

## Unmasking an Italian Chameleon

Franco Pratesi

The name of Z. Volpicelli is known among historians of board games thanks to two pioneering English articles that he published in the *Journal of the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, printed in Shanghai. The first, of 1888, deals with Chinese chess; the second, of 1892, contains one of the first descriptions of wei-chi in an European language. Let us examine in some detail the latter article, of no less than twenty-eight pages.

His interest in the subject is motivated by the high esteem of this game among the Chinese literary class, as is explicitly stated at the beginning. “About three years ago I wrote a short sketch on Chinese chess. While gathering materials and making enquires on that subject, my attention was drawn to the other great game of China, which she invented and which she considers far superior to chess. This alone would be sufficient to awaken curiosity. We are so accustomed to consider chess as unquestionably the royal game, that the simple statement that a country possesses chess and another game, and considers the latter superior, is startling”.

Clear and interesting observations follow, as soon as he examines the game. “We find a game totally different from those we have been accustomed to. The difference is not in detail, but in the essence of the game. It belongs to quite a different order from chess and draughts. Moreover, though a game of extreme difficulty, it is of the greatest simplicity.” “The object of the game of wei-ch’i may be stated very simply, though it will be found sufficiently difficult to carry it out in practice. It is to occupy as much space as possible on the board and to prevent the adversary from doing the same”. “The interest of the game is not concentrated in one spot as at chess, around the king, but it is diffused all over the board, as every single spot is equally important in affecting the result of the game and counts in the grand total which represents the position of each side at the end of the struggle.”

For notation, he uses the traditional Chinese division of the board into four quadrants, and then the two Cartesian coordinates so that each

point requires three figures for identification. For simplicity, he then uses in each quadrant letters for the vertical axis and numbers for the horizontal. He then provides a lot of examples of eyes, life-and-death positions, ending his description with an example of the counting method (adding own stones and intersections, as the Chinese traditionally do).

Of course, this work has a remarkable historical value. It appears to have been compiled from Chinese sources, independent of the previous description of 1877 by Herbert Giles. Even more independent it evidently is from the fundamental German articles published in 1880/1881 in Yokohama by O.Korschelt, based on his direct experience of Japanese go.

Even if this contribution was compiled in English, the name of Volpicelli sounds Italian and might directly be inserted in my present study of the contributions of Italian missionaries and travellers to the early history of European go. However, in various reference catalogues I could find nothing written by him in Italian.

On the contrary, I could find other works listed under his name, most of them again being written in English. Some are devoted to linguistic subjects and in particular to the phonology of the ancient Chinese (on the same topic a publication by him is recorded in French). In addition, we find several short monographs on various historical matters of the Far East, such as *The Silver Question in China* or *The Early Portuguese Commerce*.

The catalogues of the largest libraries, to begin with the Library of Congress, record under his name also two whole books, which actually had been printed under the pseudonym of Vladimir. The same library catalogues provide us with some additional information on Volpicelli, his Christian name, Zenone, and his year of birth, 1856. However, finding further biographical data on this author is not an easy task.

I first leafed through his works in the hope of finding some information. The linguistic papers appear to be written at a high academic level – Volpicelli was certainly a scholar of Oriental languages. On the other hand, he appears to have been a well documented historian from the two Vladimir books, *The China-Japan War* (450 pp – it was later reprinted in Kansas City in 1905) and *Russia on the Pacific and the Siberian Railway*, 373 pp. Both books were published in London, in

1896 and 1899 respectively, by Sampson Low, Marston and Co. (Publishers to the India Office) and were identically bound in red cloth with gold titles impressed.

Obviously, any search within books published under a pseudonym can hardly provide much useful detail about their author! In particular, as indication I could only find on the title page, under Vladimir's name, "Lately of the \* \* \* \* Diplomatic Mission to Corea". Korea had been opened to foreign trade even later than Japan, and only in the Nineties official diplomatic relationships with the various European countries were commonly established. In the second book, he is simply indicated as, Author of *China-Japan War*.

Moreover, I could find a challenging statement in the second book, in which the author not only appears to be wholly satisfied with publishing under a pseudonym, but is also glad to be undetectable as a foreign observer of the facts he is describing and analysing. "I have studied the [Russian] language carefully, and I spent four months in travelling across the Empire, from Vladivostok to the frontier of Galicia." "The critics of my former work paid me the flattering compliment of supposing I was a Japanese, and I wish, though I can hardly hope, that my assiduous study of a little-known subject may lead them to suppose now that I am a Russian."

I was thus more and more puzzled about this chameleonic countryman of the world, possibly belonging to several nationalities. Among other attempts, I tried searching for information about him in official yearbooks of the civil servants of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Italian Kingdom. After checking several issues, when I was ready to abandon my search (because I found nobody under the name of Volpicelli), I could eventually dig him out of the records – at least, I am fully convinced that this skilful chameleon has been unmasked.

Our author was not actually named Zenone Volpicelli, but Eugenio Zanoni Volpicelli, with Eugenio, his Christian name, followed by a double surname and thus listed under Z instead of V.

As usually occurs, other puzzling questions arise as soon as we answer the previous ones – in this case we just encounter the first problem at his birth. The year indicated in the catalogues of the libraries, 1856, is here confirmed, and we also might obtain the very day of his birth as the 12 April, if someone should find it useful. Nevertheless, his birthplace remains puzzling. It is recorded in the 1902 yearbook as Tersey,

which I could find nowhere on the Earth, and this could indeed represent the most suitable birthplace for a Vladimir believed with some good reasons to be an Italian, English, Japanese and/or Russian expert. But this name simply appears to be a typo – the 1909 yearbook correctly indicates instead the hardly more Italian town of Jersey, which I suppose to correspond to the island in the Channel, directly facing St Malo.

Thus, an Italian writer who published nothing in Italian and who was born in Jersey may not be the most authentic among the Italian writers on go, whom I am studying nowadays.

However, in the official yearbooks it is explicitly recorded that Eugenio Zanoni Volpicelli studied in Italy and took his degree in the renowned Istituto Orientale of Naples, in no less than Arab, Chinese and Persian languages. This occurred in 1881. In the following years he apparently travelled in many countries and stayed in the Far East where he could practice and increase his knowledge of the local languages and literatures.

Apart from writing the works mentioned above, he began in 1898 his career as an Italian civil servant. In the 1902 yearbook we find him occupying the fourth of the five places of the seniority list of Interpreti di prima classe. He was first sent to Peking then to Hong-Kong, where he also covered the duties of Italian consul. Starting from 1<sup>st</sup> May 1902, he became the titular Italian consul for Hong-Kong and Canton. In the yearbook of 1909, he is still located in Hong-Kong, the only difference with respect to the previous personal description being a couple of further honours, such as Knight of the Saints Maurice and Lazarus and Commendatore of the Italian Crown.

I have not yet been able to find information about his subsequent activity, nor date and place of his death, but this may be less relevant for us, considering that our interest is focussed on his article on wei-chi, already published in 1892. In the case of this chameleonic author it is enough for me that I could attach a real personage to his bare surname, which before my search was the only thing known, together possibly with the year of his birth, and his – mistakenly suggested! – Christian name.