

Early East Asian Chess Pieces: An overview

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Abstract

This paper deals with the materials used in the production of early East Asian chess pieces up to ca. 1650. It does not aim at being a close study of the development of the pieces, but is rather a cursory look over some of the written material collected by the author. (For first contact, the author can most easily be reached through Peter.Banaschak@t-online.de)

Introductory Notes

The chess games we're dealing with here are

- (standard) Chinese Chess, |**Xiangqi**|,
- Korean Chess, |**Changgi**|,
- the Japanese Chesses, the various |**Shôgi**|s.

I will be using the Chinese, Korean, and Japanese names throughout this article, in order to save space. Due to technical restrictions it isn't possible to give the corresponding Chinese characters. (The transcription systems used are Pinyin for Chinese, McCune-Reischauer (modified) for Korean, and Hepburn for Japanese. The article follows East Asian naming conventions in giving the family name first, then the personal names.)

1 Xiangqi

The eldest game that can (with some reliability) be classified as a chess game is the so-called |**Baoying-Xiangqi**|. This is the name given to the game described in the |*Xuanguai lu*| {An alternative title for the book is |*Youguai lu*|, the meaning being the same as |*Xuanguai lu*|.} (often rendered as |*Book of Marvels*|, but possibly more accurately |*Notes on the Strange and Memorable*|, a book written by a Minister of State of the *Tang* dynasty, **Niu Sengru** (779--847). In the story |*Cen Shun*| we are told about an impoverished scholar named Cen Shun who, in a dream, is witness to a battle. Later it turns out that he had been living in a house that had been erected above an old grave that amongst other things contained a fully set up chess-board. {The name **Baoying-Xiangqi** comes from the date, **Baoying 1** (= 762 AD), at which these events are supposed to have taken place.}

From the text one might deduce that once there was a type of Xiangqi that actually used three-dimensional pieces. The pieces the story tells about were made of gold. Although the eldest extant version of the text is from the latter half of the 10th century, {The text is included into the collection |*Taiping guangji*|, 'Gleanings from the era *Taiping*', compiled 977--978.} there is another text that corroborates the existence of a chess game at the beginning of the 9th century. It is a poem {This poem belongs to the cycle |*He chun shen ershi shou*|, '*Twenty poems on the quiet in spring*'.} written by **Niu's** contemporary and friend **Bo Juyi** (772-846), that mentions Xiangqi and other board games. But alas, it doesn't give particulars on the pieces. So there is a slight possibility that there might be three-dimensional Xiangqi pieces dating from the 9th or 10th century somewhere. Needless to say that a properly documented find of a set of such pieces would be quite a sensation.

From that time on there is no further mention of the possibility of three-dimensional pieces. {With one exception: in the early 12th century text |*Pingzhou ketan*|, '*Leisurely talks from Pingzhou*', chess-playing 'foreigners', most likely Persian or Arabian merchants, are

mentioned. Their pieces were described as 'unlike Horse and Chariot [the Xiangqi pieces, P.B.]; all pieces are made from ivory, rhinoceros horn, and aloes wood'. To my knowledge no such pieces have ever been found.}

The oldest Xiangqi game of which we have a complete description of is the so-called |**Qiguo Xiangqi**| ('Seven Realms-Xiangqi') which is played on a board with 19 by 19 lines, and uses 120 pieces: one General, one Commander, one Colonel, one Diplomat, one Catapult, one unit of Archers, one unit of Crossbowmen, two units of Swordsmen, four units of Broad Swordsmen, and four units of Cavalry each. It was created (or propagated) by **Sima Guang** (1019--1086). We do not know of a single set of pieces for this game, nor do we know whether it was played at all. Most likely the pieces for this game were shaped like these for ordinary modern Xiangqi, but there would have to be pieces that aren't found in ordinary Xiangqi.

All we know about from the texts are flat, disc-shaped pieces that are inscribed with Chinese characters and/or -- for some period of time at least -- are engraved with pictures corresponding to the Chinese names of the respective pieces.

The earliest set we know of was found in 1984 near **Anxi** in **Jiangxi** province. By sheer coincidence a wooden box was found that contained 32 copper pieces: two Generals, four Ministers, four Chariots, four Horses, four Elephants, four Cannons, and ten Soldiers. They were divided into two sides through different colours (red/black); the discs had characters on one side and pictures on the other. The two Ministers of each side were differentiated through two slightly different characters; we don't presently know for what purpose, if any. The discs were about 3.8 cm wide and 7 mm thick. From coins that were found alongside they could be dated to the era **Chongning** (1102-1106) during the Northern Song Dynasty (960--1126).{The find is described in *Zhang Ru'an, Zhongguo xiangqishi* ('A History of Chinese Chess'), Beijing 1991, p105. I could not find another description nor pictures of these pieces.}

A similar full set of copper pieces, dated to the same period, was unearthed in **Kaifeng**. They, too, were inscribed with Chinese characters on one side, and bore pictures on the other side. The pieces were smaller (2.0--3.0 cm), and the ministers were not differentiated.{Pictures of these pieces in *Li Songfu, Xiangqi shihua* ('Talks on the History of Chinese Chess'), Beijing 1981, p60-61.} A third similar set (copper pieces) of unknown provenance, but tentatively dated to about the same period of time, a full set as well, measures 2.6--3.1 cm, the thickness of the pieces is given as 1--2 mm.{Photographs and 'expertise' in *Arbeitspapiere zum Privatissimum "Seidenstrasse"*, Förderkreis Schach-Geschichtsforschung (ed.), Kelkheim/Ts., p100--101.}

A fourth (full) set of similar pieces was found in Inner Mongolia in 1954 These pieces are made from bronze; they are inscribed on one side and engraved on the other side as well. From an inscribed piece of wood that was found in the same context they were dated to about 1270.{A description and pictures in |*Nei Menggu chutu wenwu xuanji*| ('A selection of cultural relics unearthed in Inner Mongolia', *Wenwu chubanshe* (ed.), Beijing 1963, p123, fig. 165.} It is well later than the other sets but its form is very similar, so I included it here.

All these sets are cast (not minted or really engraved), it seems they have been finished to remove grates, and the two sides are usually differentiated by colours (red and black or green).

From a poem{A poem written by **Emperor Huizong** (r. 1101-1126), included in the collection |*Xuanhe yuzhi gongci*|, 'Poems written by the Emperor himself during the era Xuanhe (1119-1126)}. from the early 12th century we know that there were ivory pieces as well, presumably with engraved characters that were later filled with a lacquer containing powdered gold. We find a similar description in a poem by **Cai Shen** (1088-1156).{This poem is part of the cycle |*Linjiangxian*| ('The Immortal of Linjiang'), which is part of the collection |*You gujushi ci*| ('Poems of two Scholars of Old'), that has been included into the collection |*Song liushi mingjia*| ('Six famous Song poets').}

In Song times we also know of pieces made of porcelain. These have been found at the **Liangcheng** site near **Fengtai** in **Anhui** province; the pieces were black and white. One of the white pieces was engraved with the character 'General', the others were plain; perhaps to be

later inscribed with ink. {Description and pictures in *Ge Zhihong*, |*Anhui Fengtai 'Liancheng' zhinei faxian Tang--Yuan shidai wenwu*| ('A number of cultural relics from Tang to Yuan times discovered at the Liancheng site near Fengtai in Anhui'), in *Wenwu* ('Cultural Relics') 10/ 1965, p46--56, esp. p49 (description), and fig. 39.}

In the years 1973 to 1974 an excavation of a sea-going vessel was carried out in the **Quanzhou bay** in **Fujian** province. During this excavation 20 wooden Xiangqi pieces were found. They must have belonged to two sets, as one piece, a Horse, was marked through an engraved character that was filled up with red paint; the others were inscribed with red resp. black China ink. The ink-marked set had the differentiated Ministers as well. The wreck was dated to Southern Song times (1127-1279). It may be interesting to note that the simpler pieces were found near the crew quarters, so it may be acceptable to presume that Xiangqi began to gain popularity at about this time (though it is of course possible [maybe even probable] that it became more widespread earlier).

From the inventory of the Imperial treasury for the year 1565 (that is, during the *Ming* dynasty [1368--1644]), the |*Tianshui bingshan lu*| ('*Record of Heavenly Waters and Frozen Mountains*'), we know that Xiangqi pieces made from jade and ivory were kept there.

In conclusion we may state that

- (hypothetical) in **Baoying-Xiangqi**: three-dimensional (figurative?) pieces, made of precious metal,
- (hypothetical) in **Qiguo-Xiangqi**: disc-shaped pieces (with unusual pieces that aren't part of modern-day Xiangqi), sides probably distinguished by seven different colours,
- in **Northern Song** times: disc-shaped pieces, cast from copper or bronze, characters on one side, the corresponding picture on the other, sides distinguished by colour (red and black, blue, or green),
- from **late Northern Song** times on: carved ivory pieces, the engraved character filled with lacquer, eventually containing powdered precious metal, sides possibly distinguished by colour
- in **Song** times: black and white porcelain pieces, inscribed or incised with characters,
- from **Song** times on: wooden pieces, carved or inscribed, marked with characters in red/black ink,
- from **Ming** times on: carved pieces from jade and ivory, sides distinguished by colour.

Since it seems safe to conclude that wooden pieces may have been used from the time on that Xiangqi earned popularity (for the simple reason that they were easy to produce and to replace, and most likely quite cheap). Wooden pieces might therefore be relatively frequent, even if their state of preservation might be not too good. Bronze and copper pieces might be somewhat rarer, but they should be better preserved than wooden pieces. Jade pieces should be rarer still, but as they are easily recognized as valuable, they might even be in better state than metal pieces -- jade simply doesn't corrode. One of the problems with the sets of metal pieces describes in short in the first part of this article is, of course, that all of these sets are full. They may seem used, and the paint may be worn off, but nevertheless they all consist of 32 pieces. In my humble opinion that is something to think about: how can it be that we don't know a single set of corroded, imperfect, incomplete metal Xiangqi pieces? It may well be that none thinks it worth while to report, photograph, or describe an imperfect set, but it would remove the nagging doubts about the sets that haven't been found in a properly documented excavation.

2 Changgi

Next to nothing is known about the early history and development of **Changgi**. It just appears in existence, out of nothing, during the latter half of the 16th century. The first mention is in a diary\footnote {Published under the Japanese title |*Bigan nikki sō*| ('*Outline of the diary of Miam*'), 5. vols., Keijō 1936--1938 (*Chōsen shiryō sōkan* [*Reprints of Korean historical materials*].8.), vol. 1, book 1, p4.}; the respective entry only states that the author, **Yu Hūi-ch'un** (1513--1577) played **Sanggi** (Written with the Chinese characters for Xiangqi (first characters means 'Elephant' &c), whereas in Changgi the first characters means 'General') against his acquaintance **Kim Yo**. We do not even know what kind of chess (Xiangqi or Changgi?) these two played.

In the next mention, an essay by **Chang Yu** (1587--1638) {Printed in |*Kyegok chip*|, ('*Collected Works of Kyegok*'), Seoul 1982, p53-54; English translation in |Chess. *Chang Yoo* (1587--1638 AD), with comments by the editor|, in: Korea Magazine, Vol. 2 (1918), p5--9.}, we get a full description of the game, and lo and behold! it is absolutely identical to the modern game. It's a pity he didn't say anything on the shape of and materials used for the pieces.

The 16th century author **Sim Su-kyōng** (1516-1599) finally describes the materials that were used to make Changgi pieces. in his work |*Kyōnham chamnok*| ('*Different notes to pass the time*') {Reprinted in |*Richo kakushu bunken fūzoku kankei shiryō satsuyō*| ('*Compilation of materials on anthropology from various literary sources of the Yi dynasty* [1392--1910]'), *Chōsen Sōtokufu Chūsuin* (ed.), Keijō 1944, p1121-1122.} According to him Changgi pieces were mainly made from wood, with carved characters that are filled with paint or lacquer. As far as I know, there aren't any published descriptions or photographs of early Changgi pieces. In addition, I've never seen old pieces on exhibition anywhere. {I recall having seen 19th century pieces somewhere -- though I can't remember, where.} It seems there is still much left to do in connection with Changgi. So we don't even know when Changgi pieces got the octagonal shape they have today.

3 The Shōgis

As I will hopefully be able to point out, Japanese Shōgi players have from early times on thought about the quality of their pieces. Thus it shouldn't be a surprise that the eldest known text that mentions Shōgi { This text is the |*Kirinshō*| ('*Notes on the Kirin* [*a mythical beast*']), written by **Fujiwara no Yukinari** (972--1027), reprinted e.g. in: |*Zoku gunshō ruijō*| ('*Continued assorted writings*'), vol. 31.2, Tokyo 1926, p190.} deals with the proper way to inscribe Shōgi pieces. The text makes it clear that from the early 11th century on the pieces were quite small (it is recommended to put them into a holder), that they were inscribed with ink, that the upper side which gives the unpromoted rank of piece is to be inscribed in regular characters, and that the lower side which gives the promoted rank should be inscribed in flowing ('grass') script.

The oldest extant pieces are dated 1058. These have been found in 1993 during a dig at the **Kōfukuji** in Nara, the then capital of Japan. {The find is presented in |*Nara Kōfukuji kyūkeidai*| ('*On the old grounds of the Kōfukuji in Nara*'), in: *Mokkan kenkyū* ('*Studies in inscribed wood*') Vol. 16 (1994), p26--30. --- It seems safe to conclude that these pieces really are shōgi pieces, as no other idea could possibly explain the design and inscriptions of the pieces found there.} They have the same shape as modern pieces (elongated pentagonal wedges). The material is *Hinoki* wood (Japanese cypress). --- We don't actually know for what Shōgi variant these pieces were used, but is it widely assumed that they belonged to one of the **Heian-Shōgi** games.

The first text that sort of describes Shōgi games is the |*Nichūreki*| ('*From the two chūreki*') from about 1230. {*Nichūreki*, esp ch. 13, in: *Shiseki shūran* ('*Collected mirrors of historical materials*'), 43 vols, vol. 5, p250.---The two *Chūreki* are two small history works from the earlier 12th century.} The first game it describes is a small variant known as |**Heian-Shō-Shōgi**| ('Small Shōgi of the **Heian** period [794--1185]') with six different kinds of pieces (King, Gold General, Silver General, Knight, Lance, and Pawn), the second is the |**Heian-Dai-Shōgi**| ('Large Shōgi of

the Heian period') with 13 different pieces (all of the above plus Copper General, Iron General, Side Mover, Wild Tiger, Flying Dragon, Free Chariot, and Go-Between).

This **Heian-Dai-Shōgi** seems to have become extinct until ca. 1300, where another **Dai-Shōgi** ('Large Shōgi') appears. {We know that from the |*Futsū shōdōshū*| ('Collection of sermons for everyday use'), quoted in: *Saeki Shin'ichi*, |"*Futsū shōdōshū*" no Shōgi kankei kiji ni tsuite -- Kamakura kōki no 'Shō-Shōgi' to 'Dai-Shōgi'| ('On the passages regarding Shōgi in the *Futsū shōdōshū* -- the large and small Shōgi in the later Kamakura (1192--1333) period'), *Yūgishi kenkyū* ('Studies in the history of games') 5 (1993), p2--7.} This new **Dai-Shōgi** is the one played on 15 by 15 board with 130 pieces. From about 1350 on there is still another variant: **Chū-Shōgi** with presumably 92 pieces on a 12 by 12 board. More variants seem to have been developed until 1443; in this year the |*Shōgi rokushu no zushiki*| ('Diagrams and Explanations on six kinds of Shōgi') {*Shōgi rokushu no zushiki*, *Tsurumine Shigenobu* (ed.), in: *Zatsugei sōsho* ('Collected writings on different arts'), Tokyo 1915, vol. 1, p198-211.} was published. Once much disputed, it now seems to have been accepted as genuine.

This brings us back to the pieces: the preface to *Shōgi rokushu no zushiki* says the work had been copied by **Minase Kanenari** (1514--1602), the piece maker of earlier times. He has left behind a list of the Shōgi sets he made during the years 1590--1602. {This list, the |*Shōgi koma no nikki*| ('Diary of Shōgi pieces') has been published in *Ei* ('The bow-stand'), vol. 6 (1978), no. 3, p34--42, under the title |*Sanbyaku hachijū nen buri ni yō no moku wo mieta atarashii shiryō*| ('Material newly discovered after more than 380 years').} The list contains not only the type of Shōgi for which the sets were made, and the customer, but also the materials used. 93% of all 735 sets were made from *Tsuge* (boxwood), the remaining 7% were made from *Byakudan* (sandalwood), *Kuwa* (mulberry wood), *Kusunoki* (camphor wood), and *Zōge* (ivory). Most of the inscriptions were made in China ink, but a few of them were in *urushi* (Japanese lacquer). According to *Minase's* list, he (together with his son and adopted son) made 618 **Shō-Shōgi** sets and 106 **Chū-Shōgi** sets, in addition to which two **Dai-Shōgi** sets, two **Dai-Dai-Shōgi** sets, three **Maka-Dai-dai-Shōgi** sets, and four **Tai-Shōgi** sets were made. Of the Shō-Shōgi- and Chū-Shōgi sets from his hand a few have survived until today, but of course genuine **Minase** sets are priceless.

It seems that the materials **Minase** used are the 'standard' materials, with the possible exception of ivory, as nearly all known early pieces seem to have been made from indigenous Japanese wood. {These materials continued to be used for the next few centuries to come.} And lots of pieces have been found: in the largest single find of Shōgi pieces (at **Asakura** near **Fukui**) 174 of them were unearthed. Interestingly, these pieces seem to have intended for use in a **Shō-Shōgi** with 42 pieces: only pieces for the modern standard **Shō-Shōgi** one Drunk Elephant have been found. {Short notes on the find in *Kubodera Kōichi*, *Nihon Shōgi shūsei* ('Collection on Chess in Japan'), Tokyo 1995, p84.} Of course quite a few more pre-1600 pieces have been found, but as a whole they have no unusual features that deviate from what already has been said.

4 Final Remarks

There is still a lot more to learn about East Asian chess pieces, and we might still be in for surprises. {Who knows what Chinese museums have stowed away in their storerooms...} Finds of Xiangqi pieces occur seldom, and we don't always have properly documented finds that help us understand Xiangqi history. Deteriorating economy in China makes it probable that 'wild' diggings with the sole purpose of making profit will be carried out, during which much valuable information on the history and development of Xiangqi might be destroyed. Once a market with prices soaring up will have been created, it becomes more probable that fake sets will appear that will we be intended for sale outside Asia. Taiwanese and other Chinese collectors are far too knowledgeable to be lead into buying such sets. As for Changgi pieces: as I wrote, I don't know much about old Changgi pieces or sets being displayed or collected. Older Shōgi sets and pieces are priceless, and they are safely guarded by their mostly Japanese owners. Quite a few of them are on display in the Shōgi museums (e.g. in **Tendō** and **Osaka**) throughout Japan.

Nevertheless, it might be worth while to have a look at East Asian chess pieces, as especially the Japanese pieces have a look-and feel that is unique. Should anyone happen to be able to get access to really old pieces, give it a try.

By the way, should you have information on old Xiangqi, Changgi, or Shōgi pieces earlier than those mentioned in these few pages, or noted here as 'unknown', please let me know.