"The Earthworms Tame the Dragon": The Game of Xiangqi

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ORIGINS

The game of xiangqi (elephant or figural game) - sometimes known as xiangxi (game of elephants)\(^1\) - as it has been played since the end of the Northern Song period (960-1127) uses thirty-two disc-shaped pieces in two opposing "armies," which move on the intersecting points of a grid on a board that is nine by eight squares on a side (Fig. 13:1). Although not as well known in the West as China’s other great game of skill, weiqi (Japanese go), it is, in fact, currently more popular in China. Indeed, in terms of numbers of active players, it is the most popular board game of skill in the world.

![13:1 Layout of a xiangqi board](image)

Xiangqi (elephant game) is a Chinese board game similar to chess. Like chess, xiangqi uses thirtytwo pieces, but unlike chess they move on the intersections of the grid rather than in the squares. Many of the pieces move in similar ways to those of chess. The shi/zu (soldier) is similar to a pawn, the chariot moves much like a rook, and the horse has a dog-legged movement much like the knight; the xiang (elephant/minister) moves diagonally like a bishop, but only two points at a time. The general is equivalent to the king, but there is no queen. The pao is distinctive it can only capture a piece when another piece lies between it and its victim.

Like international chess, xiangqi is a game of displacement. As in chess, the objective is to capture or eliminate the opponent’s pieces, culminating in the capture of the opposing general. The similarities with chess are significant: not only is the number of pieces the same, but some of them have similar movements. The chariot (ju), for example, moves in exactly the same fashion as the rook; the horse (ma) moves in an L-shaped manner like the knight; and the xiang (elephant), diagonally like the bishop. These similarities have prompted some scholars to suggest that xiangqi is historically related to, or even derived from, Indian chaturanga, the source of modern international chess. Even the name - elephant game - is suggestive, since elephants were deployed in war during the Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE), and preferring to see xiangqi as derived from earlier indigenous games such as the xiangxi of 762 CE.\(^4\) This essay does not primarily address this controversy - until chaturanga pieces actually are discovered in an archaeological context, the case for a foreign origin must remain unproven - but instead focuses on Chinese literary references to the game.

The earliest mention of a game that may have been the prototype for xiangqi dates to the Northern Zhou period (557-81), when it is recorded that Emperor Wu lectured on the Xiang jing (Classic of the Xiang Game) to his ministers at court.\(^5\) The Xiang jing is not extant, and only literary pieces describing the game in ornate language survive.

Wang Bao, in his preface (extant) to the Xiang jing, compares the game to twelve categories: heaven, earth, yin and yang, the four seasons, numbers, the musical scale, the eight trigrams, loyalty and filial piety, lord and vassal, civil and military, rites, and virtues.\(^6\) Joseph Needham interprets this to mean that the xiang game was actually an astrological game,\(^7\) but it may be argued that the description in the preface merely reflects an ornate style of prose writing, and
does not necessarily mean that the game was actually a direct representation of these various concepts.8 Yu Xin (513-81), in his "Xiangxi fu" ('Prose Poem on the Xiang Game'), describes a square board and includes cryptic lines such as the following:

- the game pieces are comparable to horses, each worth a thousand pieces of silver
- the tallies shine like the tallies of the six spirits [in the command of the heavenly emperor]
- carrying out in the north the tactics from Black Mountain
- carrying out in the south the tallies from Red River
- the green dragon in the eastern path
- the white horse leaves the western pass.9

Lacking the game board, pieces, and rules with which to decipher these writings accurately, it is difficult to ascertain whether this was a race game or a game of displacement in which the capture of a principal piece was one of the defining features,10 or a combination of both. To shed more light on the nature of this game, further research on earlier race and displacement games in China, such as liubo (six rods) and the Northern Zhou game of ruqi (Confucian board game), is necessary.11

A much more specific description of what appears to be a prototype of xiangqi is found in a fictional tale set in the first year of the Baoying era (762), recounted by the Prime Minister Niu Sengru (780-848). In the story, a scholar staying in a temple sees two armies come to life and do battle, with arrows and stones flying, which may indicate pieces such as the nu (crossbow) and pao (catapult). The scholar also hears a general (jun shi) give details of the moves of the tian ma (heavenly horse), shang jiang (top general), zi che (covered wagon), and liu jia (soldier). In the battles, the pieces are described as three-dimensional objects, though not more than a few inches in height. As a fictional tale belonging to a category of stories of common daily objects coming to life, we cannot be sure at this point in the story whether the chess pieces represented here were in reality three-dimensional. But when the scholar weakens with his experience of the nightly battles, his relatives steal into the temple while he visits the toilet and dig up his room. An old tomb with a golden chess board and several hundred three-dimensional pieces are revealed, and the relatives realize that the moves seen in the battles have been those of pieces from xiangxi.12 Historians of xiangqi therefore call this the xiangxi from the Baoying era and note that the pieces in this game were three-dimensional.13 A poem written in 829 by Bo Juyi also includes the line, "the soldier rushes at the wagon in the game of xiangzi," and this may refer to the same game.14

**XIANGXI AND XIANGQI OF THE NORTHERN SONG PERIOD**

Whereas the references cited above give little information as to the details of earlier xiangqi-type games (and the extent of their popularity), by the Northern Song period, multiple works discussed by the modern scholar Zhu Nanxian indicate that the game, in a number of versions, was becoming increasingly popular.15 The following are the main sources:

1. Yin Shu (1001-1047), Xiangqi. The scholar-bibliographer Chao Gongwu (twelfth century) notes that this work contains five diagrams (of games) and that these games are different from those played in his day.16 Yin's work has not survived, and it is not clear how similar the game was to today's version.

2. Mei Yaochen (1002-60), "Xiangxi," 1059. This poem contains a line referring to the use of ferocious animals, including elephants, in battles.17 It thus reflects the fact that there were ferocious animals represented in the game, such as the elephant, at least.

3. Cheng Hao (1032-85), "Xiangxi," ca. 1055-75. The poem reads,

   Bo and weiqi are both games,
   but the game of elephants imitates the deployment of troops.
   The wagon and the horse still retain the warring methods of the Zhou period [ca. 1045-256 BCE];
   the deputy general and the assistant general retain titles of Han officials.18
   In the area of the central army, the general-in-chief can move in eight directions, and is important;
   beyond the river, moving diagonally to a pointed corner, the foot soldier's position is not crucial.
   I lean on the patterned catalpa board and smile;
   heroes such as Liu Bang and Xiang Yu also vie for something casual.19

Thus the following pieces were found in this xiangxi game: jiang (general in chief), pian [jiang] (deputy general), bai [jiang] (assistant general), che (wagon), ma (horse), and zu (soldier). A river was present, and when the soldier crossed it, the piece could move diagonally. There may have been a central square in which the general in chief could move in eight directions; this piece, therefore, was in the central position of the square at the beginning of the game.
4. Sima Guang (1019-86), Qi guo xiangxi (Xiangxi of the Seven Kingdoms), ca. 1071-85. The scholar official Sima Guang wanted to use a larger board and settled on a weiqi type board of nineteen squares on a side for his game of qi guo xiangxi (Fig. 13:2). Each kingdom had the following pieces, some unique to this game: one jiang, one pian, one bai, one xing ren (emissary), one pao (catapult), one gong (bow), one nu (crossbow), two dao (knives), four jian (swords), and four ji (mounted riders). The appearance of the catapult is particularly interesting. Although the catapult was mentioned in Niu Sengru’s aforementioned story, this account constitutes its first appearance in a description of a real game. In later versions of xiangqi, the catapult was replaced by the cannon (pao), though its idiosyncratic moves it could only capture a piece by jumping over an intervening one were retained. The emissary, on the other hand, did not survive in any form in conventional xiangqi, which is not surprising as it could neither capture nor be captured by other pieces.20

5. Chao Buzhi (1053-1110), Guang xiangxi tu (Expanded Xiangxi with Illustrations). Like Sima, the scholar official Chao wanted to enlarge the board in a similar fashion. Chao’s work does not survive, but in his essay “Guang xiangxi tu xu” (“Preface to Illustrations of expanded xiangxi”), there are clues to both the xiangxi game current at the time and his expanded version. Chao mentions, for instance, that he wants to expand the normal board of eleven squares per side and thirty four pieces to a board with nineteen squares per side and ninety eight pieces. Though his essay was written in 1079, Chao was referring to the thirty four piece game he saw as a child, about 1060-70. Scholars have attempted to reconstruct this thirty-four-piece game, which probably included one jiang, one pian, one bai, two xiang (elephants), two ma, two pao (catapults), two ju (chariots), and six zu.21

From the above, Zhu Nanxian concludes that there was a game of xiangxi popular among members of the middle and upper classes between 1050 and 1070 and that Yin Shu’s xiangqi was probably a similar type of game.22

STABILIZATION OF XIAOQI AT THE END OF THE NORTHERN SONG PERIOD

The aforementioned references indicate that there was considerable variation in the game as it was played in the eleventh century. By the early twelfth century, however, the pieces and rules had been largely stabilized. In the reign of Emperor Huizong (r. 1101-27), there is evidence that the game used thirty two pieces, the number still used at present. Cao Xun (Ca. 1098-1174) records the story, dated to 1127, of the dowager empress, mother of Prince Kang, who took a general from among the pieces for his game of qi guo xiangxi (Fig. 13:2). Each kingdom had the following pieces, some unique to this game: one jiang, one pian, one bai, one xing ren (emissary), one pao (catapult), one gong (bow), one nu (crossbow), two dao (knives), four jian (swords), and four ji (mounted riders). The appearance of the catapult is particularly interesting. Although the catapult was mentioned in Niu Sengru’s aforementioned story, this account constitutes its first appearance in a description of a real game. In later versions of xiangqi, the catapult was replaced by the cannon (pao), though its idiosyncratic moves it could only capture a piece by jumping over an intervening one were retained. The emissary, on the other hand, did not survive in any form in conventional xiangqi, which is not surprising as it could neither capture nor be captured by other pieces.20

The painter Xiao Zhao depicted this scene in 1162 as the seventh painting in a series of twelve entitled Zhong xing rui ying tu (Auspicious Responses in the Restoration Period of Emperor Gaozong). One painting of the scene survives and is thought by some scholars to be the authentic work of Xiao Zhao. In the center is the dowager empress, dressed in red, and several court ladies looking attentively at a xiangqi board, which is drawn accurately with nine by eight squares. Sixteen black and fifteen red pieces are scattered over the board, and there is one piece wrapped in silk lying within the base squares.24

THE MATERIAL RECORD: COPPER XIAOQI PL ECEES

Excavation records also support the argument for the stabilization of the modern xiangqi game toward the end of the Northern Song period. In 1983, two sets of copper xiangqi pieces were excavated from a hoard dating to about 1102-10 in Zhangming zhen, Jiangyou City, Sichuan.
One is a complete set of thirty-two round pieces, each measuring 2.5 centimeters in diameter and 0.2 centimeter in thickness. A character is chiseled in standard script on one side of each piece, and the back of each bears an image fitting the name of the piece. Thus we have the following names and illustrations:

- jiang (two); a seated general holding a sword
- shi (four); a warrior guard holding a sword
- xiang (four); a majestic elephant
- ma (four); a horse ready for war
- ju (four); a bronze chariot pulled by a horse
- pao (four); a catapult
- zu (ten); a soldier in armor

As the pieces for both sides are identical, it has been suggested that one side played with the characters on top and one side with the figures on top. The pieces from the other set have characters on both sides (and no images), which would have made recognition of the pieces in play difficult, unless they originally were differentiated by color (which may have been the case). The use of characters to differentiate the pieces raises the question of whether only the literate could play xiangqi. The answer is probably that only minimal literacy was needed, but the use of characters on the pieces may well have been an incentive to acquire literacy.

**EARTHENWARE AND PORCELAIN PIECES**

In a report of the ten major archaeological discoveries in the Three Gorges Dam area in 2001, number nine is the discovery in Wanzhou District, Chongqing City, of an earthenware xiangqi piece, the che, in the entrance to Tomb 1, dating to the Eastern Han (25-220 CE) or Three Kingdoms period (221-265 CE). If this dating is accurate, it would push the origin of xiangqi back some five centuries. At present, however, the piece remains an isolated find. Until more securely dated pieces from this period come to light, it would be rash to accept this example as valid. In 1997 a complete set of thirty-two ceramic xiangqi pieces was excavated from a tomb in the Xigong area of Luoyang. The round pieces of unglazed earthenware measure 2.5 centimeters in diameter and 0.3-0.5 centimeter in thickness. Half are white, half black, with incised characters for jiang, shi (guard), xiang, ju, ma, pao, and zu, filled in with cinnabar. This is the earliest complete set of ceramic xiangqi pieces excavated thus far, dating to the Chongning era (1102-06).

**XIANGQI OF THE SOUTHERN SONG PERIOD**

Following the stabilization of xiangqi toward the end of the Northern Song, several references from the Southern Song period (1127-1279) that mention the game in its present form are extant. The monk Yuxian, writing between 1131 and 1162, describes the po luo sai game as follows:

*The Sanskrit term po luo sai is translated here as bing [troops] that is, the game of troops. It is [the game in which] lines are drawn on a board, separated in the middle by a river, and each [side] has sixteen pieces: soldier, catapult, chariot, horse, elephant, etc.; it is commonly known as xiangqi.*

The poet Liu Kezhuang (1187-1269) wrote a poem entitled "Xiangyi yi shou, cheng Ye Qianzhong" (Poem on the Elephant Game, to show Ye Qianzhong), which describes all of the different pieces of the general, guard, elephant, chariot, horse, catapult, and soldier. Finally, Zhou Mi (1232-98), recalling Hangzhou in the Southern Song, records fifteen chess players in attendance at court. Among these, five specialized in weiqi and ten in xiangqi, including a nun, Shen Gugu.

**THE MATERIAL RECORD FROM THE SOUTHERN SONG ONWARD**

In the Qiandao era (1165-73), the eunuch Chen Yuan committed a crime and was banished, his belongings sold off. One was a xiangqi table of the following description:

One chi, five cun in height; two chi, five cun in width; the center is hollowed for the box of chess pieces. There is a rim all around. Eagle wood is used for the face of the board, and ivory to delineate the lines. Around the edge, several layers of ebony, huali, and white sandalwood are used for ornamentation. Laka
The earliest excavated wood xiangqi pieces date from the late thirteenth century, or the late Song or early Yuan period (1279-1368). In 1973, a sunken Chinese ship of this date was discovered off the coast of Houzhu Harbor, Quanzhou City, in Fujian Province. Excavations were carried out, and a total of twenty wood xiangqi pieces were recovered from three of the ship’s holds. One piece is carved with the character ma in standard script, filled in with red. Ten other pieces bear various characters such as jiang, shi, ju, xiang, pao, and bing (soldier), written in ink, and the characters on the remaining nine cannot be deciphered. In the Ming period (1368-1644), the Grand Secretary Yan Song (1480-1565) was dismissed from office in disgrace and his belongings confiscated. The scholar Shen Defu (1578-1642) later noted that Yan had in his possession several hundred sets of green and white jade weiqi pieces and also several hundred sets of gold and silver pieces for xiangqi. He then commented, ’If we use them for play, they would be intolerably heavy, and there is no sense in storing them. Truly they are superfluous things.’ A list of Yan’s confiscated belongings published in the early eighteenth century describes a smaller collection of xiangqi pieces. The list does not mention the gold or silver pieces but only nine sets of agate xiangqi pieces, one set of jade chess pieces, one set of crystal agate chess pieces, and eight sets of ivory chess pieces, which may have been for xiangqi or weiqi. It is also recorded that the wealthy merchant official Hu Guangyong (1823-85) played xiangqi against his wife using his concubines as live pieces, in two teams dressed in blue and red with the names of the pieces written on them, using a raised platform as a board.

**XIANGQI MANUALS**

In the Southern Song period, there were at least two manuals devoted to xiangqi. Ye Maoqing compiled the *Xiangqi shenji ji* (Divine Strategy of Xiangqi) between 1173 and 1234, but it is no longer extant. The Song loyalist general and prime minister Wen Tianxiang (1236-83), a xiangqi fanatic, also compiled a manual that included forty games. For a popular introduction to the game, the late Southern Song encyclopedia *Shilin guangji* (An Encyclopedia of Matters) is worthy of note. The Zhishun (1330-33) edition includes two complete handicapped games as well as the earliest recorded endgame, entitled *er long chu hai shi* (game of two dragons emerging from the sea). In the Yuan period, there was the *Youxi daquan* (Complete Games) of the Zhizheng era (1341-68), but only a manuscript exists, and its authenticity remains to be confirmed. Many manuals of later periods also circulated in manuscript form, which may be due in part to the wish of some compilers not to let everybody in on the secrets of play, and it is only in the twentieth century that many of these have been printed.

Coming to the Ming period, there are at least six extant manuals (with enticing titles), which mainly include complete games or endgames, or a mixture of both:

2. Zulong shi, *Bai bian xiangqi pu* (Xiangqi Manual of a Hundred Transformations), 1522
4. Xu Zhi, *Shiqing yaqu* (An Elegant Interest that Suits One’s Temperament), 1570
5. Zhu Jinzhen, *Ju zhong mi* (The Mystery in the Tangerines), with a preface (1632) by the author’s brother, Zhu Yiwei, once the Supreme Commander of Yunnan. This work tops the list for number of reprints of xiangqi manuals in the Ming and Qing (1644-1911) periods. The title refers to another story from Niu Sengru’s *Xuan guai lu* (A Record of the Abstruse and Strange), in which someone from Baqiong in Sichuan Province notices two large tangerines remaining on the branches after the autumn harvest. He orders them to be picked, and finds in each fruit two old men, each a foot or so tall, playing xiangqi. The story is notable for the fantastical objects wagered, such as ten ounces of hair from the seventh daughter of the Dragon Spirit of the Sea, nine hu (about forty five pecks, or ninety gallons) of jade dust from Yingzhou, one of the three magical mountains, and others. One old man says, ’The pleasure in the tangerine is no less than that to be found on Shang Mountain, but it cannot be permanent, since the tangerine has been plucked.’

In this story, the old man is comparing the pleasure of playing xiangqi inside the tangerine to the joys of residing on Shang Mountain, the place to which the famous Four Greycards of the founding of the Han dynasty retired. Although there is no mention of weiqi in the original
account of the Greybeards, by the Tang dynasty (618-907) they were said to have enjoyed the game in their retirement.\textsuperscript{47} Later versions of Niu Sengru’s story seem to have been influenced by this, as the four men in the tangerines end up playing weiqi instead of xiangqi, no doubt because the former was considered a more prestigious game.\textsuperscript{48}

6. Chunyang Daoren, \textit{Zi chu dong lai wu dishou (Since Emerging from the Cave I Have Not Met a Worthy Opponent)}, date of compilation unknown.\textsuperscript{49} The title is taken from a line of a poem written by a priest who was good at weiqi, recorded by his contemporary, the scholar official Yao Kuan (1105-62). The next line reads, “But if I can let someone off, I will do so.” Although this originally referred specifically to weiqi, it has become a metaphor for the wisdom of allowing someone to save face in defeat.\textsuperscript{50} By using a line from a poem about weiqi as the title of a manual for xiangqi, there is implicit admission that weiqi was the intellectually superior (or at least more prestigious) game.

For the Qing period, at least two-dozen manuals are extant. As the quality of xiangqi play in premodern China reached a peak in the Qianlong (1736-96) and Jiaqing (1796-1820) eras,\textsuperscript{51} the four famous manuals from the Jiaqing era should be mentioned briefly. All are on endgames, which end mainly in stalemate.

1. Xue Bing, \textit{Xin wu can bian (Mind Battle Endgames)}, 1800, with a preface by the scholarly official Wang Chang\textsuperscript{52}

2. Sanle Jushi, \textit{Bau xiangqi pu (Xiangqi Manual of a Hundred Games)}, 1801\textsuperscript{53}

3. Zhang Qiaodong, \textit{Zhuxiang zhai xiangqi pu (Xiangqi Manual from the Bamboo Fragrance Study)}, originally printed in 1804 (revised edition, 1817), with a preface (1802) by Wu Yingkui, a senior licentiate.\textsuperscript{54}

4. Chen Wenqian, \textit{Yuanshen haikuo (Deep as the Ravine, Wide as the Sea)}, 1808, with a preface by the scholarly official and calligrapher Liang Tongshu, son of the Grand Secretary Liang Shizheng\textsuperscript{55}

Many of the manuals from the Song to Qing period have been reprinted and studied briefly, and one of the pleasures in reading these manuals is appreciating the imagery in the titles in terms of the games illustrated. These titles are normally in set phrases of four Chinese characters. Some are common, some amusing, while others refer to historical battles or elegant lines of poetry. We have, for example, “rats fighting for the hole” (soldiers threaten the generals and fight for the prize), “snow surrounds Lantian Pass,”\textsuperscript{56} “the earthworms tame the dragon” (three slow-moving soldiers force two chariots into a stalemate), and “the meeting of the orangutans” (seven pieces lined up on the eighth rank).\textsuperscript{57}

\textit{Xiangqi} historians have noted the following course of development in the manuals, as seen from the level of play shown. Stage one, as seen in \textit{Ju zhong mi}, demonstrates a grasp of the basic rules and various openings (including the cannon move to the central file), and endgames in which a winner emerges. This level, however, is relatively basic and crude. Stage two is exemplified by \textit{Meihua pu (Plum Blossom Manual)} by Wang Zaiyue of the Kangxi era (1662-1722), and \textit{Zhuxiang zhai xiangqi pu}. The former deals with openings, in particular the \textit{pingfeng ma} (screen horses) defense\textsuperscript{58} against the opening attack from the cannon to the central file. The latter evinces a switch from endgames in which there is a winner to stalemates, and advanced endgames. Stage three, from the late eighteenth century to 1957, includes more systematic studies of openings, in particular the horse response to cannon attacks.\textsuperscript{59}

Early introductions of the game to the West include W .H. Wilkinson’s \textit{A Manual of Chinese Chess}, published in 1893; H.J.R. Murray’s \textit{A History of Chess}, 1913; and Charles Kliene’s \textit{Seven Stars: A Chinese Chess Ending with Three Hundred Variations}, 1916, which is an expanded study of the \textit{qi xing juhui (meeting of the seven stars)} endgame variations found in \textit{Baiju xiangqi pu}.\textsuperscript{60} The endgame is so named because, at the start, each side has seven pieces remaining; it is one of the games that aficionados might choose to play against professional players for a small wager on street corners. Both Wilkinson and Kliene spent some time working in China.

\textbf{ATTITUDES TO XIANGQI}

In the late Southern Song period, Zhou Mi referred to weiqi as \textit{da qi} (big chess). The modern scholar Zhang Ru’an has interpreted the \textit{da} to mean “major,” thus relegating xiangqi to a lower status as the “minor” form of chess. Zhang notes that this period marks the beginning of a differentiation of the two games into “high” and “base” pursuits.\textsuperscript{61} It may be argued, however, that the term \textit{da qi} was used simply to differentiate between the games, with \textit{da} indicating that weiqi uses more pieces.\textsuperscript{62} Nevertheless, a derisory attitude towards xiangqi was clearly evident in
some quarters by the late Ming period. In his xiangqi manual Ju zhong mi, Zhu Jinzhen noted that people despised the game as an insignificant skill because it was played in marketplaces by the young and old but thought highly of weiqi; therefore, there were numerous manuals on weiqi and few on xiangqi. Zhu argued that there was no difference in the level of intelligence and skill required for the two games and that people attempted to differentiate between the two based solely on their own preferences.

In the Qing period, the scholar Jiao Xun (1763-1820) also wrote that people thought highly of weiqi and despised xiangqi, and that he found this to be strange. He argued that in the game of xiangqi, there were billions of possibilities for the deployment of each piece, while the game of weiqi required only the completion of the 361 points with no additional effort. According to Jiao, the scoring of weiqi seemed to be refined, and the game seemed to require deep thought, but someone with a bit of intelligence could exhaust the techniques. He went on to say,

\[ \text{Women, children, farmers, or herdsmen may grasp the techniques of xiangqi, but to be good at it is another matter, and even grand Confucian scholars and famous worthies do not dare to lay this claim.} \]

\[ \text{Weiqi looks difficult, but is easy. Xiangqi looks easy, but is difficult.} \]

The relative level of difficulty of the two games may be argued, but it is to Jiao’s credit that he stands up for xiangqi. As for women playing the game, it should be noted that there are records of women playing xiangqi in the Song and Yuan periods.

The reason behind derogatory attitudes towards xiangqi merits some discussion. During its early history in the Song period, xiangqi found favor among members of the upper classes. Games of the xiangqi family attracted the attention of scholar officials such as the aforementioned Yin Shu, Sima Guang, and Chao Buzhi and there were xiangqi players in attendance at the court of Emperor Xiaozong (r. 1163-89). In the Ming period, the scholar official Li Kaixian (1502-68), a top player, wrote numerous poems on the subject. Legend has it that five high ranking ministers loved the game in the Qing period. Emperor Qianlong (r. 1736-95) watched them play over a period of six months, and the games were recorded in a volume. Nevertheless, when xiangqi took off among the common people, it seems that scholarly aficionados of weiqi became anxious and began to differentiate between the two games in terms of the perceived level of skill required, with ramifications for their relative status.

A comparison between weiqi and xiangqi may prove interesting. Weiqi has a much longer history, and the accumulated symbolic and cultural capital of elegance associated with weiqi far outweighs that associated with xiangqi (see section 15). When Xu Zhi tried to package his aforementioned xiangqi manual with the title Shiqing yaqu, or An Elegant Interest that Suits One’s Temperament, leading scholars like Jiao Xun stood up rightly for this terminology, but it was an uphill struggle. A comparison of the number of manuals on xiangqi and on weiqi produced in the Ming and Qing periods will demonstrate this point.

At first count, there were at least seventeen xiangqi manuals (six still extant) and seventeen weiqi manuals (all extant) in the Ming period. In the Qing period, the difference becomes more pronounced, with at least twenty-six xiangqi manuals (twenty-three still extant) compared to fifty-five extant weiqi manuals.

It is not easy to draw sensible conclusions from these figures. Professional players, some educated, compiled some of these weiqi and xiangqi manuals. But many of these manuals had prefaces written by literati, or were compiled by literati themselves. From the numbers, we can say that the literati were on the whole more interested in compiling manuals for weiqi than for xiangqi; and from the long association of literati with weiqi, the much greater number of poems written on weiqi, and the numerous paintings of literati playing weiqi, it would seem that the literati considered weiqi a more prestigious game than xiangqi. The physical evidence of xiangqi pieces and boards, however, paints a rather different picture. Whereas weiqi pieces, though often made of fine materials, were usually plain, xiangqi pieces were often more elaborate and sometimes were made from exotic materials such as coconut (Fig. 13:3), tortoiseshell inlaid with silver (Fig. 13:4.), ivory (Fig. 13:5), jade, or if we are to believe Shen Defu’s aforementioned account even gold and silver.

### Table: Set of xiangqi pieces

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>China</th>
<th>18th century</th>
<th>Coconut: height: 2.9 cm, diameter: 1.6 cm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Polumbaum Collection, 0039</td>
<td>Photograph by Risa Korris</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Whereas in the Ming and Qing periods weiqi pieces were stored in separate containers, xiangqi pieces were usually kept in a single round box.
Moreover, many game boards during the late Ming period were used for both weiqi and xiangqi, the two games marked out on the obverse and reverse sides of the board, respectively (Fig. 13:6). It is ironic to think that on the underside of many weiqi boards depicted in literati paintings there lurks a xiangqi board.

Indeed, the fact that there were more manuals produced for weiqi does not mean that the game was more popular than xiangqi on the whole. For one thing, the numbers of reprints of particular manuals have not been taken into account. Manuals for both games could be reprinted many times, and the figures for manuals in circulation would then change. We also do not have actual figures for numbers of players in premodern China, but it could be argued that xiangqi was more popular among the common people and thus was played by a greater number of people than weiqi. Practical factors also favor xiangqi: a game of xiangqi takes less time than a game of weiqi; the paper xiangqi board is an economical option; and the thirty two pieces are less cumbersome than the 361 or so needed for weiqi. Even today, xiangqi sets may be purchased easily in convenience stores in Taipei, but not weiqi sets, and it is more common to see people playing xiangqi (rather than weiqi) in teahouses and parks in China. The reason for xiangqi’s enduring popularity, like that of international chess, must lie not just in the intellectual challenge of outwitting an opponent by sheer skill (after all, weiqi is no less skillful), but in the individuality of the different pieces that reflect the composition of a real army so explicitly. Just as all of the different elements of an army work together to defeat the enemy in real battles, so, too, is victory accomplished by marshalling one’s army to greatest effect in xiangqi and in chess. The winner of a game of xiangqi feels the palpable satisfaction of having vanquished his opponent in battle, no mean feat for time spent on one side of a gaming board.

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1 The character xiang has multiple meanings: elephant, ivory, image, or figure. It is not always clear which meaning is intended in the name. Sometimes the term seems to refer to elephants (which feature as pieces in most versions of xiangqi), but in other cases it seems to refer simply to figures, perhaps in contradistinction to games (such as weiqi) in which the pieces are non figural. Qi literally means a gaming piece, but in combination with xiang it usually refers to the game rather than to the individual piece. The xi of xiangxi
means "to play." Xiangqi literally means 'elephant (or figural) play,' and in this essay, it is translated as 'game of elephants' or 'game of figures,' in order to distinguish it from xianqi. From the end of the Northern Song period, xiangqi was sometimes used interchangeably with xianqi, but in earlier times, it referred to a distinct game.

2 For an argument for Indian ancestry, or the possibility that China obtained its knowledge of chess from Persia rather than from India directly, see H.J.R. Murray, A History of Chess, pp. 119-21.

3 See Shi Liangzhao, Boyi youxi rensheng (Games such as Bo and Weiqi and Life), p. 162. Elephants and other ferocious animals were used in a battle in 23 CE; see Fan Ye (comp.), Hou Han shu (History of the Later Han Dynasty), vol. I: p. 5.

4 For a discussion of xiangqi, see Zhang Ru'an, Zhongguo xiangqi shi (A History of Chinese Xiangqi), p. 46; and Li Songfu, Xiangqi shi hua (Chats on the History of Xiangqi), pp. 2-6.

5 Linghu Defen (comp.), Zhou shu (History of the Zhou Dynasty), p. 76.

6 Li Fang et al. (comps.), Taiping yulan (Encyclopedia of the Taiping Xingguo Era, for Imperial Perusal), p. 3353.


8 Other writings on games, such as Ban Gu's (32-92 CE) 'Yi zhi' (Principles of yi, Bian Shao's (fl. mid second century) "Sai fu" (Prose poem on the game of saq, and Li Xiú's (Eastern Jin period [317-420]) "Si wei fu" (Prose poem on the game of the four directions), all relate the game boards, pieces, and their movements to higher concepts. See Liu Shancheng (ed.), Zhongguo weiqi (Chinese Weiqi), pp. 119-122; and Ouyang Xun, Yuwen leiju (Collection of Literature Arranged by Categories), pp. 1286-81.

9 Xu Yimin (ed.), Yu Zishan ji zhu (Collected Works of Yu Zishan, Annotated), pp. 68-73. For interpretations of more lines from the writings of Wang Bao and Yu Xin, see Li Songfu, Xiangqi shi hua, pp. 31-35; and Zhang Ru'an, Zhongguo xiangqi shi, pp. 21-29. Emperor Taizong (r. 627-49) could not understand three games as described by Emperor Wu, and called upon his minister Lù Cai, who solved them in one night. See Liu Xu et al. (comps.), Jiu Tang Shu (The Old History of the Tang Dynasty), Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975, p 2720.

10 David Parlett, The Oxford History of Board Games, p. 286.

11 For rules of the Confucian board game, see Li Fang et al., Taiping yulan, p. 3351.

12 The story is from Niù Sengru’s Xuan guai lu (A Record of the Abstruse and Strange); see Li Fang et al. (comps.), Taiping guangji (Comprehensive Records Compiled in the Taiping Xingguo Era), pp. 2935-37.

13 Based on the attribution to the Northern Song period of a piece of brocade on which the four accomplishments of the zither, chess, calligraphy, and painting are depicted, and chess is represented by a board of eight white and black squares on a side, scholars argue that the pieces in this game were placed on the squares and not on the intersections of the lines, as in the xiangqi of the Southern Song period (1127-1279). See Li Songfu, Xiangqi shi hua, pp. 43 45; and Zhang Ru’an, Zhongguo xiangqi shi, pp. 43 44. We are unsure, however, about the dating of this piece of brocade. We have seen only Wang Duan, Gu jin tu’an ji (Patterns of Ancient Brocade), p. 3, which says that this brocade dates from the Ming (1368-1644) or Qing period (1644-1911). We have not been able to consult Bai Lichuan’s Zhongguo meishu shi lue (A Brief History of Chinese Art), which dates the correct number of thirty-two is what Cao Xun meant. See ibid., pp. 17-20.

14 Peng Dinggu et al. (comps.), Quan Tang shi (Complete Poems of the Tang Period), vol. 14: p. 5065.

15 See Zhu Nanxian’s groundbreaking work, Zhongguo xiangqi shi congkao (Studies on the History of Chinese Xiangqi), pp. 52-84.

16 Ibid., pp. 54 55.

17 Ibid., p. 55.

18 In the Han dynasty, the deputy general was subordinate to the general in chief, and the assistant general was subordinate to the deputy general.

19 Zhu Nanxian, Zhongguo xiangqi shi congkao, p. 57. Liu Bang gained supremacy over Xiang Yu, his rival who ruled the state of Chu, and established the Han dynasty in 206 BCE. This may be the earliest reference to the four characters Chu he Han jie (Chu River, Han Boundary) written in the river area on later xiangqi boards.

20 Ibid., pp. 59 63.

21 Ibid., pp. 68 8a.

22 Ibid., p. 82.

23 Different texts record either thirty or thirty-two xiangqi pieces, but Zhu Nanxian argues convincingly that the correct number of thirty-two is what Cao Xun meant. See ibid., pp. 17-20.

24 The painting, in color on silk, measures 137.6 by 26.7 centimeters, and is in the collection of Tianjin Art Museum. See Zhongguo meishu guanji bianji weiyuanhui (comp.), Zhongguo meishu guanji (A Complete Collection of Chinese Art), vol. 4: pp. 8 9.
Tomb No. 5692 from Xigong area, Luoyang City), jicheng chubian (A Synthesis of Various Collectanea, Volume One)

In 1964, a similar set of thirty-two copper pieces (with characters on one side and images on the other), possibly dating to the Chongning era (1102-06), was found in Anyi County, Jiangxi Province. Half of the set could be seen faintly to be in red, and half in black. Each piece measured 3.8 centimeters in diameter, and 0.7 centimeter in thickness. See Zhang Ru'an, Zhongguo xiangqi shi congkao (A brief analysis of copper Chinese xiangqi pieces of the Song period), Sichuan wenwu (Cultural Artefacts from Sichuan), 1995, no. 6, pp. 16-17. For an illustration, see Cui Lequan, Zhongguo godai tiyu wenwu tulu (Album on Ancient Sports Art in China), p. 157.

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For a modern study and revised reprint, see Xu Jialiang (ed.), Shiqing yaqu (An Elegant Interest that Suits One's Temperament).

For a modern reprint, see Tang Boyuan (ed.), Ju zhong mi (The Mystery in the Tangerines).

Li Fang et al., Taiping guangji, p. 250.
One of the earliest references to the Greybeards playing *weiqi* is found in a poem by Yu Hu (fl. 766-ca. 814); see Peng et al., *Quan Tang shi*, vol. 10: p. 3500. The earliest recorded painting of the Four Greybeards is by Sun Wei (fl. late ninth century). The Song dynasty painters Li Gonglin and Ma Yuan also painted this topic; see Sun Yuepan et al., *Peiwen zhai shu hua pu* (*Paintings and Calligraphy from Peiwen Study*), printed with Zhang Zhao et al., *Mi dian zhu lin* (*Daoist and Buddhist Art Collection*), vol. 5: pp. 256, 270, 422. For poems of the Yuan and Ming periods on paintings of the Four Greybeards playing *weiqi*, see Chen Bangyan (ed.), *Lidai tihuа shi* (*Poems on Paintings from Various Periods*), pp. 418-20.

See, for example, the poem by Li Dongyang (1447-1516) quoted in Zhang Ru'an, *Zhongguo xiangqi shi*, p. 53.

For a modern revised reprint, see Li Geng and Ma Zhengfu (comps.), *Zi chu dong lai wu dishou* (*Since Emerging from the Cave I Have Not Met a Worthy Opponent*).


The famous *xiangqi* player Xie Xiaxun (1887-1988) noted that in the mid Qianlong era, there were eleven famous players who formed their own schools in nine different areas of China. See Zhang Ru'an, *Zhongguo xiangqi shi*, pp. 330-33.

For a modern rearrangement and study of the manual, see Li Geng, *Xin uu can pian xiangqi pu* (*Xiangqi Manual on Mind Battle Endgames*).

For a modern rearrangement and study of the manual, see Xu Jialiang and Su Delong (comps.), *Bau xiangqi pu xinbian* (*Xiangqi Manual of a Hundred Games, Newly Arranged*).

For a modern reprint and study of the manual, see Qiu Wangyu et al., *Zhuxiang zhai xiangqi pu, chuji* (*Xiangqi Manual from the Bamboo Fragrance Study: Volume One*); Zhu Hezhou et al., *Zhuxiang zhai xiangqi pu, erji* (*Xiangqi Manual from the Bamboo Fragrance Study: Volume Two*); and idem, *Zhuxiang zhai xiangqi pu, sanji* (*Xiangqi Manual from the Bamboo Fragrance Study: Volume Three*).

For a modern rearrangement and study of the manual, see Liu Guobin and Zhu Baowei (eds.), *Yuanshen haikuo* (*Deep as the Ravine, Wide as the Sea*).

This is from the famous fine "Snow surrounds Lantian Pass, and my horse cannot proceed," by the poet Han Yu (768-863). In the game, it appears that the horses on both sides do not succeed in a checkmate. See Zhishui, *Han Yu shi xuan* (*Selections of Poems by Han Yu*), pp. 194-95.

See Li Geng, *Xin uu can pian xiangqi pu*, pp. 44, 151, 187; and Xu and Su, *Baiju xiangqi pu xinbian*, p. 68.

The two horses move to the third and seventh files and form two wings of a defense.

Yang Guanlin et al. (comps.), *Zhongguo xiangqi pu* (*Manuals on Chinese Xiangqi*), pp. 2-6. A detailed introduction to developments in the whole of the twentieth century remains to be written.


As a counterweight to the above, we may note that both types of games were included in popular late Ming encyclopedias and Qing period reprints, although the content was simple and intended for popular consumption. See Wu Hufang, *Wanbao quanshu: Ming Qing shiqi de minjian shenghuo shilu* (*A Myriad Treasures: A Truthful Record of Ordinary Peoples’ Lives in the Ming and Qing Periods*), pp. 558-70.


See Zhang Ru’an, *Zhongguo xiangqi shi*, pp. 114-17, 183-84.

Ibid., pp. 127-29.

The volume is not extant. See Li Songfu, *Xiangqi shi hua*, pp. 180-81.

These figures are taken from ibid., pp. 109-29, 153-81; and Zhao Zhiyun and Xu Wanyun (comps.), *Weiqi cidian* (*A Dictionary of Weiqi*), pp. 254-68. See also Tu Jingming, *Zhongguo xiangqi cidian* (*A Dictionary of Chinese Xiangqi*), pp. 207-12.

It is rare to come across a painting of scholars playing *xiangqi*. An exception is a Yuan-period mural painting from Guangsheng Temple, Hongdong County, Shanxi Province, depicting two scholars playing the game. See Cui, *Zhongguo gudai tiyu wenwu tutu*, p. 158.