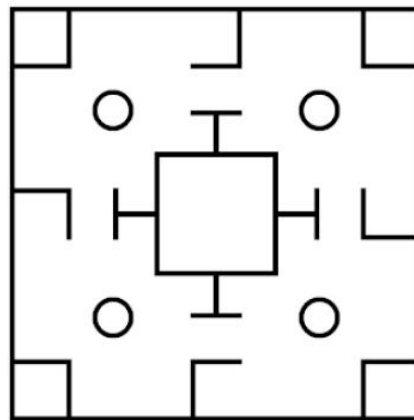
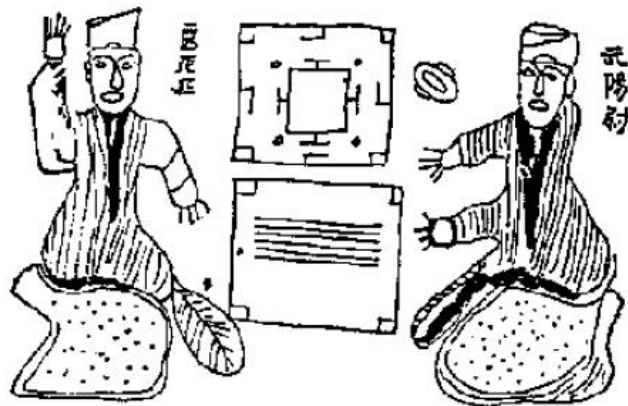


51 Liu bo: An Ancient Chinese Board Game

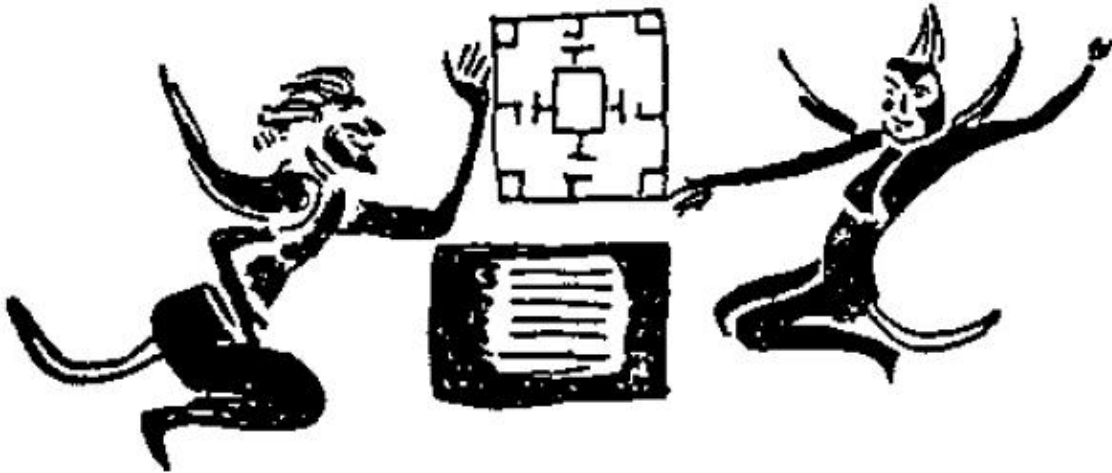
From the Warring States period through the Han dynasty (475 BCE – 220 CE) and perhaps on a lesser scale for about another century after the Han a board game for two players was very popular in China. The Chinese called it Liu-bo 六博 (or 六簫), the Game of Six Sticks. The basic equipment for the game was a square board with a square marked in the center and lines resembling T, L, and V placed at intervals around the space between the central square and the outer edge of the board. There were also knobs, circles, or diagonal lines between the corners of the central square and the smaller V-squares in each corner of the board as a whole.



Each player started with a set of six pawns, usually of an oblong shape. One set was white, and the other set was black. Next to the game board would be another small table or an extension of the game board with six wooden or bamboo rods on it. The bamboo strips would be used as dice and also could be used sometimes for consulting an oracle. Some sets included a die with 18 sides numbered from 1 to 16 with two polar sides, one labeled “win”, and the other labeled “lose”.



Two men playing the game of *Liu-bo*.



Two immortals with tails playing the game of *Liu-bo*.



Two players prepare to begin the game. Note the six sticks placed neatly on one side and each player's tiles lined up on his side of the game board. They seem to be doing a hand-clapping ritual before they start play.



Two players with the game in progress.
Player on the left has thrown the sticks and some of the tiles have been moved out onto the board.

Unfortunately no complete set of rules survives. The best we have are some records of when it was played, some historical figures who played, and some comments about the method of play perhaps drawn from a lost work called the *Gu-bo-jing* (古博經). During the Jin dynasty (265–420) Zhang Chen 張湛 described some aspects of the game in his commentary to the *Book of Lie-zi* 列子:

博法：二人相對坐，向局，局分為十二道，兩頭，當中名為水。用棋十二枚，古法六白、六黑。又用魚二枚，置於水中。其擲采以瓊為之。二人互擲彩行棋，棋行到處即豎之，名為驍棋。即入水食魚，亦名牽魚。每牽一魚獲二籌，翻一魚獲三籌。若已牽兩魚而不勝者，名曰被翻雙魚，彼家獲六籌為大勝也。

Method of play: two people sit opposite each other facing the board. The board is divided into 12 pathways and two “heads” (starting points, one for each player?) The middle is called the water. Use 12 pawns. The old method is that six are white and six are black. Also use two “fish” placed in the water. They take up a die and toss it for the number of moves. The two players take turns tossing for the numbers and move their pawns. When a pawn reaches the Place, [the player] stands it on end and calls it a fierce (owl) pawn that can then enter the water and eat fish, which is also called pulling fish. Each time someone pulls a fish [out of the water?], he gets two points. Flipping a fish gets three points. If one has already pulled two

fish but does not win, that is called “being flipped a pair of fish”. When a player gets six points that is a great win.

The problem with this passage is that there are many technical terms that the writer does not explain clearly. For example, what are the two “heads”? Where is the Place? Some assume it is in the central water, but that is not certain. The fierce (xiao 驍) pawn seems to be a pun on the pawn that can become an “owl” (xiao 梟) and then fly about preying on fish. Apparently the player stood his tile up on end when it became an owl and this was something like the way a checker becomes a king or a pawn in chess becomes a queen. The owl has greater freedom to roam the board and attack opponent pawns. How do you pull a fish out of the water, and what exactly is “flipping” (*fan* 翻) a fish? What is “being flipped a pair of fish”? It sounds like the fish are different from the player pawns.



Two players with sticks and tiles laid out ready to begin play. Note the two round “fish” in the middle of the board. The players again seem to be doing a hand-clapping ritual before they begin play.

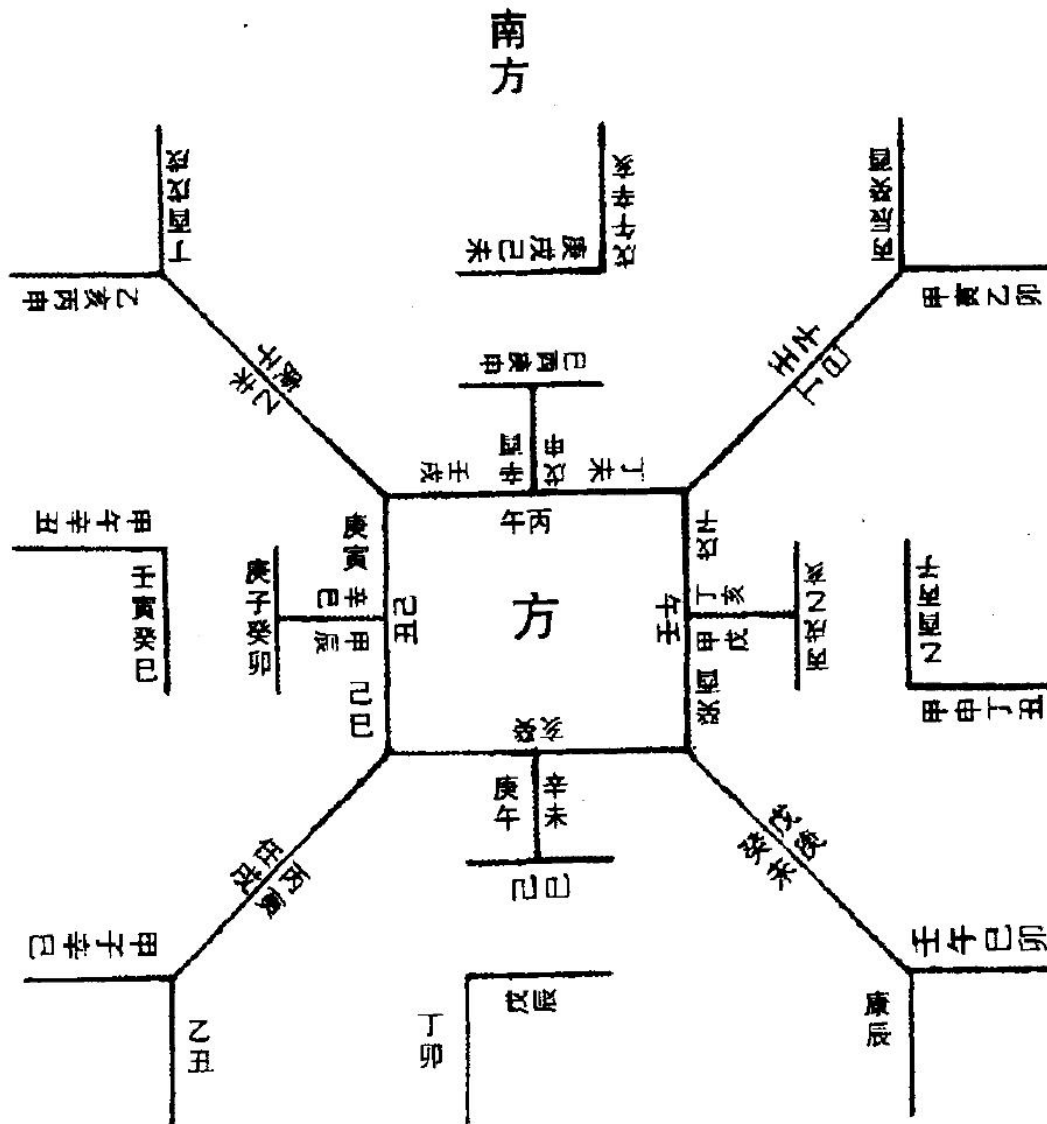
A much earlier text, the *Zhao Hun* 招魂, a poem from a collection of **Poems from the South** (*Chu-ci* 楚辭) during the late Warring States period, is devoted to summoning the soul of a deceased person back from the land of the dead, perhaps to participate in the funeral rites. After the funerary feast, the guests begin to play *Liu-bo*, presumably because the fun will attract the soul to come back. This sounds very reminiscent of the use of *Senet* in the funerary rites just as the placing of game boards in tombs matches the ancient Egyptian custom.

菟蔽象碁，有六籀些。
分曹並進，適相迫些。
成梟而牟，呼五白些。

Then with *kun-bi* sticks and ivory pawns they have a bit of Liu Bo;
Two [players] take their sides and advance, threatening each other.
One becomes an owl and doubles [his score] shouting ‘five whites!’

This passage tells us that sometimes the sticks were not made of bamboo, because *kun-bi* is twigs from another kind of plant, possibly twigs of the castor oil plant (*kun-ma* 菟麻). Pawns could be made of ivory, bone, metal, and so on. Another technical term comes in here: “becoming an owl”. This apparently is a power upgrade to a tile that occurs under certain circumstances. “Five whites” hints at a rule that may be connected to the owner of the “owled” tile, either in his favor or to his dismay if it is a counter move by the opponent.

The role of game boards in funerary rites and placing of them in tombs is indicative that the game was something more than just an amusement. There was a spiritual and divinatory aspect to the game. In the case of *Senet* it was the relation to the calendar and the weighing of the heart ceremony of the Book of the Dead along with the oracular use of the board. In the case of *Liu-bo* the game related closely to the **Book of Changes**. The six sticks could be used to generate hexagrams, the board could be easily divided into spaces for the 64 hexagrams, and boards survive that have the cycle of 60 combinations of heavenly stems and earthly branches (*tian-gan di-zhi* 天干地支) written on the surface of the board.



Liu-bo board with the 60 stems and branches.

Another phenomenon that further strengthens the case is the existence of a number of Han dynasty bronze mirrors that have a stylized *Liu-bo* board diagram on the back, suggesting the power of the oracle to help a person see himself or herself more clearly.

A number of scholars have attempted to reconstruct the play of the *Liu-bo* game.

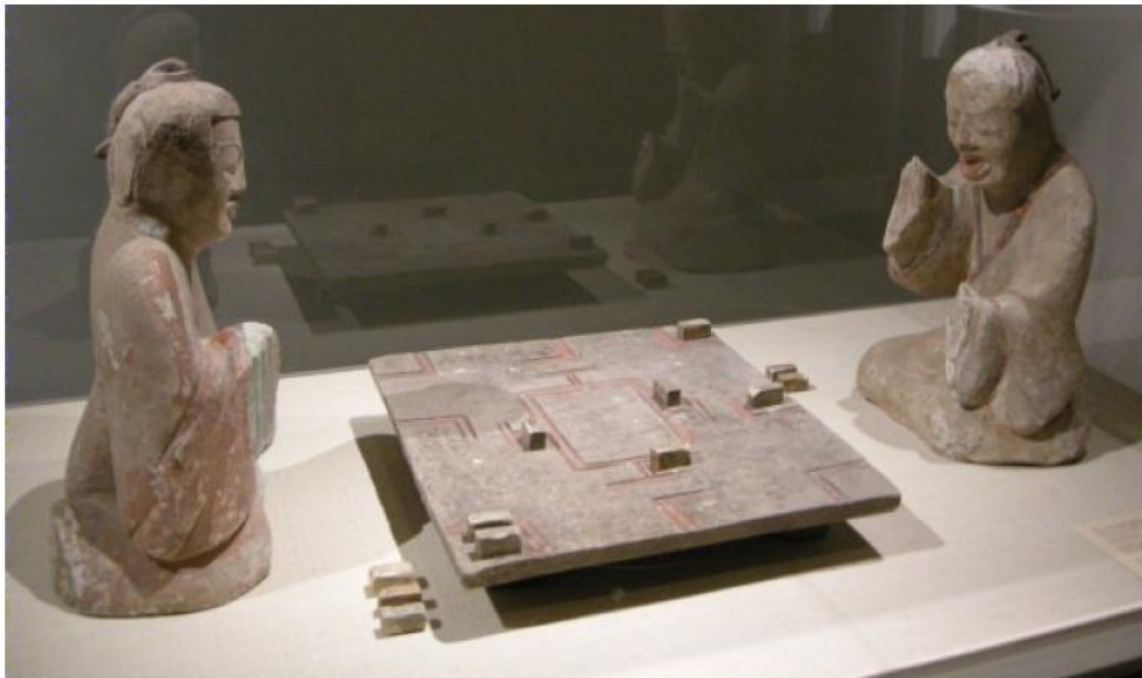
Professor Lien-sheng Yang of Harvard investigated the game in a preliminary fashion, and more recently Jean-Louis Cazaux has published on

the Internet his study of the game and his reconstruction. (For his article and many excellent pictures see <http://history.chess.free.fr/liubo.htm>.

For his reconstructed rules of the game, please see <http://history.chess.free.fr/liubo-rules.htm>.

Another great site with photos, related texts, and archaeological sources of the artifacts is:

<http://babelstone.blogspot.com/2009/05/lost-game-of-liubo-part-1-funerary.html>.)



A Liubo game in progress. Source : [Wikimedia](#) (CC BY/SA by [Sailko](#)). The man on the left looks like he has captured one more pawn than his flustered opponent.

A Comparison of *Senet* and *Liubo*

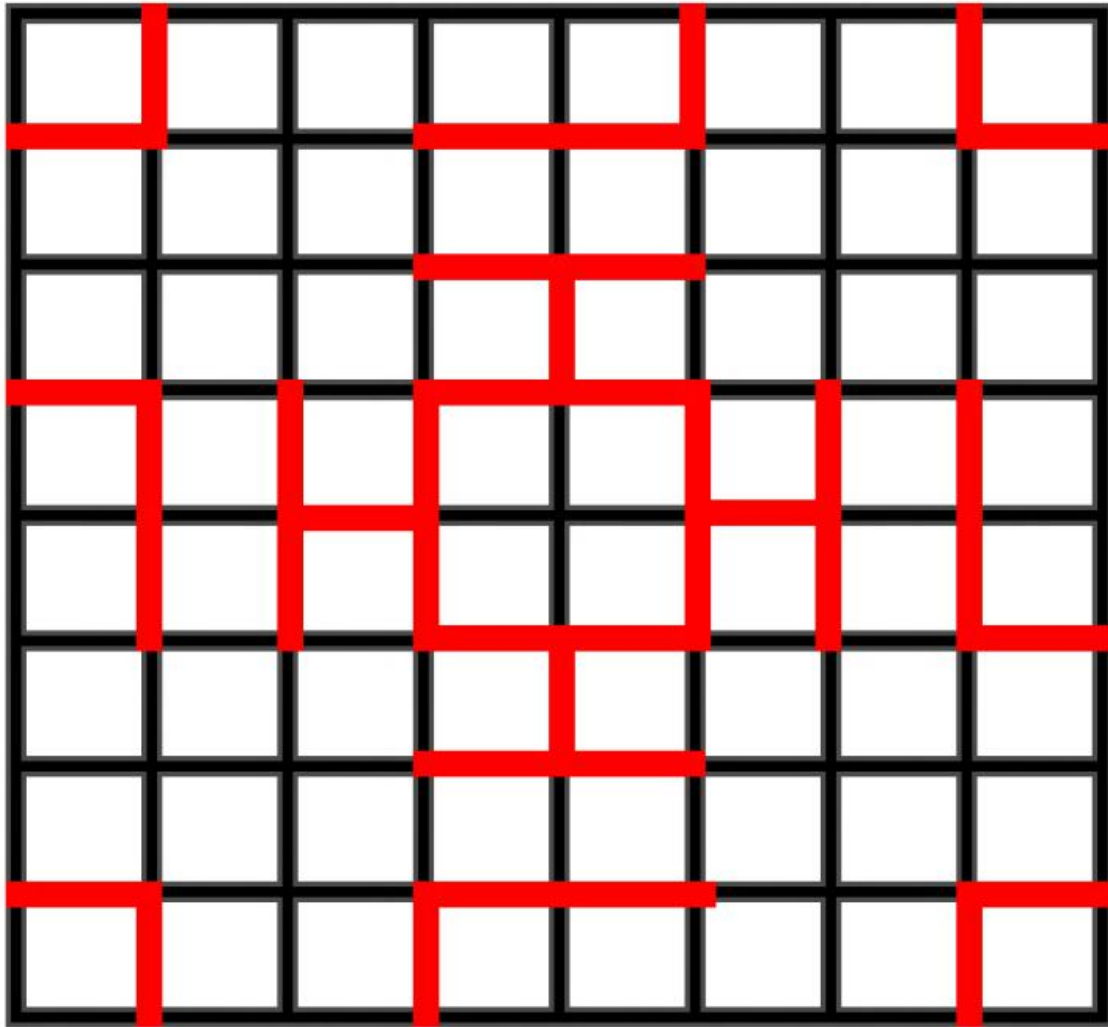
Let us now compare *Senet* and *Liubo* as games and as oracles and see whether there are any connections.

- * Both are board games.
- * Although we do not have exact rules for either game, they both involved throwing sticks used as dice (or carved dice) and pawns that moved about the board in a race game. Both games seem to have involved the capture of opponent pawns and ways of disadvantaging them during the course of play.

* Both boards could be used as calendars. The Senet Game Board encoded both the solar and the lunar month. The Liubo board distributed around the region outside of the central water square the 60 combinations of stems and branches used for Chinese calendars (presumably also mapping them to the hexagrams).

* The central square contained the final four hexagrams to complete the sixty-four. Thus a Liu-bo calendar board contains the Chinese traditional cyclical calendar that equals exactly two months (or Senet Board circuits) in the Egyptian calendar. The difference is that the Chinese cycle went on and on like the Mayan Tzolkin, independent of seasons or years, whereas the Egyptians eventually tuned their cycles of 30 days to the real cycles of the sun and moon. Here is the cycle of the stems and branches.

1. 甲子 11. 甲戌 21. 甲申 31. 甲午 41. 甲辰 51. 甲寅
2. 乙丑 12. 乙亥 22. 乙酉 32. 乙未 42. 乙巳 52. 乙卯
3. 丙寅 13. 丙子 23. 丙戌 33. 丙申 43. 丙午 53. 丙辰
4. 丁卯 14. 丁丑 24. 丁亥 34. 丁酉 44. 丁未 54. 丁巳
5. 戊辰 15. 戊寅 25. 戊子 35. 戊戌 45. 戊申 55. 戊午
6. 己巳 16. 己卯 26. 己丑 36. 己亥 46. 己酉 56. 己未
7. 庚午 17. 庚辰 27. 庚寅 37. 庚子 47. 庚戌 57. 庚申
8. 辛未 18. 辛巳 28. 辛卯 38. 辛丑 48. 辛亥 58. 辛酉
9. 壬申 19. 壬午 29. 壬辰 39. 壬寅 49. 壬子 59. 壬戌
10. 癸酉 20. 癸未 30. 癸巳 40. 癸卯 50. 癸丑 60. 癸亥

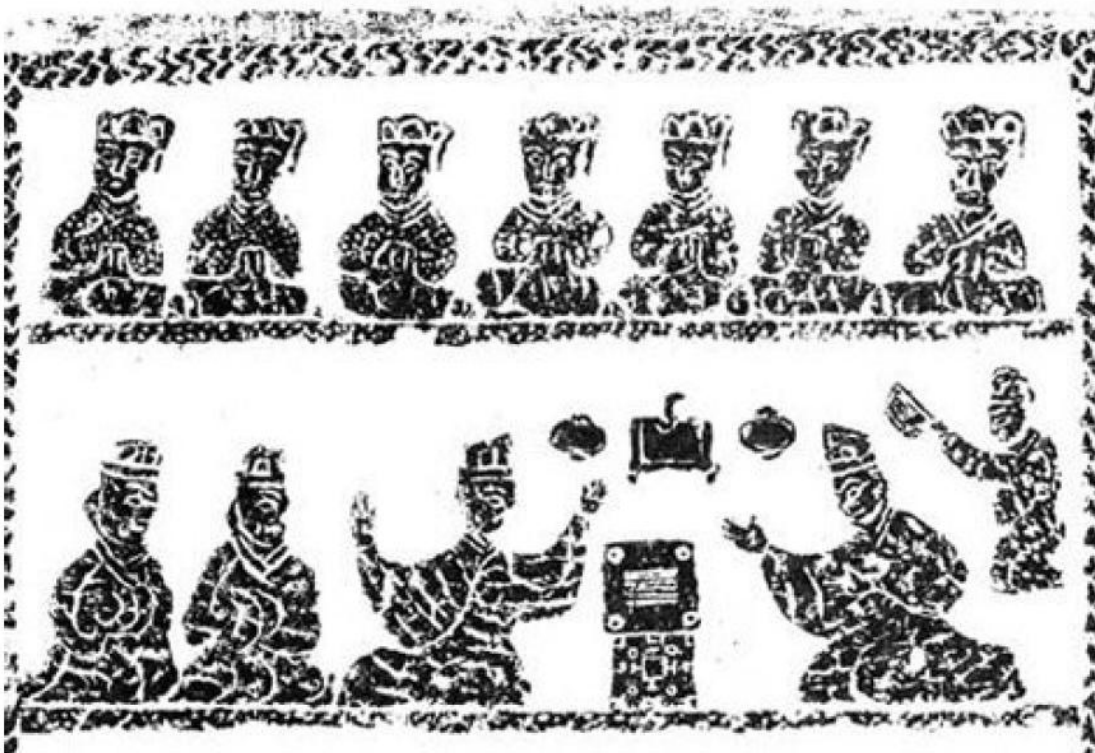


Drawing of a Liubo Board overlaid on a $8 \times 8 = 64$ -square hexagram board. Counting the layers from the center outward we find 4, 12, 20, and 28 squares. The outer three layers sum to 60 squares, or 30 for each player's side. The central 4 can represent the four seasons. Two fish (yin and yang) are put in the central square.

* Both Senet and Liubo boards tended to embody abstractions of content that expressed the essential message of the culture, but were stylized into a simple format with square houses over which the pawns moved. In the case of Senet the pawns moved through the adventure of life on a calendar. The pathway of the pawns was to become Horus the Elder, personification of **Wat** 𓂏, the Way of the Neter, and then transcend the relative world of the board. The board represented the Weighing of the Heart. In the case of Liubo the pawns moved through the pathway of the Dao 道, the Way of the Natural Cosmos as symbolized by the hexagrams of the **Book of Changes**.

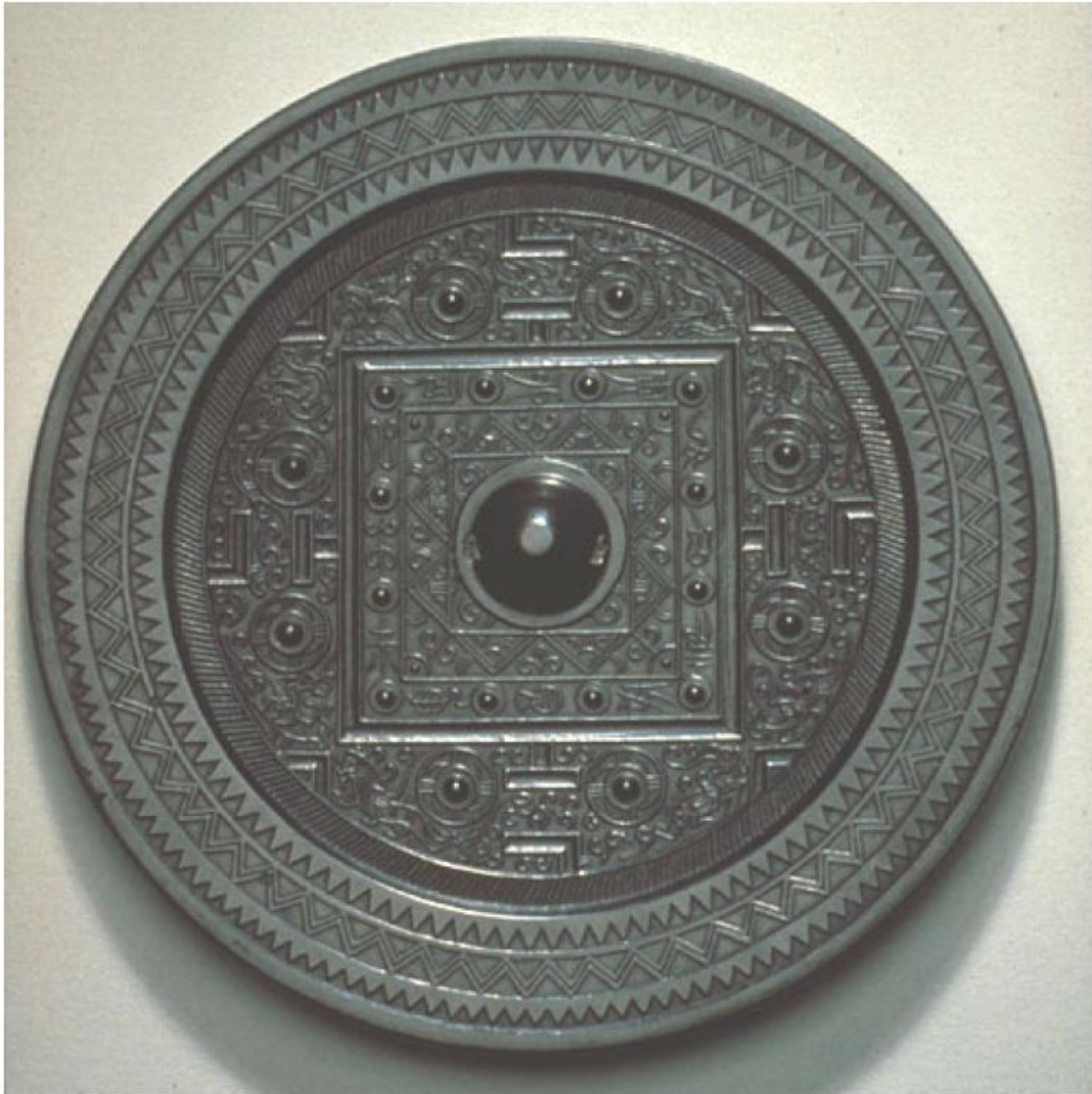
* Players seemed to be aware of the underlying cosmological symbolism of the boards and other playing pieces and probably knew by heart the cosmic significance of moves on the board.

* The full moon formed the center piece of the Senet Game Board, and the Heart in the balance of the Scale of Justice at the center of the universe formed the center piece of the Oracle Board layout. The center piece of the Liubo board was the Taiji and expressed the balanced state of all the hexagrams that formed the grid.



This game of *Liubo* has an ensemble of players and onlookers that vaguely resembles the Senet Oracle Board layout.

The Liubo Oracle Game Board is the Cosmic Balance.



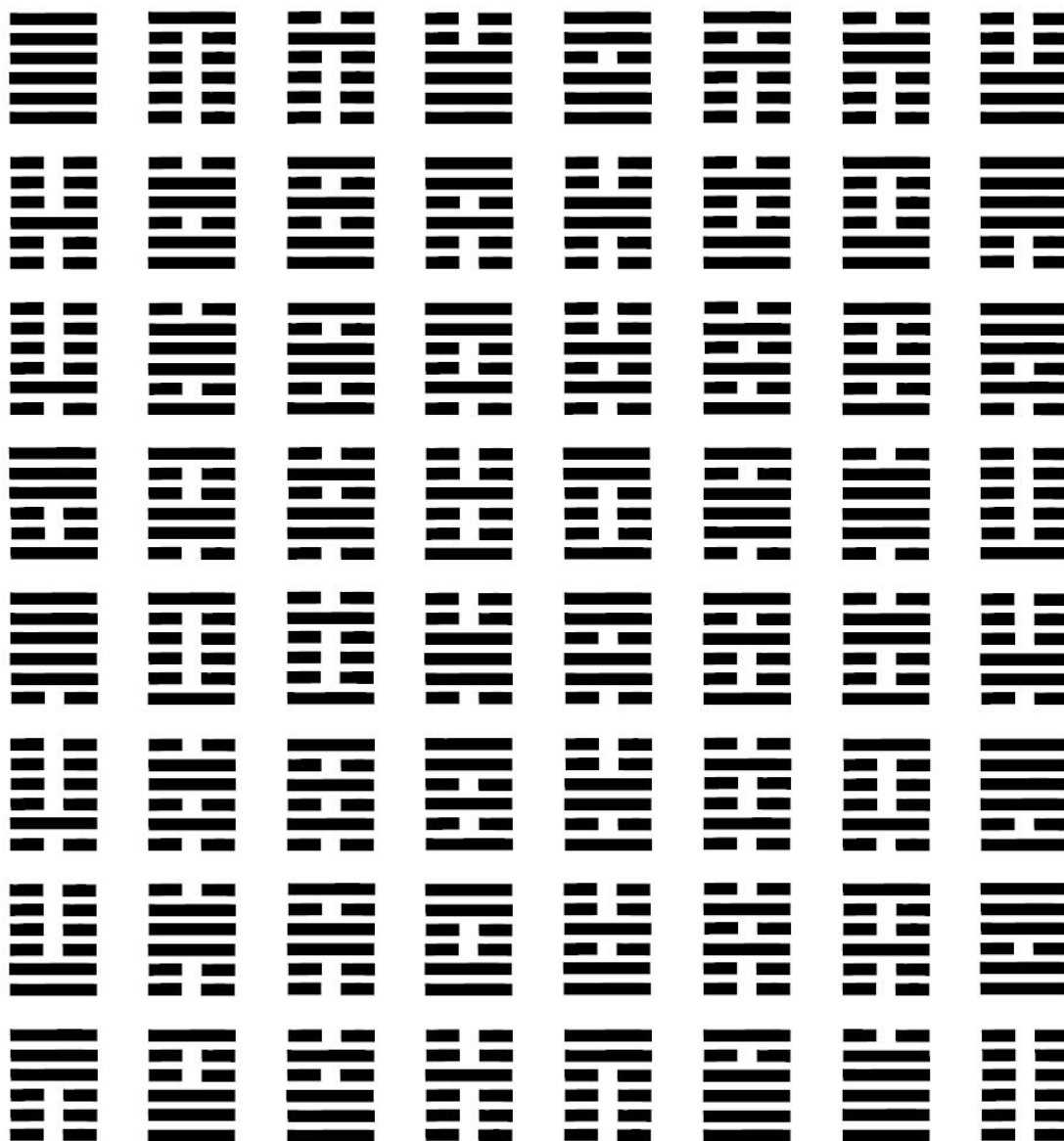
Example of a Han TLV mirror

The small nipples in the square are the 12 months of a year or the 12 earthly branches. The larger nipples in the outer region are the 8 trigrams. The Taiji knob in the middle has a hole through it for suspending it with a lanyard.

* In Egypt Hathor functioned as a mirror for Ra, and this gave him his power. The Chinese Liubo board was often cast into the backs of bronze mirrors to remind people that the game board was a mirror of the cosmos and a way in which a person could see a true reflection of self.

* Egypt possessed an earlier version of the **Book of Changes** in the form of a binary code, and by tradition it came from the beginning of creation at the center of the country in Khemenu, Home of the Ogdoad (eight

primordial neter archetypes) and under the guidance of *Tekhy* (*Taiji*), the balance point, who was also known as Baba. The system consisted of 64 phases of the Lunar Eye of Horus, the Ogdoad, the four sons of Horus, and Men-Mut (the invisible cosmic solar lovers who could also be interpreted as Thoth and Maat the cosmic lunar lovers). The total comes to 78. The Egyptians used the binary system for their weights and measures. The Liubo board has the 8 trigrams distributed abstractly around the outer path and encoded by the L's in the middle edges and V's in the corners, and then the 4 T shapes for the four cardinal directions. In the middle were the 2 fish (Yin and Yang). The throw of the sticks could generate any one of the sixty-four hexagrams, and we can fill in the board with an 8x8 grid to make the hexagram positions visible. This also gives us a total of 78. This binary code was central to Chinese thought and permeated all her art and technology.



Square grid of the 64 hexagrams

The expression for the 64 hexagrams in Chinese traditionally is Ba-ba liu-shi-si gua (八八六十四卦), which happens to exactly spell the name of Thoth in his transcendental identity as a game- and prank-playing baboon and indicates that the 64 hexagrams belong to him. Baba the baboon usually sits right in the middle on top of the Scale of Justice balancing the heart and truth.

* Both boards had a subtle symbolism of water in the middle. Texts tell us that “water” filled the central square of the Liubo board and from there the

owl could “pull” fish, traditional Chinese symbols of abundance. We have evidence of a pun on the term “owl”. In the History of Jin general Xie Ai (謝艾 whose name means “Thanks to the yarrow straws”) reads the omen of an owl roosting among his flag standards before a battle as: “*Xiao* (a fierce one) is to waylay an enemy. In Liubo the one who gets the owl wins. Now an owl hoots among the battle flags – that is an omen of defeating the enemy.” 梟，邀也，六博得梟者勝。今梟鳴牙中，克敵之兆。 He then went on to defeat his enemy. Another word that matches the pun between the owl in Liubo and a fierce opponent is 消 (to dissolve). Perhaps the real secret to Liubo is that *xiao* means to dissolve all difficulties and distinctions by centering in the Taiji and moving with the Dao. Water filled the central row of the Senet Oracle Board, because that row was where the magical boat of Ra-Osiris moved between Heaven and Earth in the mysterious Astral Realm of Wizardry. The boat image punned on the word for meditation, the core teaching of the Litany of Ra.



Two men in a pavilion play Liu Bo while people watch from a balcony above and what look like two phoenixes cavort on the roof of the pavilion. Tengzhou, Shandong, Han dynasty carved tomb decoration. Photo by Grace White.



Xi-wang Mu (Mother Goddess of the West, [Mut Hathor]) watches from Heaven as two men play Liu Bo among a crowd of onlookers in Heaven and on Earth. Tengzhou Shandong, Han dynasty carved tomb decoration. Photo by Grace White.

51 Study Questions

- * What are some similarities between Senet and Liubo?
- * What are some differences between Senet and Liubo?
- * Why do you think these games became connected to the calendar?
- * Why do you think these games both became associated with oracles?
- * Why do you think these games both became associated with funeral rituals and tomb art?

- * How is the symbol of a mirror involved with the deeper philosophical and spiritual aspect of these games?