

Harry Smith Parkes, the First British Go Player in Japan

Guoru Ding, Franco Pratesi

In his book “Goh or Wei chi” of 1911, the first complete treatment of Go in Great Britain, Horace Cheshire mentioned that he had played the game of Go for some thirty years and that his sources were both Chinese and Japanese. Possibly people he had played with were students or scholars from China or Japan. For instance, in 1877, there was a group of Chinese students that came to study at the Royal Navy College at Greenwich. They stayed for several years; some only 2-3 years, and some for 5-6 years. They had had formal traditional Chinese training and had acquired some Western naval knowledge; after finishing their training in England, they became the first generation of Chinese Navy officials. They were roughly the same age as Cheshire, and some of them played Weiqi. Other visitors from Asia were present at various times.

What is certain is that the material provided by Giles in 1875 was too brief for learning the game. The German book published by Oskar Korschelt in 1881 in Yokohama was little known even in Germany, and apparently completely unknown to Cheshire; the first book in English based on it was only published in 1908 by Arthur Smith in New York. Thus, most probably, Cheshire learned how to play Go from someone in person who knew the game. However, playing more or less continuously for thirty years is hardly compatible with just casual visits of players from Asia. It seems likely that a group of native players had formed, with the occasional assistance of stronger players from China and/or Japan. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to find any evidence for it.

Therefore it is Oskar Korschelt who deserves the credit for having introduced the game into Europe. His articles (then collected in a book, which did not have a large circulation and soon became rare) were enough to teach the essential techniques of the game. On the basis of Korschelt’s work, Richard Schurig (an expert chess player and writer) published a booklet in 1882, in Leipzig. This was considered (first of all by its author) as easier to understand and to use as a handbook for

beginners; a confirmation can be found in the several further editions of this booklet. At the very origin of this “German channel”, there was the participation of Korschelt in the Hoensha¹ in Tokyo. An essential detail was that he was accustomed to writing comprehensive reports on various technical subjects. However, Korschelt could probably never have written his Go work if he had not been forced to remain inactive at home for a while, recovering from a disease.

All this information can be found in the histories of Go available in Europe. There are, however, useful additional data in a famous Japanese book of Go history, “Zain Danso”, by Ando Toyoji - its first edition was printed in 1903. Toyoji (1866-1915) made his own investigation and research when he prepared the materials for the book. He interviewed many famous Go figures, such as the second and third Hoensha Presidents, respectively Nakagawa Kamesaburo² (1837-1903) and Iwasaki Kenzo (1841-1913), the 16th and 20th Honinbo, Shugen (1854–1917), the 17th and 19th Honinbo, Shuei (1852-1907), and other players.

The first edition of “Zain Danso”, in 5 volumes, was published in 1904; its second edition, in 3 volumes, in 1910. Watanabe Hideo (1903-1998), a professional Go player and Go historian, added notes and expanded the 1910 edition to make a new “Zain Danso” - the first edition was published in 1955. The information commented on here comes from its 3rd edition of 1983; it is in the section on the 18th Honinbo Shuho, on page 595.

When Oskar Korschelt studied Go with Murase Shuho, there were other Europeans in the Hoensha to learn Go, and in particular the British Minister, Sir Harry Smith Parkes. His presence there has not escaped the attention of John Fairbairn, who mentions it in a few places of GoGoD³. Let us add some further comments on this situation and discuss real and hypothetical connections.

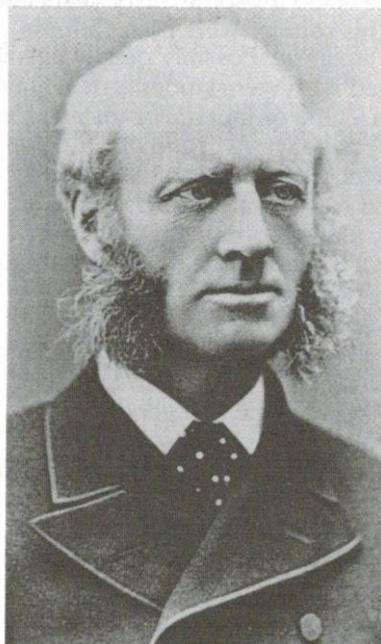
Sir Harry Smith Parkes is an important historical figure; he died in Peking in 1885, as the British Minister in China. He was only 57 by then (he was born in 1828 in Staffordshire), and this may be surprising when considering all the many events in which he took part. He had spent most of his life in China, in a diplomatic career that had begun

¹ A Japanese Go Association, preceding the Nihon Ki-in – Wikipedia.

² The fourth Hoensha President, Kamesaburo’s adopted son, was also named Nakagawa Kamesaburo (and in addition known as Ishii Senji, Hayashi Senji).

³ Go Games on Disk - see www.gogod.co.uk.

very early, when he was just entering his teens. He was active in several of the main Chinese towns, subsequently as interpreter, Consul, Commissioner and Minister for Great Britain. In particular, he took part in many military expeditions and was personally involved in battles and riots within the rather confused political situation of those years, with conflicting requirements imposed on China by the Western powers.



Sir Harry Smith Parkes

What interests us most here, however, is a long interlude in his life that he spent in Japan during the years 1865-1883; he held the post of “Her Majesty’s Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary and Consul-General in Japan” for 18 years. A whole book by Gordon Daniels, “Sir Harry Parkes. British Representative in Japan 1865-83”, was published in 1996. Parkes used his influence in support of the Liberal Party of Japan, and had some influence in the Meiji government. His interest in Japanese habits and culture was remarkable; in particular, he inspired some younger participants in the British mission to become famous experts in Japanology.

Another indication of his official activities can be derived from Wikipedia: “A thorough investigation on Japanese paper and papermaking

was carried out by Sir Harry Parkes and his team of consular staff in different Japanese towns, resulting in the publication of a government report and the formation of a collection of 400+ sheets of handmade paper. The Parkes paper collection is important because the origin, price, manufacturing method and function of each paper was precisely documented.”

In this context, we can ask whether he could have initiated a deep study of Go too, but have no answer. There are some points that we can attempt to deduce in the absence of specific documents. Our questions concern how we can consider Parkes as Go writer, Go player, and Go teacher.

As a Go writer, we can safely exclude the possibility that he had compiled some work on Go that has got lost with time: in his life he took part in so many and important events that he could hardly have had time enough for sitting and writing something on Go.

Let us discuss Parkes as a player. There is an early biography of him: Stanley Lane-Poole and Fred Victor Dickins, “The Life of Sir Harry Parkes” (2 Volumes), London 1894. The following statement can be found there (Vol. 1, p. 96): “He knew nothing about sport and played no games, except in later years a quiet rubber”. This is probably the only place that ever mentions games in the whole biography of more than 1000 pages, which is mainly focused on Parkes’ diplomatic activities. In Daniels’ book (p. 117) there is the following quotation for the year 1871, from another biography: “During the voyage to San Francisco in fair weather or fog Parkes was always delighted to play a game of deck quoits or bull-board, throwing his whole heart into it with the warm enthusiasm and merry laughter of a schoolboy”; something rather far from Go.

As for Go, the Hoensha was established on April 20, 1879 in Tokyo, and during that year Parkes was able to learn to play the game there. The reason for Parkes learning to play Go was, of course, diplomacy-oriented, because many important Japanese people, such as political figures, high-ranking government officials, business leaders, and scholars were Go enthusiasts and patrons at the time. The Japanese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Inoue Kaoru (1835-1915), who had just taken the post in 1879, and with whom Parkes constantly had to deal afterwards, was on the top of the list. In any case, Parkes can be considered to be the first ever British Go player who directly learned to play Go in Japan.

It thus remains to discuss the last point, which is the most important in our context; the possibility of Parkes playing and teaching Go in Great Britain. Some opportunity could have been present during his last visit there. “Lady Parkes fell ill and died in England in November 1879, while there to make a home for the returning family. Sir Harry did not reach London until four days after her death.” Parkes stayed in Great Britain for two years, and only came back to Japan at the end of January 1882.

Plausibly, as a Go teacher, he may not have been deficient in knowledge, but what he would have been short of was the opportunity to play, and especially the opportunity to play in Great Britain. At most, we can imagine him joining the unknown group of Cheshire’s fellows, and suggesting to them a few improvements on their playing style, as complete beginners.

We can discover a possibility in one connection between Edward Falkener⁴ and Horace Cheshire. When, in March 1911, Cheshire gave his public report on Go, this occurred in a session of the Japanese Society in London, held in the Hall of the Royal Society of British Architects. It had been Falkener, years before, who had been familiar with that environment! We can thus speculate about an existing fellowship devoted to Go-playing, earlier than we actually know. Another possible connection is that between Edward Falkener and Parkes himself: it might have been a happy discovery indeed for Falkener, who for decades had been searching for information about Go, to know that the British Minister in Japan was a Go player!

In conclusion, we were already familiar with three British Go pioneers; now it may be useful to add Parkes as the fourth one, and to report again the dates of their lives: Edward Falkener (1814-96), Harry Smith Parkes (1828-85), Herbert Giles (1845-1935), and Horace Cheshire (1854-1922).

⁴ see Early Go in Western Europe - Part 2, BGJ 151.