-Mongolian nomadic people of the Genghis Khan era (Safarov 2012, 220-222). But this is not entirely accurate since there is much evidence that this game existed long before the 13th century, the period when Genghis Khan was active. The mountainous nomadic people of Central Asia had been raising superior horses for a long time, and the Tajiks and

Xinjiang Uighurs had been playing on yaks instead of horses. In addition, in the area that is now Tajikistan and Afghanistan, matches had already been held during Nowruz, the Persian New Year Festival, well before Genghis Khan arrived (Brecher-Dolivet 2009).

The winner of a game of buzkashi is the person who takes the leg of the goat's body and places it on the back of his horse first. However, this is probably the case when the whole group plays against each other in a free for all match. In comparison, today the kokboru game in Kyrgyzstan takes place on a team by team basis. Kokboru means blue wolves, and one team consists of four players. The entire length of the stadium is 200 meters, and the two goalposts, called kasan, are 140 meters apart from each other. The players go on without a break and the team that puts the most goats' bodies in their opponent's kasan in 20 minutes, each in the first and second half, will win (Ives 2012). As the game is structured as such, it is possible that it began as individual competitions in the early days and gradually developed into team competitions.

Looking at the origins of buzkashi and kokboru, there are two theories. One is derived from the ancient custom of sacrificing goats, and the other is derived from revenge by men who returned from war for village women and the elderly who were hurt by wolves (Parkes 1996, 43-67). However, it is not easy to find any evidence. The theories seem to depend on the meaning given to the carcass of the animals used during the game. Although there is a common denominator of horse sports, there should still be much more evidence for it to serve as an origin of polo. However, it is certain that the living space of the nomads was not limited to the mountainous regions but spread across the plains, where the lifestyle changed and they interacted with other peoples. The phenomenon is remarkable when it reaches north Pakistan and Persia. Chowgan, which began here, is a game in which men ride on horseback and hit a round ball, a guy, with a wooden stick, a chowgan. In time, the word chowgan came to denote the game itself (Chehabi 2002, 384). However, using a ball instead of an animal's carcass and using a stick instead of a hand are the biggest differences from buzkashi or kokboru.

Persia, Arabia, and Turkey

It is said that chowgan is perhaps the oldest team polo game in the world. The first record shows that Turkmens and Persians competed against each other and that the Turkmens won tournaments in the 7th and 6th centuries BCE (Safarov 2012, 229). From the 5th century BCE, it spread to Arabia, Tibet, and the Eastern Hemisphere (Laffaye 2009, 5-6), and it might have been transmitted to the Western Hemisphere after Alexander the Great's first encounter with polo on the route to Central Asia (Tursunov 1983, 26). Darius III, the last king of the Achaemenid Dynasty, was killed by Alexander. However, Iran's narrative tradition

describes Alexander as a half-brother of Darius. Thus, Alexander's defeat of Darius and taking his throne was a legitimate succession of the Persian kingship. By making Alexander an Iranian, they wanted to say that he was no longer an Iranian enemy (Hanaway 1990, 93-103). An interesting episode related to polo is also used to explain this. Darius sent Alexander a ball and a stick, which meant 'Don't pay attention to war games and focus on children's play'. However, Alexander told the Persian envoy that the ball was Earth and he was the stick, so he would blow it away as he wanted (Stoneman 1991, 70-71). This is far before the claim that polo originated in the Parthian Empire, 247 BCE–224 CE (Knauth 1976, 48).

The Parthian Empire originated in the northeast of Iran (roughly in the Khorasan region), near the Central Asian grassy plains. The Parthians' riding skills were great enough to be acknowledged by their everlasting enemy, the Romans. In particular, they were famous for the 'Parthian Shot', in which the rider shot an arrow while looking back and keeping his balance on a galloping horse. Their riding skills and their games appear to have also been transmitted to their successors in the Sassanid Empire. The way in which polo was handed down from the Parthians to the Sasanians remains an episode in the literature of the seventh century. According to the book *Karnamak-e Ardashire-e Papakan*, which recorded the daily life and achievements of Ardashir, the founding king of the Sasan, Ardashir beat Ardavan V, the last king of the Parthians. Ardashir married Ardavan V's daughter who gave birth to a son, Shapur I, who captured Valerian, the 33rd emperor of the Roman Empire. One day, the son bravely caught a ball that had rolled under his father's throne while playing polo with other players, and his father recognized his son's bravery (Ferdowsi 1977, 274-5). This story may be a metaphor for how certain forces came to topple the old regime and established a new nation. It can be seen that polo played a very important role in the process of founding kingdoms.

Additionally, Persian classics and art provide many materials related to polo. In particular, Abulqasim Ferdowsi, a poet and historian of the 10th century, refers to it several times in the epic *Shahnameh* (Horn 1907, 837-49). Horses and jockeys play a very important role in *Shahnameh*. One interesting episode can be found in the game played by the legendary Iranian prince Siyavash, the hero of *Shahnameh*, and his father-in-law Afrasiab, the king of Turan. In the process of this match, Siyavash hit the ball hard enough to make it invisible, then hit another ball and it moved side by side with the moon (Ferdowsi 1977, 97-8). This is a scene in which his kingship is portrayed through his ability to play polo. There is also a lyric poem that uses polo as an image. The poet Nizami tells the story of how the king met his Aramean wife, Shirin, in the tale *Khosrow and Shirin*. Khosrow, who saw Shirin playing polo, found her as beautiful as if she were 'a dove on the grass' and as valorous as if she were 'a hunting hawk'. He challenged her to a polo game. After Shirin won one game and Khosrow another, he said 'the greatest blessing is to be created when two lovers stick around' (Sykes 1902, 285). Polo's popularity was also large in court life. It can be guessed from the fact that it was the most

beloved motif in Persian miniature painting (later on in Turkey and India as well), along with hunting (Fig. 1).

Furthermore, the Ummayyad and Abbas Caliphs, who ruled the Muslim world after overtaking the Sasanian Empire and conquering Syria and Iraq, developed polo according to the tradition of the Sasanians. Yazid I, the second caliph of Umayyad, beheaded Hussein, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, in Damascus, and played polo with his head. Hussein, who was believed to be the third Imam (as the orthodox successor of the prophet) by Shia, was assassinated in 680. However, the Persians and the Kurds became deeply immersed in polo without knowing this history (Dankoff 1990, 147-51). This statement might be a later



Fig. 1) A folio of a Persian manuscript of *Mathnavi of Guy-va-Chogan* (Khalnameh) by Tahmaseb Mirza

distortion by Shia sources, because Yazid is said to have hit Hussein in the teeth, but not played chowgan with his head.

After the Caliphate era, even when secular leaders ruled Iran and the Arab Middle East, they continued to play polo, called 'sawlajan' in Arabic (Ahsan 1973, 303). Despite fighting against the crusades, Salah al-Din was known as a great figure in the Western Hemisphere. Similarly, Baibar I, who ruled the Mamluk Sultanate, was known to be a man of great athleticism who played polo in both Cairo and Damascus during the same week (Diem 1982, 173-178).

Despite being dominated by Turks and Mongols from the middle of the 11th century, Persia continued to be keen on polo. The court poet Farrokhi took only the Sultan's polo hobby as the subject in his poetry (Schimmel 1992, 441). He even listed four things for the monarch to do: 'feasting, hunting, polo game, and war' (Schimmel 1992, 286). Timur (1336-1405) seems to have exerted a great effort to spread polo from his conquest of Russia, Iran, Central Asia, and India. Hafiz, a Persian Sufi poet, in desperation because of Timur's victory, wrote a letter entitled 'I hope the enemy's head is a polo ball' (Diem 1982, 188). Indeed, Timur did exactly what the poet prayed for (Brown 1891, 12). Apart from historical facts, the fact that the enemy's head was considered a polo ball was not just the poetic imagination of Hafiz, but a story that had already appeared in the process of forming the Shia.

Moving on to Anatolia, Seljuk first, and then Ottoman Turkey, also played polo. It was also known among the Kurds living in eastern Anatolia (Chehabi 2002, 391). The Safavid Dynasty, which ruled Iran from 1501 to 1736, also cared about polo. Shah Abbas, the greatest king of the Safavids in the early 17th century, was also a great polo enthusiast. Sir Anthony Sherley, a British traveler, recorded this game in detail. In particular, he said, 'When the king rode on a horse, the drums and the trumpets sounded ... the drums and the trumpets played louder when the ball fell in front of the king' (Hurst 1825, 70-71), stressing that the game was played based on music. Shah Abbas moved the capital of the Safavid Dynasty to Isfahan and built a big square at the center. It was also called the Maydan of the Polo Stadium, Imam Square, or Naqsh-e Jahan Square (Fig. 2). On both sides of the plaza, there are two marble pillars used as goal posts. The base circumference is about 2 m, the height is about 2.3 m, and the distance between the two goal posts is about 10 m. The length of the stadium is 512 m from north to south, and the width is 163 m from east to west. The kings would have sat on the high terrace of the Alicapu Palace across the street and watched the game, which was held in the square under their eyes. Like this, polo was a lofty sport of the Persian aristocracy and also a game of the court (Bull 1989, 173-5).



Fig. 2) Imam Square or Naqsh-e Jahan Square in Isfahan

Tibet and India

If polo had been transmitted through the Silk Roads, the road would probably have originated in the northeast of Iran and crossed Turkestan and Tibet, and then reached the northwest of China. The fact that it came through Tibet can be seen through the epic of King Gesar. It is recorded variously in poetry and prose, and is sung widely throughout Central Asia and the north east of South Asia (Chadwick 2010, 48-49). Its classic version is to be found in central Tibet. As a hero from heaven, King Gesar defeats monsters and unifies various races, defeating the strong and helping the weak. In Chapter 12, the Battle of Kunlun Mountain between King Gesar and King Baakar appears as an anecdote related to polo (Lu 2002, 202). Gesar was the ruler of the ancient Bonismo Kingdom, and Baakar was the ruler of the Khotan Kingdom. Gesar fought for months when he knew that his queen had been captured by the enemy and was trapped by a shell. In the meantime, the queen had already given birth to two children at the palace of Baakar. Eventually, Gesar went to the Khotan Kingdom and killed Baakar, and then he took the queen to a safe place. Afterwards, he went back to the palace, killed the two children, cut off their heads, put them in his pocket, and went back to the queen. Gesar rode a horse with the queen on a green plain. Then he took the children's heads out of his pocket, threw them hard in the sky, and hit them with a stick to blow them away. After hitting the first head, Gesar shouted 'Draafoks!' and the second time the queen shouted 'Hit!' too. When the queen arrived at the end of the plains, she found out that the

heads of the two children who had been just hit were her children. She immediately lost her mind (Lu 2002, 204). The epic of King Gesar has spread throughout the region, and this is the story of how polo started in Turkestan, including the northern part of Pakistan (Lu 2002, 201).

Especially in Baltistan, polo was already loved before the common era. When a polo game was played, the musicians played special music with drums and flutes. The famous sword dances 'Zobo Barasu' and 'Kashuba' in Baltistan are dances to the epic of King Gesar. In this area, the winners of a polo game rode their horses and shouted 'Yayayayaho'. After a player recited the first verse of the epic, he would ask the musicians to play for the opposing team, and the musicians would perform three or four songs with all their heart. The performance was not only inspiring for the polo game, but also gave a strong impetus to the players' fighting (Lu 2002, 204). This custom played a great role in preserving the epic of King Gesar. Reciting and playing the Gesar was an integral part of the polo game, 'dacipulu'. For centuries, the game of polo has been played widely in Baltistan. The word 'dacipulu', a compound word combining 'da' for 'horse', 'ci' for 'on', and 'pulu' for round object in Baltistanian etymology (Lu & Li 2007, 87), was used from Ladakh to Gilgit and Chitral. It seems that the ancient Baltistanian conquerors played a role in extending it widely. There is a record that they played polo in riverside fields when it was time to go to the battlefield or return. Polo seems to have had a festive character with music because they killed a goat before the game began to provide a blood sacrifice to ensure their victory. Today, in the Kashmir region, which is adjacent to Baltistan, the game of polo is still played, and it is very popular in Pakistan. In this way, we can see how long polo, which was born during the mythical period of Gesar, lasted and spread widely (Ding 2004, 50).

Moreover, some traces of polo still remain in the nomadic areas (30°-73° east longitude, 27°-40° north latitude) of Tibet and the northern Mongolian Plateau where the epic of King Gesar is recited. The area covers 2,700km from east to west and 1,400km from north to south, with a total area of 2,500,000 km². It reaches the upstream areas of the Yangtze River, the Yellow River, and the slope of the northern Himalayas. It also includes Pakistan's Balti region, Nepal, Bhutan, India's Ladakh, Mongolia, and Russia's Kalmyk Autonomous Republic and the Buriyat Autonomous Republic. It is interesting to note that the area where the game of polo is played overlaps with the area where the epic of King Gesar is recited (Li 2001, 320). As for the dissemination of polo matches, evidence can be found not only in legend, but also in history.

For example, Songstengampo was the 33rd king of Tibet and was born in 617, the year before the founding of the Tang Dynasty, and conquered the surrounding kingdoms and unified Tibet for the first time. He attacked the Silk Road and the Sichuan region, expanding the Tibetan forces and pressing the Tang Dynasty. In 634, the king asked for a marriage with the princess of the Tang Dynasty, but when he was rejected, he attacked and took Toyohon.

Then, leading 200,000 troops, he invaded the border of the Tang Dynasty and finally married Princess Wencheng in 641. It was at this time that China received polo from Tibet (Li 2001, 322). It is clear that polo was very popular throughout the Tang Dynasty. In 710, Emperor Zhongzong of the Tang Dynasty made Princess Jincheng marry the king of Tibet. When the envoy of Tibet visited Tang to greet Princess Jincheng, the two countries played polo. King Zhongzong and his nobles came to the pavilion to watch the international match, but the victory was for Tibet (Li 2001, 322).

Islamic India also carried on the tradition of playing polo. After Islam spread to the northern part of India, Qutbuddin Aybak (r. 1206-10), the first sultan of Delhi, was a Turk slave from Central Asia who died while playing a polo game. King Akbar of the Mughal Empire (r. 1556-1605) was a polo lover as was Shah Abbas, his contemporary in Iran. They used a luminous ball made from a palas tree and even played at night. His servant Abu'l-Fazl vividly testifies to this pastime of Akbar:

Ordinary people can see the game as a mere recreation, but in the eyes of a thoughtful person, it can be understood as a means to learn some quickness and determination. Strong people learn the art of riding in this game. Animals learn agility and to submit to authority. Through this, the values of men can be identified, and the tenacity of friendship can be strengthened. Therefore, the king enjoyed it very much (Allami 1989, 309-10).

In the Mughal Empire, Islam was at its height and the cultural traditions of Central Asia were also greatly affected. The Mughals' literature and art, which reached their climax in the 17th century, were often decorated with polo as their theme. There are several miniatures in which Jahangir, the son of Akbar, plays polo, and also there are a number of literary works that encourage him to be bold and brave (Diem 1982, 218-219).

China

Polo began to emerge in China from the time of the Tang Dynasty (618-906 CE), when it brought excellent horses called the 'Heavenly Horse' from the Fergana region of Central Asia (Brownell 1995, 35). In China, polo was referred to as Jiju (击鞠), meaning 'ball hitting', or as Maqiu (马球), meaning 'horse ball'. There is a great deal of evidence to tell how successful polo was during the Tang Dynasty. Names related to polo alone are used in various terms, depending on region, and just as diverse as the ethnic minority distributions (Kim 2004, 29-30).

At the beginning of the Tang Dynasty, there were about 20 luxurious private stadiums



Fig. 3) Stone inscription commemorating the building of Hanguang Hall (含光殿) and a polo field in Daming Palace in 831



Fig. 4) 'Polo players at their game.' Prince Zhang Huai's tomb, interred in 706 AD during the Tang Dynasty of China

for the emperor and aristocracy. In 831, a large scale polo stadium was built in the palace courtyard in Chang'an, so we can guess how great the interest in polo at the time was. It is proven by the discovery of a stone tablet inscribed with the phrase, 'A polo stadium is next to Hanguang Hall' (Fig. 3). It was unearthed in 1956 from the ruins of Daming Palace of the Tang Dynasty in present day Xi'an City. In addition, a painted clay polo-playing figurine as well as a mural which depicts a horse playing polo were found in the tomb of the Crown Prince Zhanghuai, Li Xian (Liu 55-62) (Fig. 4). There are twenty horses on the whole mural. The moment when five players try to take the ball with poles is expressed in full excitement. The riders wear black coats of narrow-sleeved multicolored wool, black boots, and headscarves on their heads. The rider holds the reins in his left hand and a crescent-shaped stick in his right hand. The leftmost horse lifts its forelock high, and the rider lies on his back, holding the stick with both hands and turning his body to hit the ball. From behind, four people are running towards the ball. The shadow depicts the expression of the rider and horse more realistically (Cui 2009, 57).

Another example from the Tang Dynasty is when, after having ordered old officials to play the game, Ruizong enjoyed himself in the midst of his court ladies' applause and laughter at the sight of them falling down in the stadium (Liu 1985, 208; Diem 1982, 138). His son, Xuanzong, was one of the most prominent figures in Chinese history. He loved poetry,

music, dance, painting, and even polo (Xiong 1996, 291). However, he fell too far into polo and it was eventually abolished by his son. Nonetheless, polo was greatly encouraged in the Chinese army, and the best polo athlete in Chinese history was General Xia during the reign of Emperor Daizong. He had twelve bunches of coins set up in the stadium and hit them one by one as he rode at full speed, hitting them up to 20 meters away (Diem 1982, 143). Polo was also one of the important subjects of the examination for government officials, and especially in the case of Xizong who was so proud of his polo skills that he boasted, 'If I take the examination in polo, I'll definitely take the first place'. When he was appointed the defense chief, polo was the most important requirement (Liu 1985, 207, 209).

This interest transferred to the Song Dynasty. The queen and other court ladies enjoyed polo just like the Tang Dynasty. In this era, mixed teams of men and women were organized to hold competitions, and there were even cases where men dressed up as women. They played on donkeys instead of ponies and had night games with torches lit. Overall, however, the fervor surrounding polo was fading because the courtiers no longer rode horses, which were limited only to the training purposes of the army, or to court entertainers (Liu 1985, 215, 219). In the Liao and Jin dynasties of the Manchurian people who fought against the Song, polo was handed down as a national rite of worship (Chung 2010, 257), although there were many negative views associated with polo's popularity. When Mongolia invaded China, the Chinese generals were more preoccupied with polo than with war, so much so that some generals were even teased as 'General Polo Stick' (Liu 1985, 214). In particular, Taoist priests objected, saying that polo consumed one's energy and was not good for horses (Liu 1985, 208). Confucians also said that 'according to strict moral standards of Confucianism, polo is like various deceptive behaviors, such as drunkenness, gambling, vulgar music and obscene acts' (Liu 1985, 218). This kind of criticism probably affected polo's decline.

By the time of the Ming and Qing dynasties, polo began to gradually disappear. Xiaozhong was the last emperor who was enthusiastic about polo. No emperor played polo after his death (Liu 1985, 222). During the Qing Dynasty, it was extinguished among the upper classes and warriors, and no longer appeared in the historical records. However, archaeological data remains considerable. In 1972, a painted clay polo-playing figurine was found at the tomb of Astana in Turfan, Xinjiang (Cui 2009) (Fig. 5). Despite its negative evaluation, polo was more prevalent during the Song Dynasty than in the Tang Dynasty. The scene of a polo match carved on bricks collected by the Chinese Sports Museum tells of this history (Fig. 6). As a further example, in 1990, a figure in a mural painting of a polo game was found in Tomb No. 1 in Pijianggou Cemetery of the Liao Dynasty at Baoguotu Township, Aohan Banner, Inner Mongolia (Fig. 7). These artifacts also prove that the game of polo was very popular and important to the northern nomads (Cui 2009, 57).



Fig. 5) Painted polo figurine. Xinjiang, 7th-10th CE



Fig. 6) Brick carving from the Song Dynasty with polo playing scene (Sports Museum of China)



Fig. 7) Tomb mural of the Liao Dynasty with polo playing scene
(Tomb No. 1 in Pijianggou Cemetery, Inner Mongolia)

Korea and Japan

Polo is commonly known as ‘kyōkku’ (擊毬) in Korea. It is unclear when kyōkku was introduced to Korea. It is possible that it was introduced from the Tang Dynasty during the Koguryō Dynasty (Kim 2004, 33). The evidence for this assumption can be found in the ‘Woman of Koguryō’ holding a stick in the Takamatsu tomb murals of the Asuka period, built in Nara, Japan, from 694 to 710 (Fig. 8). The first appearance of polo in literature was in 889, about two centuries later. In *Haedong’yōksa*, there is a record that Wang Mun-ku, the envoy of the Balhae Kingdom, demonstrated kyōkku in front of the Japanese king, and the king gave them 200 dun (屯) of cotton (Han 2001). Balhae, where kyōkku was already prevalent at that time, had sent envoys to Japan 35 times to demonstrate it. Having seen this, the Japanese king made a bet with his servants (Song 1997, 39). Balhae not only accepted kyōkku from the Tang Dynasty but also played a role in spreading it to Japan. There is another record that during the Koryō Dynasty, a welcoming ceremony was held in the middle of a kyōkku stadium, where Azagae, the general of the enemy country, Later Baekje, surrendered in September of the first year of the reign of King Taejo (Song 1997, 40). Based on this, it can be estimated that polo first appeared on the Korean Peninsula in the middle of the ninth century after passing through Tibet and the Tang Dynasty in the early seventh century.

Likewise, it is possible that it was imported directly from Persia at the end of the ninth century. The proof is that in the Persian epic *Kushnameh*, the Persian prince Abtin was exiled to Basilla, believed to be the Silla Kingdom, where he enjoyed polo with King Taihur (Akbarzadeh 2014, 162-166). There are traces on a corner pillar excavated from the square mounded tomb in Kujōng-dong, Kyōngju. On one side of this pillar is embossed a martial artist’s image holding a stick that is believed to be Persian, and on the other side is an engraved lion. In the context of *Kushnameh*, Professor Vosughi interpreted the martial artist’s stick as a polo stick (Lee 2016) (Fig. 9). Later on, King Ŭijong of the Koryō Dynasty (918-1392) was very fond of watching polo games (*Koryōsa*, Ŭijong 1), and also had excellent techniques for



Fig. 8) Woman of Koguryō in the Takamatsubo murals of the Asuka period



Fig. 9) Corner pillar excavated from a square mounded tomb in Kujōng-dong, Kyōngju

playing the game. The military regime had great interest in polo and also owned a luxurious private stadium (*Taejo Sillok*, vol. 1). In the Koryō period, kings and martial artists must have enjoyed playing it as an amusement. The period of the sport in Koryō has been shown differently from time to time, but after King Ch'ungyōl, it was fixed as a seasonal custom of the Dano festival in May (Chung 2010, 259-260). This was recorded only in the case of the king's own presence, so it can be assumed that it was held much more frequently.

Finally, the polo of the Chosōn Dynasty (1392-1910) was different from that of Koryō. Taejo enjoyed watching the game, and had an outstanding ability in horse riding martial arts. According to the *Kyōngguk Daejōn*, which is known as the basic law of the Chosōn Dynasty, the length of the stadium was 600 meters with 400 steps. It was larger than Isfahan Imam Square, which measures 512 meters north to south and 163 meters east to west. The way of playing was a little unusual. When the singers and dancers played and threw the ball in the middle of the field, the game was begun by the players who were waiting in the middle of the runway with a stick. The music and dance for polo, so-called 'hoerye'ak' (會禮樂), were

created to encourage the game. It can be guessed how high the popularity of the game was due to the fact that the phenomenon that it was set to music and dance could be seen not only in Korea but in the Persian region where polo was played as well as in the region where *Gesar* was recited. A combination of sports and music is an example of acculturation (Fig. 10).

King Sejong in the early Chosŏn Dynasty enjoyed the game greatly, so he systematized it and adopted it as one subject of the martial arts test (Chung 2010, 263-266). It is considered to be the period of the revival of polo in the Chosŏn Dynasty, and Sejong built thirty new stadiums in order to spread it. The era of the greatest popularity of polo was called ‘the Renaissance of Chosŏn’ when the transformation and development of science took place, Han’gŭl was created, and academic achievement was higher than ever before. Because of such a phenomenon, it can be assumed that a strong cultural exchange along with polo took place at that time, just as the renaissance that took place in the Western Hemisphere was affected by the Middle Hemisphere from the 14th to the 16th centuries (Kim 2018, 7-17). Subsequently, after a silent period for a while, polo was revived briefly during the reign of King Injo, who maintained the Hullyŏnwŏn, a military training center, but which was disbanded at the beginning of King Yŏngjo’s reign. It was during the reign of King Chŏngjo (1776-1800) that polo was documented in *Muyedobotongji* as one of the six horseback martial arts (Fig. 11). In the late Chosŏn period, it was handed down as Changch’igi, a form of



Fig. 10) Kyŏkgu with music by Yŏsŏng Lee, 1938



Fig. 11) Kyōkgu' in *Myedobot'ongji*, 1790

ground polo. The period is estimated to be around the 18th to the 19th century in the late Chosŏn Dynasty. After at least 200 years of disuse, horseback polo was restored in the mid-1990s and has continued until today.

In Japan, polo is called *dakyu* (打毬; strike the ball). Although there is a record related to the visit of the demonstration team of Balhae in 899, the first record that the nobility enjoyed the game of *dakyu* is in 727 and appears in the 8th century poetry collection *Manyōshū* (Gottmann 2001, 36). Indeed, it seems that the game was performed in aristocratic society for 500 years during the Nara period (710-794) and Heian period (794-1185). According to a record from June 7, 966, a gate was made and children played ground *dakyu*. Therefore it was probably in the 10th century that the format was completed. The capital of the Heian period was Kyoto, and polo games were held in May of the lunar year as an annual event for the guardians of the Imperial Palace. However, *dakyu* was on the decline when power passed from the king to the Fujimara Clan and again to the Shogun of Kamakura (Kim 2004, 42).

Then, in the 18th century, the Shogunate of Tokugawa Yoshimune (1716-1751) revived it for the practice of martial arts, and in the 19th century, it was handed down in several branches of the Shogunate (Kim 2004, 42). However, at that time, it had already changed to a way of showing individual skill rather than playing competitively. Although it was old and the data about the game were rare or lost, the sticks became more like a lacrosse stick

than a polo stick, and adopted a form of netting rather than hitting (Gottmann 2001, 38). Originally, *dakyu* meant ‘*mariuchi*’, ball hitting, but it is possible that other similar games were imported and mixed together. Two different kinds of sports, from the *buzakashi* line of Central Asia and the lacrosse line of the Native American, may have come to Japan and created a new form. In fact, there are various versions of the game and system, so it would be more meaningful to understand the process of transformation than to track the prototype.

Conclusion

The history of the game of polo seems to have originated in the wide range of the Central Asian mountains in the 6th century BCE. The context runs through the Persian and Parthian to the Sasanian empires of the 3rd to 4th centuries CE. However, according to the above arguments, it is more specific to identify northwest India and Baltistan Tibet as the other epicenters of polo. It may not be a coincidence that they still use the word ‘*daci-pulu*’ meaning of ‘horse and round object’, which should be considered as the etymological root form of the current word polo. In a transition of the game style, *buzkashi*, which is enjoyed by Central Asian nomadic people today, also could be considered an original form of polo. As such, the route of the flow and the interchange of polo is in accord with the Silk Road.

In Persia, the enthusiasm for polo gradually faded after the end of the Safavid Dynasty in the 18th century. In Central Asia, which is considered to be its original birthplace, it is almost impossible to find data after the 17th century. It seems that China, Korea, and Japan also had polo until the early 18th century. It is difficult to explain polo’s decline with one reason only, because the court reduced its support due to a complicated social and political situation stemming from various political and social factors. However, there still remained some traces of it in northern India in the Hindu Kush and Manipur, where rich villages flourished. It is unclear whether this was influenced by Mughal court culture or directly influenced by Central Asia (Parkes 2005, 44-45), but fading interest in polo was revived by British soldiers in India. They were introduced to it on the borderlands of Burma, in Manipur in 1854 (Milburn 1994, 34-35), and polo spread to Canada, the United States, South America, Australia, New Zealand, Egypt, and beyond (Tursunov 1983, 27).

Polo performed various functions for the purposes of military training, harvest rituals, wedding celebrations, seasonal events, martial arts examinations, displays of power, and diplomatic friendship, as well as play or sport along the Silk Road civilization area. It was also expressed in various art genres, including epics, lyric poetry, songs, murals, cartoons, sculptures, and paintings. In the Chosŏn Dynasty, music and dance called ‘*hoerye’ak*’ was also developed, and during the Safavid Dynasty in the early 17th century, creativity showed its presence in various fields such as playing unique music for polo games.

It is interesting that epics such as *Shahnameh* and *Gesar* share the motif of ‘hitting the enemy’s head off as a polo ball’ as it is also told in the episode of Hussein’s assassination. Additionally, it is remarkable that a similar motif appears in the poetry of Hafiz for praising Timur. Moreover, in Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, the Dauphin sends Henry V a box of tennis balls intending them to serve as a mocking symbol of Henry’s boyish frivolity, but Henry V’s reaction to the gift renders them a different symbol entirely. The tennis balls are changed, in his imagination, to cannon balls. Though he once played games, he will now fight wars against France (Bach 1999, 3-4), which is exactly what Alexander did to Darius in *Shahnameh*. Polo is even the subject of philosophy. Shah Abbas’s subjects identified polo as a means of learning some quickness and determination, and said people could even understand ‘the way of submission to authority’ and ‘the friendship of a man’ through polo (Allami 1989, 309-10). The fact that polo was treated as a subject of martial arts examinations in China and Korea suggests that it was understood not just as a martial art but as a category of ‘literature’ and ‘manners’. Moreover, it was a serious issue of Confucianism as well as Taoism, which dominated the mental sphere of the Eastern Hemisphere, although both were never linked with polo.

Thus, in the end, polo offers a way to draw larger conclusions from specific examples that demonstrate the interconnectedness of history. It does not mean that there has not been an attempt to read culture and civilization from the perspective of an interchangeable history but it may be in this context that Chinese civilization or Islamic civilization, which spread through exchanges, can be emphasized in the interpretation of ‘modern’ in Europe in recent years. It is also an attempt to dissipate the achievements and contributions of Europe’s monopoly on progress. In the development of technological civilization, although the timing of a technology’s emergence varies depending on the region, we can see how it develops to suit the environment through the exchanges and influences of various factors over a certain period of time. For example, it is estimated that silk cultivation started around 4500 BCE during the Yangsao culture period (Barber 1992, 31), but an understanding of silk culture is impossible without an understanding of the propagation process of transformation and development for that long history. The invention of paper was presumed to have already begun in the second century BCE, but it is also impossible to understand paper culture without understanding the propagation process of transformation and development, as it was transmitted to the Islamic world through the battle of Talas in 751. In the case of printing technology, the first metal type appeared in the Koryō Dynasty in the 13th century and it went through several experiments before the Gutenberg type appeared in the 15th century. However, the development of print culture would have been impossible without the demands of the times, such as the Renaissance or the Reformation, for the spread of paper (Kim 2018, 315-325).

These inventions were groundbreaking results that changed the lives of mankind, but

how they developed is far more important than who invented them or where they were invented first. While many technologies have been invented and developed, they have soon flowed into other areas through cultural contacts and interactions between groups that were made sometimes intentionally, sometimes accidentally. The flow of culture was made sometimes entirely, sometimes selectively. Contact between heterogeneous cultural groups has also sparked conflicts and facilitated encounters and mixes of technology, thought, belief, value, religion, and civilization itself. It has also shaken the cultural identities of all related groups and sometimes brought about the destruction of cultural traditions that had already been established (Bentley 1992, 5-9). Therefore, many peoples have been offered the opportunity to redefine their unique cultural traditions. Thus, it is reasonable to insist that the history of civilizations eventually is a history of mutual borrowings that lasted for centuries, although each civilization of the world maintained its own unique character (Braudel 1987, 8).

In that sense, the fact that a version of this ancient game with the name chowgan, a traditional Karabakh horse-riding game in the Republic of Azerbaijan (ICH 2019), was included on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding in 2013 is a serious concern. It should not be a tradition of any particular nation but a joint heritage of Iran, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Armenia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Azerbaijan (Ubaidulloev 2015, 50). The ownership of the cultural prototype is not with any particular group.

The history of the cultural exchange of polo emphasizes the role of heterogeneous culture group contacts, and the importance of contact between culture groups in daily life. Civilization is not a one-time event, but always has to be read as a process. Polo, which is visible in the world today, is a cultural artifact for reading Silk Road civilization, and it is also a lens through which we can reinterpret the unilateral discourse of the ‘expansion of the West’.

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