

## CHINLONE - AN ANCIENT ASIAN GAME OR INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE?

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**Abstract** - Chinlone is an ancient Burmese ball game that is considered to be the national sport of Myanmar. What makes the sport truly unique is that it is not competitive in nature, and this is a fact that makes it different in comparison to other major ball games. The primary purposes of this paper is to further understand Chinlone's history, relations to other Southeast Asian kickball games and its possible inclusion into UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage. There is a lack academic texts in the English language detailing Chinlone's history. There is some evidence to suggest that it may have its origins in the ancient Chinese sport of Cuju, and furthermore, it has many links to other ancient Asian games. One of the earliest mentions of Chinlone in the historical record describes it as more of a performance art akin to dancing meant to entertain Burmese royalty. During the colonization of Burma by the British, it began to adhere to the more 'Western idea of sport', something which was nonexistent in traditional Burmese society. Then, in the postcolonial period, it was used as a nation-building tool by the newly independent Burmese government to instill a sense of national pride and unity amongst the people of Myanmar, and it was during this period that the sport truly went through a process of 'gamification' where it was completely changed to resemble a modern sport. These are all important pieces of the history of the formation of modern Chinlone, and they all deserve much more looking into than has been afforded to them thus far. The sport itself has a very promising future, it has been included in the Southeast Asian games 3 times, and international participation is expected to continue increasing.

**Keywords:** Chinlone; Intangible Cultural Heritage; Sports and Heritage; Sport and Culture

### INTRODUCTION

Chinlone is at least 1500 years old, and it is commonly practiced by the vast majority of different ethnic groups residing within Myanmar's modern borders. It is certainly not a game played exclusively by the Bamar (the dominant ethnic group in Myanmar), and it should not be confused as such. In the present day, the sport is very much confined to Myanmar itself, but there are pockets of migrant workers and refugees from Myanmar who play the sport in other countries around the world. Other than that there are small groups of international fanatics scattered all over the world who have decided to take up the sport and practice it in their own respective countries. To the Western eye, Chinlone might seem like a bunch of people playing 'Keepie-Uppie' with a tiny wooden soccer ball, or it may resemble 'Hacky-Sack': a common leisurely game that you may see college students playing on Western university campuses. Chinlone is much more than that though, it is the national sport of a whole country, whereas Keepie-Uppie and Hacky-Sack are simple casual activities.

Chinlone is typically played in one of two forms, either in a group (known as Wein Kat), or solo (known as Tapandaing). The most common form is Wein Kat which will typically consist of six people standing in a circle. The court is typically marked by a white circular line measuring 22 feet in diameter on the ground. The players pass a handwoven rattan ball back and forth using mainly their feet and knees. Using the hands, however, is strictly forbidden in play. They will continuously walk around in a circle formation rotating around one player standing in the middle. The player in the middle is known as the 'Prince' or 'Princess', and the players will take turns going into the middle of the circle to take on this role. What makes Chinlone truly unique is that it is not competitive, there is no winner and no loser. There is only one team, with every player involved being on the same team. The game has two main objectives, one primary, and one secondary. The primary objective is to pass the ball from person to person without it falling to the ground for the longest amount of time possible. The secondary objective is to add flair to the style of play, players will typically attempt to execute the most complicated and beautiful moves or tricks that they are capable of doing.

The solitary version of the game: Tapandaing, is traditionally played only by females, it has essentially the same objectives, except that there are no other players to pass the ball back and forth with. The player will essentially juggle the ball using their feet and knees, and attempt to go for as long

as possible while executing their best tricks. A multitude of Tapandaing videos can easily be found online, and they are truly stunning. These videos will typically feature a woman practicing against the backdrop of an ancient Burmese temple while wearing traditional Burmese attire, accompanied by traditional Burmese music. This particular style of Tapandieng is a glimpse into just how culturally important the sport of Chinlone is to the people of Myanmar. Another type of Tapandieng is more similar to what a circus juggler or jester would do, an example of this could be a female juggling a shiny metal ball with one foot, while her other foot is balancing on a glass bottle that is placed upon a stool, and the stool itself is balancing on 4 more glass bottles placed under each leg of the stool, and those four glass bottles are placed upon another stool. This version is truly impressive and can get very technical and dangerous indeed. In summation, the solo version of the sport (Tapandieng) is essentially a modern-day performance art that is intended to display either baffling complex skills or ancient Burmese traditional culture, whereas the group version (Wien Kat) is generally viewed as more of a modern-day sport. The group version is highly structured with players wearing uniforms while playing on a specifically designed Chinlone court in front of a large audience of fans cheering them on.

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE AND FIELD


There has been a very small amount of academic literature produced in English about Chinlone. The most important documents that are easily found regarding this subject have been written by Mairii Aung-Thwin. He has written several documents regarding this topic and has delved deeply into the connection between the sport and how colonial/postcolonial powers used it for their various objectives such as domination over the Burmese in the case of the British, and nation-building in the case of the newly independent postcolonial Burmese government. He talks a great deal about how these events changed the sport and the various new rules and standards that were applied to it.

His work provides a great deal of insight into a lot of the history and what took place to make Chinlone what it is today. He covers a lot of what we can consider to be ‘the second in a series of four segments’ of the story of Chinlone. The second segment, though rather brief, is arguably the most important part of the sport’s history. This second segment in the story of Chinlone could be referred to as ‘Its Premodern History’ and he details the intense changes it went through during the period. What Aung-Thwin doesn’t talk much about, however, is what we could consider the First, Third, and Fourth segments in the story of Chinlone. Essentially he has covered the development of the sport in the periods of Colonial occupation and Postcolonial independence, which would roughly be about 100 to 150 years or so total, starting when the British arrived in Burma in 1824 to the middle of the 20th century when the newly independent Burmese government utilized the sport as a nation-building tool. The First, Third, and Fourth segments in the story of Chinlone, would be as follows. First: its ancient history, Third: its recent history, and Fourth: its future. Aung-Thwin does talk a bit about Chinlone’s ancient history in his work and he tells of how there is some evidence to suggest Chinlone is possibly more than a thousand years old, notably he mentions an Ancient ‘replica of Chinlone ball’ found in a 7th century CE Pyu civilization settlement:

“Contemporary tourist brochures, popular magazines, government websites and newspapers trace the origins of chinlone as far back as the Pyu civilization (first to eighth centuries), considered by historians to be the first political culture of ancient Myanmar. In 1926 -1927, a French scholar reported that he had uncovered a silver replica of a chinlone that dated back to the seventh century.” (Aung-Thwin, 2016).

He also briefly talks about how historically variations of the game were played throughout all of Southeast Asia and the notable different names that it was called in these places. He then goes on to briefly mention one account of a Burmese king being gifted a Chinlone ball from a Siamese visitor in the Thirteenth century:

“Another reference to chinlone established its origins during the ‘classical’ kingdom of the thirteenth-century Bagan, where a king was presented an ivory chinlone by a ‘Siamese’ sculptor upon his ascension to the throne. The story goes that he was so pleased with the gift that he ordered it made in cane so that young men at the Royal Court could play it.” (Aung-Thwin, 2016).



But other than these few references to the ancient history of Chinlone, Aung-Thwin barely touches on the subject, and there is truly something to be told here because of the great deal of documentation that there is surrounding another similar but different sport: Cuju, which was played by another ancient kingdom in the region: China. Also known as Tsu-Chu, Cuju was an ancient Chinese sport that probably started being played more than 2000 years ago by the Han dynasty, and eventually ceased to be played at some point between the 14th and 17th centuries during the Ming dynasty period. Chinlone is also an ancient sport, although according to the historical record, it is not quite as old as Cuju. Due to the proximity of Myanmar to China, however, there is a strong likelihood that Chinlone is directly descended from Cuju. It is highly likely because ancient Myanmar and ancient China have had relations stretching as far back as nearly 2 millennia ago. Considering the fact that many other Southeast Asian countries have some sort of similar game to both Chinlone and Cuju, it can be theorized that all versions of these similar Southeast Asian sports could all be directly descended from Cuju. Aung-Thwin talks about these other similar sports and says:

“...Sixteenth century sources suggest that versions of the game were played in Siam, Cambodia, Southern Vietnam, and Indonesia.” (Aung-Thwin, 2020)

One can gain insight into the deeper relationship between all these ancient Asian sports from further understanding them individually, as well as their similarities and differences to each other. We can also suggest that there is a lot of significance in the relationship between Chinlone and Cuju, not only because Aung-Thwin didn't cover it, but also because of the recent acknowledgment by FIFA that Cuju is considered to be the first officially recognized version of Soccer or Football, which is the world's most popular sport. Therefore it is imperative for the story of Chinlone's history to mention that there is likely a connection between Chinlone and the world's most important sport.

The Third section in the story of Chinlone would be the recent history to the present. This would cover a period of a bit more than a half-century from the 1970s (just after the postcolonial nation-building era talked about by Aung-Thwin) to the 2020s in the present day. Aung-Thwin makes very few references to this period in his work, and there is a lot to be drawn from this period as well. Furthermore, it is much easier to explore the development of the sport in this period because of the great deal of documentation on many things related to Chinlone in contemporary history: documents, modern competitions, stories, books, and documentaries. One documentary that Aung-Thwin does make mention of, however, is *'Mystic Ball'*: a very spiritual documentary created by a Canadian man named Greg Hamilton who tells the tale of how he found Chinlone and fell in love with the sport. Speaking of the documentary, Aung-Thwin says:

“Audiences were treated to stunning footage that portrayed the 'sport' of chinlone being performed on temple grounds, in tournament play and in the back-alley streets of the city. Mystic Ball presented chinlone as an enduring element of Burmese culture, challenging conventional definitions of sport by presenting chinlone as a manifestation of cooperation, non-competitiveness, community and spiritual ideals.” (Aung-Thwin, 2020).

This documentary has been notoriously quite difficult to locate however, there is a short snippet of it that was uploaded to YouTube, but the official website for the documentary is very outdated and has provided only one way to view the film, by buying a DVD of it. However, just the existence of this documentary alone paints a picture of how Chinlone has spread quite far internationally in the recent past, and this is evident when you consider the fact that there are now practitioners of the sport as far away as Europe and Canada.

One easily accessible reference depicting how Chinlone has progressed in the recent past, however, is the inclusion of Chinlone in the Southeast Asian Games. Chinlone has been included in the SEA Games 3 times now in 2013, 2017, and most recently in 2023. At its inaugural inclusion into the SEA Games in 2013 it was met with criticism by many who claimed it was unfair because the Myanmar team seemingly had the upper hand as it was their national sport. Regardless of the criticism (which will be addressed later in the essay), The inclusion has shown the progression of the sport as a whole and its potential to expand internationally, and this point leads to the fourth segment in the story of Chinlone: its Future.

Chinlone's future is something that Aung-Thwin makes almost no mention of whatsoever, and there is a decent amount that can be explored when thinking about the sport's future. Its inclusion in the SEA Games has paved the way for it to have a promising future. Considering that it has been included in the

SEA Games three times now we can theorize that it will only continue to be included, and this will surely garner more exposure for the sport globally. This will likely make it grow, and then possibly begin to be commonly played in parts of the world other than Southeast Asia. It is not ludicrous to suggest that someday it may be included in more important global sporting events, like the Olympics.

JoAnn LoSavio is a writer who has done some work about the use of sport as a tool in the nation-building project of postcolonial Myanmar. Though she makes virtually no mention of Chinlone itself, her work is still somewhat relevant because it heavily focuses on the use of sport in the nation-building of postcolonial Myanmar. The reason this is relevant is because it was this postcolonial nation-building period that essentially shaped Chinlone into what it is today. LoSavio talks a lot about how the postcolonial Burmese nation-builders wanted to escape from the legacy of colonial stereotypes placed upon them. An example of one of these stereotypes would be them being labeled as ‘physically inferior’ by the British. She mentions that one of the ways they achieved this was by using activities that were introduced to them by their colonial rulers, such as Western sports, to overcome their supposed ‘physically inferior’ image. She says:

“Participation in games communicated Burma’s sovereign status to other states and demonstrated a commitment to the global community. Simultaneously, transnational sporting events were liminal spaces to disrupt continued colonial perceptions which positioned Burmese as physically inferior. Burmese athletes disputed the material ‘truths’ on which racist attitudes relied: the physical incapacity of Asian bodies to match Western bodies and exoticized notions of time and place that rooted Burmese in a primordial past, lacking intellect to absorb modern technologies.” (LoSavio, 2020)


It was during this period that these same Burmese postcolonial nation-builders used a similar mix of pro-Western and anti-Western tactics to develop Chinlone into its modern form today, this is something that LoSavio barely talks about, but Aung-Thwin goes into great detail on. All in all, this is a very important occurrence to take account of because the modern sport of Chinlone that is being played in Myanmar today is essentially a hybrid of the traditional Southeast Asian game combined with Western sporting culture.

In summary, the ultimate goal here is to provide a more detailed understanding of the origins, transitional periods, and future of the sport of Chinlone. Whereas Aung-Thwin and LoSavio focus mostly on colonial legacies and the politics of nation-building, this project will focus more on the sport as a whole. Where does it come from? What relations does it have to other Asian sports? and where is it going?

#### **Heritage of Chinlone: Shared, Similar or Distinct?**

Chinlone has its origins in the ancient Pyu civilization of modern-day Myanmar, it is not very clear whether the inhabitants of the ancient Pyu civilization created the sport themselves, or derived it from similar ancient Asian games. The latter is certainly a more reasonable hypothesis. To further understand the essence of Chinlone, it is important to learn about the various similar Asian games with which it has a shared heritage. There are a multitude of different ancient games which are very similar to Chinlone which can be found throughout the various nations of East and Southeast Asia. Some of these include Sipa of the Philippines, Da Cau of Vietnam, Cuju and Jianzi of China, Sepak Raga of Indonesia, and Takraw Wong of Thailand. While some of these games use the aforementioned wooden rattan ball (sometimes referred to as a Caneball in English), other variations use something that could be described more as a birdie or shuttlecock, similar to what is used in modern-day Badminton. Regardless of whether they use a caneball or a type of shuttlecock, all these games are extremely similar stylistically in their techniques, movements, and rules.

In many of these Asian nations, the game has developed into a hybrid net game, akin to volleyball or Badminton. Sepak Takraw is the most popular version of these hybrid net games and it is essentially a mix of Chinlone and Volleyball, it even still uses the same exact hand-woven wooden rattan cane ball. These hybrid net games, however, seem to be much more recent and probably were developed sometime in the past 100 years or so, while the original versions of the games are a great deal older with some potentially even dating as far back as the 9th century BCE. It should be mentioned that one of these original versions of the games (Cuju) did sometimes use a net as well, but it used the net in a very different manner, with the net being hoisted much higher up. Furthermore, the players would attempt to kick the ball through a hole in the net, as opposed to over it. It is not clear whether other ancient versions of the games used a net as well, but in any case, the use of nets seems to have fallen out of favor more than 500 years ago. So it can be said that for the past 500 years, these similar Asian kick-ball



games have been flourishing all over the continent, and had developed into a standard that did not use nets across the board. Then during the past 100 years or so when the net came back into favor, it most likely did so due to influence from Western sports that used a net, as opposed to being drawn from ancient tradition. Subsequently, the more modern versions of the games played with nets, grew to become much more popular than their traditional netless counterparts, even though they had only recently just reemerged onto the scene. This is probably partly because these modern net versions tend to be directly competitive games with clear winners and losers, whereas the traditional netless versions tend to be mostly non-competitive. In our modern world, people love to see action, they love to see competition, and this is something that the modern net versions of the games can provide. Thus, they have since gained much more popularity than their traditional netless counterparts in a very short period of time. Furthermore, the modern net versions of the game tend to display skills that are inherently more acrobatic and athletic, this can be observed in Sepak Takraw, where players commonly utilize aerial flips to spike the ball downward with their feet on the opponent's side of the net. It is truly a sight to behold, and when one is first exposed to it they tend to be very impressed by the amazing movements of the players. The traditional non-net versions of the game are beautiful in their own right, but they tend to have less of these mind-blowing acrobatic movements, they focus more on elegance and teamwork, thus they do not receive as much applause from modern spectators who tend to crave exhilarating displays of acrobatic athleticism.

As previously mentioned, all these Asian kick-ball games likely originated from the ancient Chinese sport known as Cuju (sometimes spelled 'Tsu-Chu'), and this of course includes Chinlone. Cuju is well documented in the historical record and was played in mainland China possibly as far back as the 9<sup>th</sup> Century BCE, which makes it nearly 3000 years old. FIFA (International Federation of Association Football) which is the modern governing body of the world's most popular sport: Football (also known as Soccer), officially recognized Cuju as the original version of the world's most popular game.

"On July 15th, 2004, Mr. Blatter, the president of FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) officially announced in the 3rd session of Soccerex Fair, that football originated in Zibo, the capital of Qi State during the Spring and Autumn Period of ancient China" (Liu, Zhang & Ma, 2018).

In China, Cuju stopped being played around the 17th Century, but it has since undergone somewhat of a revival in the 21st century with many history buffs dressing in traditional attire and playing the sport in a sort of historical reenactment show, not dissimilar to what has occurred with the resurrection of Jousting in Europe and 'Ulama' the Mesoamerican ball game in the Western Hemisphere.

Jianzi: another Chinese adaptation of Cuju is very popular and is a common pastime for many people in China. Instead of a ball, it is played with something very similar to a badminton shuttlecock, which is made from goose or turkey feathers which are tied to a roll of copper coins as a counterbalance. Jianzi can be observed in public parks in the afternoon and is a relatively low-intensity sport so it is something you may see even elderly people participating in as a way to stay active during old age. Quite similar to Chinlone, players walk around in circles while they are playing and pass the shuttlecock back and forth. Due to the slow speed at which the shuttlecock flies through the air, the game is much more observable, meaning it is much easier to see clearly which movements and maneuvers are being used. It is basically Chinlone in slow motion, which makes it very age-inclusive. Another aspect that slows the game down (and differentiates it from Chinlone) is the fact that the bottom of the shuttlecock is flat, this allows the player to literally catch and balance the shuttlecock with the tops of their feet effortlessly. This changes the dynamic of play considerably: in Chinlone the bouncy wooden rattan ball immediately springs off of the player's foot upon impact, speeding up the pace of the game, but in Jianzi, the players can retain the shuttlecock for as long as they please with the tops of their feet. It is not uncommon to see players balancing the shuttlecock for 5 to even 10 seconds before releasing it and continuing the flow play.

Two other examples of ancient Asian games that use a shuttlecock-like object in play are 'Sipa' of The Philippines and 'Da Cau' of Vietnam. It can easily be theorized that these two sports have their direct origins in Jianzi and Cuju. This is evident when analyzing Da Cau, which is very popular in Vietnam. There is not much to say about Da Cau though, because it is essentially the same thing as Jianzi, and it is obviously descended from Jianzi. This is because China and Vietnam famously have such an intertwined history, with the Vietnamese people being directly descended from the southern Chinese Yue people. The few differences between Jianzi and Da Cau in the modern day are as follows: Firstly, the shuttlecock used in Da Cau tends to be a bit heavier than the one used in Jianzi. Secondly, while both sports have

some version of both net and circle play, Jianzi favors circle play and Da Cau favors net play. Lastly, Jianzi tends to be more casual and 'freestyle' in play, while Da Cau tends to be more structured with lots of rules and competition.

Regarding Sipa of the Philippines, what is not entirely clear is when or how the exchange of sporting culture took place from China to the Philippines. Sipa was officially recognized as the official sport of the Philippines up until the very recent past when this distinction was lost to Arnis, a traditional Filipino martial art using wooden sticks for self-defense.

“When former President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo approved Republic Act 9850 – an Act declaring arnis as the national martial art and sport of the Philippines on Dec 11, 2009 – many people reacted negatively, questioning the change. Sipa had occupied a place in the subconscious of Filipinos as a people, that it has become the automatic answer whenever Pinoys enumerate the national symbols.” (Lozada, 2012)

Sipa, in the Philippines, is very loosely defined, it can be found in many different forms which range from over-the-net versions similar to Sepak Takraw to circular stylistic play more akin to Jianzi and Chinlone. It mainly uses a shuttlecock very similar to Jianzi, which is said to be typically crafted of metal washers and old cloth, as opposed to the more elegant goose feathers and shiny coins that are used in making Jianzis. Sipa can commonly be seen being played in the streets by Filipino youngsters who deploy an interesting technique to control the shuttlecock: they flip their sandals upside down and use the flat sole on the bottom of the sandal to make an impact with the shuttlecock. The flat surface of the sole of the sandal is the perfect landing area for the type of shuttlecock that Sipa uses, which is similar to Jianzi in that it is also flat on the bottom due to the flat metal washers used to make it. What makes Sipa unique compared to the other similar sports previously mentioned, is that it also sometimes uses the wooden rattan ball as well, therefore it is probably the only sport amongst the ones previously mentioned which is known for being played with the shuttlecock and the wooden rattan ball, whereas all the other aforementioned sports only use either or.

Sepak Raga is a well-documented Southeast Asian kick-ball game that has been played throughout Malaysia and Indonesia for centuries. Due to the massive amount of different islands and regions throughout Maritime Southeast Asia, the game is played in a multitude of different varieties which all fall under the umbrella of 'Sepak Raga'. The dominant version of the game played in the modern era is indeed Sepak Takraw, and which certainly does fall under the umbrella of Sepak Raga as well in these regions. Please note that from now on when 'Sepak Raga' is mentioned, this strictly refers to the various non-net circular versions of the game, not Sepak Takraw.

In general, Sepak Raga in Indonesia and Malaysia uses the same exact wooden rattan cane ball as Chinlone, Sipa, and Sepak Takraw. Furthermore, it has the same essential goal as Chinlone, which is keeping the ball aloft for as long as possible. The court markings and the style of play however are very different when compared with Chinlone. The players do not walk in circles while playing, they form a stationary circle with each player standing still, and there is no player in the center. The main technique used seems to be a horizontal straight-forward shot which is directed at the player opposite the one kicking. This maneuver is achieved by raising the knee up to waist height and bending the leg to form a 90-degree angle, then the top of the foot is used to make an impact with the ball and shoot it directly forward with a lot of power to the player opposite the one performing the maneuver. This also kind of adds another dimension of play to the game which Chinlone doesn't really have because essentially the purpose of this powerful straight-forward shot is to make it difficult for the player opposite to receive the ball, control it, and continue the flow of play without the ball touching the ground. So Sepak Raga is unique in the way that it contains a form of internal competition, while still retaining the overall goal for all players to work together and keep the ball aloft for as long as possible. In addition to this difference, another key distinction is that Sepak Raga's moves are much less graceful, there is much less flair added to the style of play when compared to Chinlone. Whereas Chinlone mainly utilizes unnecessary and impractical but stunning displays of complex skill, the maneuvers in the most popular version of circular Sepak Raga are purely functional. It seems that Sepak Raga has always had this emphasis on control, a passage from a famous historical text which was written in the Malacca Sultanate known as the Malay Annals in the 15th century refers to Sepak Raga and says:

“The Moloco Prince was very skillful at football, and all the young nobles set about learning it from him. A hundred hundred times he would receive the ball on his foot, and keep it up without falling, and when he was to deliver it to another, he would send it directly upon the person

who was to receive it. When he sat down in a chair, after this exercise, all the young nobles would run to fan him, and when the ball was returned to him, he would send it up to the top of the hall, and following it up there, he would keep it up on the top of the hall as long as one would be eating a luncheon, and then he would bring it down and deliver it to another. Such was his skill at football.” (The Malay Annals, n.d.)

It should be noted that in this particular English translation of the Malay Annals, the word football is being used but there is no doubt about the fact that what is being described here is the traditional Malay sport of Sepak Raga. This is the earliest mention of Sepak Raga, but there are other important descriptions of Sepak Raga in the historical record including some Dutch colonial accounts, furthermore, it can also be speculated that Sepak Raga may have even been played as far back as the time of Srivijaya Empire, which occupied much of what would later be referred to as the ‘East Indies’ by the Dutch and other colonial powers.

### SPORTS AND CULTURAL RIVALRY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

The similarity between these sports throughout Asia at times leads to tensions when it comes to official international tournaments. Because the sports are so similar, international competitions can be held using a fusion version of the sports which incorporates elements from all of them. The tension then arises when the fusion competition is either named after one of the versions or when there is too much influence of one of the particular versions in the adapted international fusion competition version. Some recent examples of this happening specifically in the context of the creation of an international fusion version of these Southeast Asian kick-ball games will soon be detailed. Before that, however, it is really important to mention that the tension that has arisen succeeding the creation of an international fusion version of these Southeast Asian kick-ball games is not something surprising in the slightest. Furthermore, it is an occurrence that could have been easily predicted simply because of the nature of Southeast Asia and the similarities that exist between its neighboring countries. It is no secret indeed that there have been a plethora of disputes between the nations of Southeast Asia regarding the origins and proper practices of several cultural customs and traditions that share a resemblance to each other. Examples ranging from disputes over similar cuisine, dance, music, and of course sports come to mind easily when contemplating this topic. Quite possibly the most famous examples of this cultural rivalry between Southeast Asian nations are the disputes over the proper practices and origins of the various Southeast Asian martial arts. So for some context, we can delve a little bit into this topic, as it shares a vast amount of mirroring occurrences with the disputes over the standardization of the Southeast Asian kick-ball games. Preceding the commencement of the 2023 SEA Games it was announced that:

“Thailand will boycott the kickboxing competition at this year’s Southeast Asian (SEA) Games in protest against hosts Cambodia using the sport’s local name of Kun Khmer rather than Muay Thai. The National Olympic Committee of Thailand (NOCT) announced on Tuesday that no Thai athletes will compete in kickboxing at the regional games, hosted by Phnom Penh from May 5-17.” (The Nation Thailand, 2023)

Muay Thai is one of the most popular martial arts from Southeast Asia internationally, but it shares a great deal of similarity with other Southeast Asian martial arts such as Myanmar’s Lethwei, Laos’s Muay Lao, and Cambodia’s Kun Khmer. Thus, when Cambodia hosted the 2023 SEA Games, their choice to change the title of the traditionally named ‘Muay Thai’ event to the ‘Kun Khmer’ event sparked a great deal of controversy. Technically speaking, however, Muay Thai and Kun Khmer are simply two hardly differing styles of the same sport. This is precisely what made the renaming of the event possible because the sports are so similar that no rule changes were really necessary. Furthermore, Muay Lao and Muay Thai are so alike that they even share the same exact word of ‘Muay’ in their official titles. So realistically, the only truly differing martial art in regards to official rules amongst the ones previously mentioned is Myanmar’s Lethwei due to its minor difference of the inclusion of headbutts.

There is no need to get into the specifics of the exact differences and origins of the various similar Southeast Asian martial arts, because this paper is about Southeast Asian kick-ball games, not Southeast Asian martial arts. It is inherently clear however, that this particular example of what occurred with the renaming of the originally titled ‘Muay Thai Event’ at the 2023 SEA Games is extremely important for understanding the tensions that have arisen during the standardization, or more realistically put: ‘the consolidation’ of the various Southeast Asian kick-ball games. Moreover, it should certainly be understood that this occurrence can be attributed to the often-hostile atmosphere in Southeast Asia

surrounding the similarity of certain cultural practices across borders. With this information, it is very easy to understand why then it was said that:

“Several countries, including Thailand, were frustrated by the list of sports at the 2013 SEA Games, which ended yesterday. They complained that there were too many traditional sports, such as Chinlone (a Myanmar sport similar to Thailand's Circle Takraw)” (Rujawongsanti, 2013)

Much of the complaints received were voicing the opinion that it was not fair to include a sport that was the national sport of Myanmar because they would seemingly have an unfair advantage. Essentially these complaints were rather baseless because as mentioned earlier, each Southeast Asian nation has its own version of ‘Chinlone’ or Southeast Asian kick-ball game. So saying that Myanmar unfairly included it in the SEA Games was certainly a bit of a stretch because there would be plenty of athletes in each Southeast Asian country who possessed the adequate skills to not only be able to participate in this event but even potentially win it as well. Furthermore, much of the confusion once again lay with the naming of this particular event, because it was named ‘Chinlone’ but it was not pure Burmese Chinlone per se, in actuality, it was a hybridization of all these Southeast Asian kick-ball games meshed into one event. So in truth, it was actually a rather fair event with regards to the rules, and that is simply because the official rules used were not the official rules of Burmese Chinlone, they were a set of all-inclusive rules that completely disregarded the stylistic approach to traditional Burmese Chinlone and instead purely focused on tallying the number of times the team could kick the ball in the air to keep it aloft before allowing it to drop to the ground. As previously mentioned, nearly all Southeast Asian nations contain within the typical practice of their national kick-ball game the common skill of simply keeping the ball aloft for as long as possible without allowing it to drop to the ground. Thus, not only was the event fair, but it could even be argued that Myanmar actually had the disadvantage, because their version of the Southeast Asian kick-ball game focuses more on flair and elegance while the other Southeast Asian nation’s kick-ball games focus more on simply keeping the ball aloft. So, the issue here once again lay within the naming of the event, not the actual event itself, and as you can see this whole controversy bears a stark resemblance to what happened with the naming of the kickboxing event at the 2023 SEA Games in Cambodia. These are just two examples of the long list of disputes and discussions that have occurred which are based on cultural rivalry throughout the history of not only Southeast Asia but the whole world.

#### **What’s In A Name?**

Since its inaugural inclusion at the 2013 Southeast Asian Games, Chinlone has been further included an additional 3 times: 2015 (Singapore), 2017 (Malaysia), and 2023 (Cambodia). It was not included in 2019 (Philippines) and 2021 (Vietnam). At all the SEA Games events in which Chinlone has been included since its inaugural inclusion in 2013, it was grouped under the category of ‘Sepak Takraw’ and was not afforded its own separate sporting event category. However, the subgrouping it has been given has consistently gone by the name ‘Chinlone’, and has not been changed even though it has retained the same all-inclusive rules. Thus, one might argue that at some point it may be a good idea to change the name of the event to improve its chances of longevity. It should be mentioned that many of these Southeast Asian kick-ball games which use the wooden rattan ball, are sometimes referred to collectively as ‘Caneball’. While this is a decent casual blanket term for all the sports that use the wooden rattan ball, it seems like a rather shoddy formulation of a name for the version of the sport played at an internationally competitive level. This is because many would argue that it just seems inadequate to name the sport after the material of the ball that it uses, like imagine for example if Tennis was instead called ‘Feltball’, so it might be a good idea to come up with a better name to promote a better future for the sport altogether.

All over the world, there are debates about what the true name of any given sport should be. One example of this is the debate over the naming of the ‘Kun Khmer’ event at the 2023 edition of the SEA Games, but the most notable example of sport-naming disputes globally is the one that is over the world’s most popular game. For English speakers, the debate on whether the sport most commonly known as ‘Football’ should go by that name, or should be called ‘Soccer’ has been raging on for more than half a century. Football is the more preferred name globally and thus it has been transliterated into almost every language in the world. ‘Soccer’ is the name most commonly used for the sport in many former British colonies around the world such as Ireland, Canada, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and most famously: The United States of America, where the name is very much a point of heated contention because the majority of its citizens use the word ‘Football’ to instead refer to their most popular sport, American Football.



The name 'Football' is rather self-explanatory, but the name 'Soccer' was a creation using the lengthier official title of 'Football' which is 'Association Football', as you can see the word 'Soccer' was derived from the word 'Association'. A similar sort of derivative title could be used in the renaming of the Chinlone event at the SEA Games. Another method to achieve this could be the utilization of a portmanteau or a compound word consisting of two or more parts taken from the name Chinlone and one of the other various names for a Southeast Asian kick-ball game. For example, using 'Chinlone' and 'Sepak Raga' we can create either the compound word: 'Chinlone Raga' or the portmanteau: 'Chinraga'. This is not a suggestion of any particular name; this is merely a provided example of how a more inclusive name for the sport can be achieved.

To some people the thought of suggesting this sort of solution may seem odd, but this kind of solution for coming up with a universal name for a sport that is called different things in different countries is a tried and tested method for resolving this type of issue. For example, many in Southeast Asia might be surprised to learn that this exact situation occurred with the creation of the official international name for the sport of Sepak Takraw.

"Sepak is the Malay word for kick and Takraw is the Thai word for a woven ball, therefore Sepak Takraw quite literally means "to kick ball."

The choosing of the Sepak Takraw name for the sport was essentially a compromise between Malaysia and Thailand, the two powerhouse countries of the sport" (Chen & Xiao, 2017)

It should also be noted that this was not an organically developed name, this formal title for the sport was officially created in 1960, by a delegation of representatives from each of the countries that play this sport (not only Thailand and Malaysia) in an attempt to appease the international community of fans and give them a name that they could all agree on. Therefore it would not be preposterous at all to suggest using similar processes in creating hybridized names for not only the various Southeast Asian kick-ball games but also the multiple Southeast Asian versions of kickboxing which resemble each other. In the case of the several similar Southeast Asian forms of Kickboxing though, it may be too late to propose a hybrid name because internationally the name 'Muay Thai' is already so well known. For the numerous related Southeast Asian kick-ball games however, it could still be a very fitting solution for the question, as the international hybrid version of the game is still in its infancy, and has only been contested internationally at the SEA Games for a little over a decade now.

If the sport is to continue growing globally, it will most likely require a name change by the time it gets internationally popular enough to be included at the Olympic games. It should be understood that this is not a suggestion of a name or rule change for Chinlone within Myanmar itself, it deserves to retain its original name and rules within its homeland. This is simply a suggestion that for the future of the international hybridized version of the sport, a name change may be necessary to promote inclusivity and unity between nations.

#### Potential of Chinlone

At the most recent SEA Games in 2023 it was clear to see that the jump in effort dedicated to the hybridized Southeast Asian kick-ball event (called the 'Chinlone' event) from the last time it was contested at the SEA Games was massive. This would clearly suggest that it likely has a bright future ahead of it and is on an obvious upward trajectory. Any doubts in this regard can easily be squashed when analyzing the massive rise in recent years of other fusion sports. Fusion sports in general have a massive potential to spread globally in a very short period of time due to their inherent adaptability. When two or more existing sports are combined to make a new one including elements from each, there is a large degree of ease of entry that people have depending on the level of experience they may have obtained in any of the given sports used to create the new fusion game. The best example of this in the modern era is Mixed Martial Arts, also known as 'MMA', whose name is pretty self-explanatory. Many will know the massive popularity that this sport has garnered since the end of 20th Century, but this isn't the only modern fusion sport that has amassed a great deal of popularity in recent years. Another is Disc Golf which is also on a massive upward trajectory as well, and is essentially a combination of Frisbee and Golf, but the list goes on and on.

One fusion sport which has also exploded in recent years, and is of the utmost importance to this research project is Teqball, which is basically a combination of Football and Ping-Pong.

"...teqball, a sport played on a specially curved table, combining elements of football and table tennis. This sport was invented in 2012 in Hungary and in 2019, Budapest hosted the Teqball World Championships with 160 athletes from 58 countries. To promote this sport, the

International Teqball Federation signed an agreement with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, which made it possible for hundreds of teqball tables to be donated to organisations around the world and popularized this sport with the help of the Hungarian embassies.” (Constantin, 2023)

It shares a great deal of similarity with the hybridized version of the Southeast Asian kick-ball games and Sepak Takraw due to the fact that it primarily involves the same essential skill set of keeping a ball aloft with one's feet and knees. That is why some of the best Teqball players in the world hail from Southeast Asia and are former Sepak Takraw players. This basic skill set that these three sports shares offer them a huge advantage in terms of potential to spread globally because of the ease of adaptability that people all over the world have should they decide to take up these sports. The reason that there is such a massive degree of adaptability with these sports specifically is that this essential skill set that they share is also shared with the world's most popular sport: Football. This is the primary reason for Teqball's massive increase in popularity in recent years, and it is certainly fathomable that the same thing could happen with the hybridized version of the Southeast Asian kick-ball games. In other words, if a sport shares the same essential skill set as Soccer, we can consider it to be a sport which does not have a steep learning curve at all, and this is due to the fact that the skill set required to play Soccer is the single most common athletic skill set associated with a sport for an individual to have in the modern world, and anyone challenging that assertion is probably misinformed.

Another advantage that the hybridized version of the Southeast Asian kick-ball games has in trying to attract new fans lies in the appeal of niche 'exotic' sports which have become attractive to people all around the world who are interested in learning about different cultures and ways of life while at the same time staying fit and being active. It could have the same sort of mesmerizing effect on Westerners as Muay Thai. It could really occupy that sort of realm that Muay Thai does where it could be the unique Southeast Asian cousin of a more internationally popular Western sport. Just as Muay Thai, while being massively popular, is still essentially viewed as the 'exotic' Southeast Asian cousin of traditional Western boxing. Similarly, this hybridized sport (whatever its official name becomes) could be the 'exotic' Southeast Asian cousin to Football/Soccer. The reason it could gain popularity quickly is that it would attract those who have become disillusioned with the more popular version of the sport, and they could see this new sport as deviating enough from its Western counterpart so that it seems new, fresh, and interesting, while still being familiar enough to easily engage in.

### **Intangible Cultural Heritage: A Pathway Towards Recognition**

UNESCO has a list of cultural practices which it has labeled as 'Intangible Cultural Heritage'. If unfamiliar with this world-renowned list of distinguished cultural practices, one can look into a much more well-known list created by UNESCO to gain further understanding, which is its list of World Heritage Sites. Many people will be familiar with UNESCO's list of World Heritage Sites because they might have a historic landmark in their country which has been designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, or maybe they have visited a famous place on vacation such as the Pyramids of Giza and heard of its status as being a UNESCO World Heritage Site. UNESCO's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage is essentially the same thing as its list of World Heritage Sites, except that what is being listed are cultural practices as opposed to historical landmarks. Even though it may not be as well-known as UNESCO's list of World Heritage Sites, UNESCO's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage is equally as important, and provides people all over the world with a sense of pride. Just as UNESCO takes measures to protect historical sites, it also takes initiative in preserving cultural practices, this is because it has thankfully realized that both are equally fragile and deserve attention and preservation. The same intense feeling of comfort that some may encounter in knowing that a powerful organization such as the United Nations has vowed to protect their local historical site, would also be felt by others knowing that the same is being done for their traditional cultural practice. Thus, the existence of this list of Intangible Cultural Heritage is of the utmost importance to this report, because it presents an opportunity for all the aforementioned ancient Asian games to not only be legitimized but also preserved.

Obviously because it was recently created, the hybridized version of these Southeast Asian kick-ball games is not included on the list, but when searching on the official database it is certainly hard to understand why missing from it is not only Chinlone, but nearly every single traditional sport or game detailed in this essay. It goes without saying that not only Chinlone, but all the traditional Asian sports and games mentioned in this essay should be included on the official list. UNESCO's definition of 'Intangible Cultural Heritage' is as follows:

“The ‘Intangible Cultural Heritage’ means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills - as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith - that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.” (UNESCO, 2003).

Based on the provided definition, it is clear to see why Chinlone and all the other ancient sports and games mentioned in this essay should be included on the official list. Firstly, they are age-old cultural practices of the utmost importance to the people who live in the countries from which they originate, that is why they have been passed down from generation to generation. They also provide a sense of identity to the people, and can be used as powerful tools to promote “respect for cultural diversity and human creativity”, which the official definition stated was something of grave importance. Adding these traditional Asian sports and games to UNESCO’s official list of Intangible Cultural Heritage would not only provide many people with a sense of pride knowing that their national sports have been recognized by UNESCO and the greater global community as being of great cultural importance, but it would also ensure them that they will be afforded some protection should they ever need it. Their inclusion into the list would be a powerful way to legitimize them and garner recognition for them as sports of importance. This could then promote their growth which would ultimately ensure their longevity, and likely prevent them from ever being disregarded or forgotten about, and that is certainly reason enough to justify their inclusion into the list.


If added to UNESCO’s list of Intangible Cultural Heritage, every ancient Asian sport and game mentioned in this essay would fall under the category referred to as ‘TSGs’ (Traditional Sports and Games). The International Council of Traditional Sports and Games (ICTSG), is an official organization that UNESCO played a major part in creating. The ICTSG was created to safeguard the TSGs played around the world, and it is likely that many of the traditional sports and games mentioned in this essay are already on the radar of the ICTSG. On their About Us page on their official website the ICTSG defines itself with this statement:

“The International Council of Traditional Sports and Games (ICTSG) is an official registered non-profit organisation which serves as an international umbrella to ensure the safeguarding and promotion of traditional sports and games aimed to support and assist governments, non-governmental organisations, as well as the sport movement at national, regional and continental levels through harmonization, coordination of efforts, guidance, assistance and advice.” (ICTSG, 2019).

The council is hopefully in the process of getting the traditional sports mentioned in this essay added to UNESCO’s official list of Intangible Cultural Heritage, but as of 2024 none of them have been added. Regardless of if the ICTSG is ever successful in getting these aforementioned sports added to UNESCO’s official list of Intangible Cultural Heritage or not, it is still comforting to know that there are organizations such as the ICTSG in existence whose sole purpose is to protect ancient games like Chinlone, so it is safe to say that the future of these ancient Asian sports is in good hands.

Another organization which has also taken measures to formally recognize and protect TSGs is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations otherwise known as ASEAN. In January of 2024, ASEAN published an official report containing more than 60 pages regarding the protection of TSGs. The title of the document is: *‘Promoting and Safeguarding Traditional Sports and Games in ASEAN: Challenges, Opportunities, and Strategies’*. In this document ASEAN lays out a plan to ensure that the region’s TSGs are guaranteed longevity and a promising future. The foreword of the report states that the report itself is:

“...proof of the commitment of our member states to uphold and celebrate the diverse cultural heritage that unites ASEAN. Through this comprehensive study, we explored the challenges faced by traditional sports and games in the modern era. It is not only the passage of time that poses a threat but also the allure of new, globalised forms of



entertainment that pull our youth away from the traditions that have shaped our societies.” (Daut, 2024).

The report makes mention of nearly every single traditional Southeast Asian game mentioned in this essay, and though that fact should have been expected, it is still certainly a relief to know that at least at the regional level all these TSGs are recognized and in good hands for the time being. Thus it could be said that if these TSGs are already formally acknowledged at the regional level by ASEAN, it shouldn't be too much of a jump to assume that they may someday be officially recognized at the international level as well by UNESCO.

ASEAN is doing good work in regards to the safeguarding of TSGs, and however comforting as it may seem there are still some points of contention that need ironing out. For example, in ASEAN's report, there was quite a bit of animosity expressed towards the modernization of TSGs:

“Modernisation has also resulted in declining interest and participation in something old and traditional in favour of modern equipment and technology that make life easier. Thus, many of the world's TSG have been modernised, resulting in deviation from their origins (Boro, Daimary, Naizaree, 2015). New equipment is used, such as the change from a natural (i.e., rattan) to synthetic ball for kasipa, a kicking game in the Philippines; rules are revised to make a TSG more competitive; and different playing surfaces are used (i.e. from natural settings to modern concrete facilities).” (Daut, 2024)

It is obvious why those advocating for the protection of TSGs may harbor some hostility towards what might seem like rapid changes to ancient tradition, but there should be a degree of understanding that some things are inevitable. For example in the case of the traditional Southeast Asian kick-ball games, it is absolutely necessary for a modernized fusion version to be contested at international events in order to promote inclusivity and still allow for fair competition. Furthermore, the majority of the traditional versions of the Southeast Asian kick-ball games are noncompetitive in nature, so rule changes to create competition are certainly necessary or it would be literally impossible to hold international competitions. This doesn't mean that the traditional versions of the games are doomed to go extinct at all. With proper protection the traditional versions can coexist in a symbiotic relationship with the new international hybridized game. It mustn't be looked at as a negative occurrence, rather practitioners and fans of the local traditional Southeast Asian kick-ball games should instead feel a sense of pride knowing that their TSG is represented vicariously through the new international fusion version of the game.

For the modern hybridized version of the Southeast Asian circular kick-ball games, the recognition of the traditional sports which it draws from as practices of 'Intangible Cultural Heritage' by UNESCO would likely increase global participation in it and put it on track to actually become a well-known competitive sport with competitions and leagues all over the world. This could put it up there in terms of global popularity with other world famous Southeast Asian sports such as Muay Thai. Maybe someday this hybridized Southeast Asian game could even become an official Olympic event, that would certainly be very meaningful to many. It should also be mentioned however, that though some of the various TSGs detailed in this essay may have the potential to also someday be contested at the Olympics as well, it is much more unlikely because they will probably remain only as highly localized activities of cultural and historical importance to the people of the respective nations in which they exist. Regardless of that likelihood however, their essence will still be represented should the hybridized version of the game ever make it to the Olympics, and that in and of itself would be something that local fans of each of these respective Southeast Asian TSGs could be proud of, and draw a sense of Southeast Asian unity from.


## CONCLUSION

Chinlone is an ancient Burmese ball game that is considered to be the national sport of Myanmar. It is certainly a TSG of great importance, and is very unique in the sense that it is noncompetitive. It is over a thousand years old, and is likely descended from the even older Chinese sport of Cuju. It has many links and a shared heritage with several other traditional Asian games. It has gone through a myriad of changes in the past 200 years, caused by colonization, Westernization, and postcolonial nation-building projects. In the very recent past it has gained a place at important international competitions such as the SEA Games, but the version played at these events is not traditional Chinlone. What is played at the international competitions is a hybridized version of all the similar Southeast Asian kick-ball games which simply carries the name of Chinlone. At these international competitions this name should be changed to clear up confusion, promote further inclusivity, and deter misinformed critics from making accusations

of unfairness. Though the name for the hybridized game should be changed at the international level, practitioners and fans of not only Chinlone but all the other various Southeast Asian kick-ball games should still retain a sense of pride knowing that their TSGs will still be represented vicariously through this new hybridized game. Regardless of the fact that these TSGs are developing into more modern competitive games, for the sake of preservation of traditional culture they should still retain their traditional names and rules in their respective countries. A way to ensure this happens is by having them added to UNESCO's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage. In the future, hopefully not only will Chinlone and all these other TSGs retain their traditional forms within their own countries, but they can also conceivably coexist in a symbiotic relationship with this new international hybridized game. This shouldn't be looked at as a destruction of culture, rather it should instead be viewed as something that can bring many in the region a sense of Southeast Asian pride and unity.

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