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# The Chinese Chess Pieces in Song Era and Their Characteristics

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## I. Introduction

When discussing the history of Japanese chess, one of the most important points is where Japanese chess has spread from. Considering the fact that many ancient Japanese things were brought to the Japanese islands from the Chinese mainland and the Korean Peninsula, many people suppose that Japanese chess has spread from the same origins. However, Japanese chess is similar to Thai chess Makruk. And there is an opinion that its roots are in Southeast Asia (B 1). Therefore, it is necessary to examine fully the two theories further.

When we consider the fact that new historical records on the origin of Japanese chess not have been found, archaeological data concentrating on excavated goods are important. The following data are today's oldest archaeological data from Japan. There are the 15 Japanese chess pieces which were excavated in the precincts of a Kofukuji-Temple in Nara Prefecture, and the 2 wooden writing tablets used for calligraphy which are concerned with Japanese chess (B 2). It is supposed that these pieces were made in the second half of the 11th century, because of the age of pottery and the characters of "Tenki 6th year (1058)" written on the wooden tablets.

On the other hand, the oldest archaeological data in China concern the Chinese chess pieces produced between the end of Northern Song Era and early Southern Song Era. There are 2 types. One is made of bronze and the other is made of ceramic. The excavated Chinese chess pieces are similar in form to the present Chinese chess pieces. The same is right for the excavated Japanese chess pieces too. However, a different point of view has to be mentioned for Japanese chess. There are no data in historical records concerning Japanese chess and excavations before the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. For this reason we can say, that Japanese chess has not spread to Japan prior to the first half of the 10th century. On the other hand, according to historical records on Chinese chess, there is the "Xuan quai lu" by Niu Sengru who was prime minister and wrote in the first half of the 9th century (Tang dynasty). There are some descriptions in the tale of Cen Shun recorded in "Xuan quai lu" which seem to give hints on an early form of Chinese chess.

The facts from Japanese excavation data precede the Chinese ones for more than about 50 years. However, if investigation of the ruins in low swampy land will make progress in China, the number of wooden chess pieces excavated will increase. And we will get "older" data. In Japan, prior to the excavations of the ruins of Ichijoudani Asakura in 1973, no one had paid attention to the excavation of Japanese chess pieces. Mainly, we want to introduce the bronze Chinese chess pieces of the Song Era which have been considered as the oldest pieces, and we shall introduce the ceramic ones, too. Bronze Chinese chess pieces are intensively confirmed in the Song Era. It seems that metal Chinese chess pieces were popular in this time. But it seems that another reason existed besides the practicability as a piece. After introducing the Chinese chess pieces, we intent to show the hypothesis that the pieces had a character different from practicability.

## II. The data and the features of the Chinese chess pieces

### 1. Introduction of data

In this section, we will introduce the bronze, ceramic, and wooden pieces which were considered to be made in Song Era for every owner or excavation ground.

① Pieces in the possession of the Kurokawa Ancient Culture Institute (fig. 1)

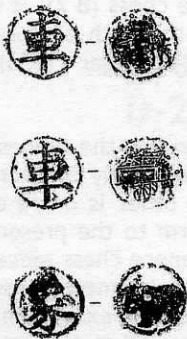


fig. 1 Kurokawa pieces  
(黒川駒)

Excavation ground: Unknown

Number of pieces: 31 [General,2] [Officer,4] [Elephant,4] [Horse,4] [Catapult,4]  
 [Soldier,9] Use of the front and reverse: Character / icon  
 How carved: Relief carving

There are some pieces with holes. It is considered that they have been made artificially.

© Pieces in the possession of the China Gymnastics Museum (fig. 2)

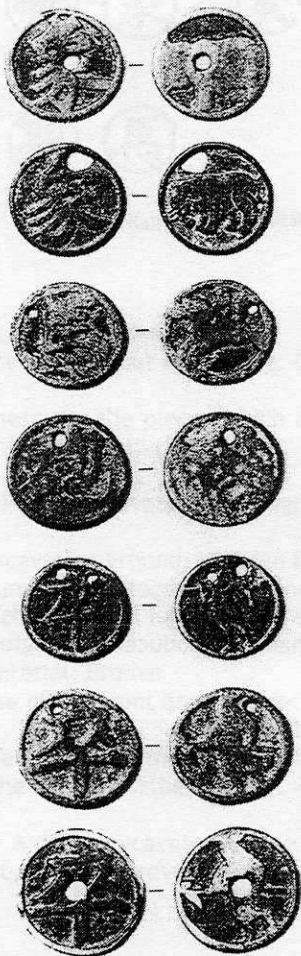


fig. 2 gymnastic museum pieces

Excavation ground: Unknown

Number of pieces: 50 pieces or more

Material: Bronze

Use of the front and reverse: Character / icon , character /character

We observed 41 pieces. There are 10 pieces with holes.

③ Pieces in the possession of the Protection Management Office in Xinyang city Henan

Excavation ground: Guangru, Xinyang city

Number of pieces: 32 (1 set)

Material: Bronze

Use of the front and reverse: Character / icon

How carved: Relief carving

There is no piece with a hole.

④ Hui Song writing piece (fig. 3) (B 3)

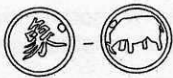


fig. 3 Hui Song real writing  
piece (徽宋親筆駒)

Use of the front and reverse: Character / icon

How carved: Relief carving

The piece has a hole. A character was written by the Emperor Hui Song. This is a bronze Chinese chess piece with the character "elephant", introduced Li Songfu's book "History of Chinese Chess" (1981).

⑤ Pieces excavated in Kaifeng city, Henan province (fig. 4) (B 3)



fig. 4 Kaifeng pieces (開封駒)

Material: Bronze

Use of the front and reverse: Character / icon

These are the pieces which are shown as rubbings in Li Songfu's book "History of Chinese Chess" (1981).

⑥ Pieces excavated in Changbu, village Anyi, prefecture Janxi province (B 4)

Excavation ground: Wooden box

Number of pieces: 28 [General,2] [Officer,4] [Wagon,4] [Horse,4] [Catapult,4] [Soldier,10]

Material: Bronze

Use of the front and reverse: character / icon

We wonder if these pieces have been made in the first half of the 12th century (the end of Northern Song).

⑦ A piece excavated at the underground chamber of Tianfeng pagoda in Ningbo city Zhejiang province (fig. 5) (B 5)





fig. 5 Tianfeng pagoda  
piece (天封塔駒)

Excavation ground : The underground chamber of Tianfeng pagoda (erected from 1144 to 1145)

Number of pieces: 1 [Officer]

Material: Bronze

Use of the inside and outside: Character / icon

⑧ Pieces excavated in Jangyou prefecture, Sichuan province (fig. 6) (B 6)



fig. 6 Jangyou pieces (江油駒)

Excavation ground : Kouzou hoards (Chinese: *Jiaocang* hoards)

Number of pieces: 54 (2 sets)

Use of the front and reverse: One set  $\Rightarrow$  character / icon  
The other set  $\Rightarrow$  character / character

⑨ Pieces excavated in Xunyang prefecture Shaanxi province (fig. 7) (B7)

Excavation ground: Kouzou hoards

Number of pieces: 32 (1 set)

Use of the front and reverse: character / character



fig. 7 Xunyang pieces (旬陽駒)

⑩ Yaozhou kiln site in Tongchuan city, Shaanxi province (fig. 8) (B 8)



fig. 8 Yaozhou pieces (耀州駒)

Excavation ground: kiln site

Number of pieces : 2

One piece ⇒ relief carving, "Wagon", character / nothing

The other piece ⇒ engraving, "Catapult", character / character

⑪ A piece excavated in the ancient castle and tomb group in Suibin, Aolimi, Heilongjiang province (fig.9) (B 9)



fig. 9 Aolimi piece  
(奧里米駒)

Excavation ground: Gleaning (area with the ancient tomb group in Jin Era)  
Number of pieces : 1, "General"  
character / dragon pattern (probably, person image)

⑫ Pieces excavated in Luoyang city, Henan province (B 10)

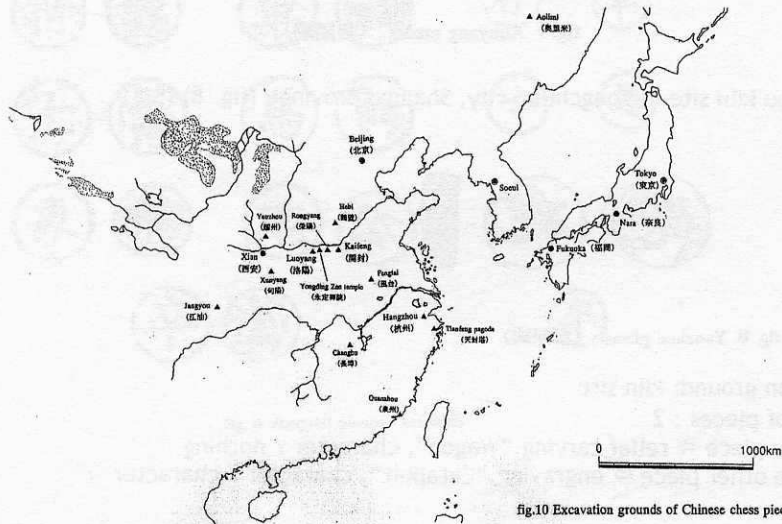


fig.10 Excavation grounds of Chinese chess pieces

Excavation ground: Small cave tomb in Northern Song  
Number of pieces : 32  
Material : Ceramics  
Use of the front and reverse: Character / nothing

⑬ Pieces excavated in Wuguishan government kiln in Hangzhou city, Zhejiang province (B 11)

Excavation ground: Studio site of government kiln during Southern Song  
 Number of pieces : 1, (an incomplete ceramic piece) [Soldier] 1, (a ceramic mold of a piece) [Horse]

⑭ Pieces excavated in kiln in Hebi, Henan province (B 12)

Excavation ground : Kiln

Number of pieces : 3 [Elephant][Horse][Soldier]

Material : Ceramics

Use of the front and reverse: character / character

How carved : Engraving

⑮ Pieces excavated at te Yongding Zen temple site in Henan province (B 13)

Excavation ground: Zen temple site

Number of pieces : 5 [Wagon,1][Catapult,1][Soldier,3]

⑯ Pieces excavated in Fengtai ranging castles in Anhui province (B 14)

Excavation-ground : Ruined castles

Number of pieces : 14 [General,1]

Material : Ceramics

⑰ Pieces excavated in a sea-going vessel in Song Era, Quanzhou city, Fujian province (B 15)

Excavation ground: A sunken vessel, the end of Southern Song (the end of the 13th century)

Number of pieces : 20

Material : Wood

Use of the front and reverse : character / nothing

## 2. Analysis of an attribute

As mentioned above, we introduced many examples of Chinese chess pieces from the Song Era. Next, we shall arrange these pieces on the basis of material, form and excavation situations.

### A. Quality of the material

There are three types. Namely, they are the bronze, ceramic or wooden pieces. Wooden pieces were only excavated from the sunken vessel in Quanzhou bay.

### B. Form of a character

There are three types. Namely, they are relief carving, engraving or writing types. They are suitable for the materials used. Most of bronze pieces are relief carving type, and most of ceramic ones are engraving type. Wooden pieces are of the engraving type or writing in Chinese ink type.

#### C. Use of the front and reverse

There are three types. First, a character written on one side and an icon design which again expresses the character on the other side. Second, characters written on both sides. Third, a character written on one side only. Most of the bronze pieces are of the first type which has a character and an icon. The ceramic pieces are of the second type or the third type. That is, characters showing the piece's value written on one side or on both sides. Concerning the wooden pieces, only the third type with one written character has been found. Concerning the ceramic and wooden pieces: No pieces with icons have been found. Moreover, pieces with design icons on both sides have not yet been found.

#### D. Existence of a hole

There are 2 types. One has a hole, and the other doesn't. All the pieces with holes are made of bronze. Concerning ceramic and wooden pieces: The example with a hole has not yet been confirmed. We could judge that the holes have been made artificially.

#### E. Excavation from ruins

There are some examples. They are tombs, Kouzou hoards (the Chinese pronunciation is *Jiaocang* hoards), production ruins, and others. Only the example of Luoyang is the example of tomb. Concerning bronze pieces, there is an example excavated from a Kouzou (*Jiaocang*) hoard. Kouzou (*Jiaocang*) hoard is a term of Chinese archaeology (B 16). It means "hoard which is in an artificial hole". Many of Kouzou hoards are buried in the ground with coins in large pots. The characters are varied. We consider that they were collections, war funds, or goods for a memorial service. There is a tendency that Kouzou hoards increase in the time of war. For this reason, it is assumed that there is a relationship between Kouzou hoards and the increase of social unrest by war. As manufacture ruins, there are some examples which ceramic pieces have been excavated from kiln sites. And as other examples of excavation ground are concerned, there are temple ruins and a sunken vessel. It is considered that the pieces excavated from the underground chamber of Tianfeng pagoda have been buried with goods for a memorial service. This agrees with a part of the characteristics of Kouzou hoards. An example of an excavation from a sunken vessel is also seen in South Korea. These are the data which call attention to the fact that chess was a special pastime for mariners.

### III. About the bronze pieces

#### 1. The feature of the bronze pieces

There are some important features in the bronze pieces. Many of the bronze pieces have relief carvings that show a character on one side and an icon which again expresses the character on the other side. This form is thought to be a middle form while changing from the statue type piece to the character type piece. However, ceramic pieces with characters exist during the same time. Therefore, we can not simply decide it to be "middle". In the bronze pieces, excavated from Kouzou hoards are those from Xunyang's and those from Jangyou. In Jangyou pieces, there are some pieces which have a hole around the margin. And then, there are the same examples with the piece with in Hui Songs writing, Kurokawa pieces, and the gymnastic museum pieces.

#### 2. The meaning of a hole

What kind of meaning does have such a hole? If a hole is in the upper part of a piece, it is considered that it was hung turning to the upper part upwards. Moreover, the only piece with a hole was excavated from the Kouzou hoards. It is important and necessary to excavate additional Chinese chess pieces from a Kouzou hoard in future.

The Kouzou hoards were used for hiding treasures for a while because of social unrest and expansion of war in those days. Although the Chinese chess pieces are similar to coins, they do not have a value like a real treasure. Finally, why had been the Chinese chess pieces buried with other treasures?

#### 3. The bronze pieces and the "Xuan quai lu"

Now, we want to introduce an interesting record. It is the tale of Cen Shun which already has been mentioned at the beginning of this paper. It can be found in the "Xuan quai lu" which has been written by Niu Sengru (779-847) a politician in the first half of the 9th century (Tang dynasty). The "Xuan quai lu" itself is lost. But, the one part was recorded in "Taiping guang ji" (B 17) which has been edited in the time Taiping Xingguo 2nd year (972) to 8th year (978). The contents of this tale shall be introduced in a condensed form.

Cen Shun from Runan wanted to live in a vacant house. However, for certain reasons, everyone opposed. But Cen Shun didn't want to listen, and he lived there for about one year. Then, the sound of war became audible at midnight. A general's messenger appeared in Cen Shun's dream, and he participated in a war. Cen Shun distinguished himself and he was promoted. However, in the actual world, he became thinner day by day. His family became suspicious, and they dug up the floor. Then, there was an old grave. In the grave, there was a golden

Chinese chess board and many grave goods. And on the board, gilt Chinese chess pieces were placed as in the war in which Cen Shun had experienced. The Chinese chess pieces which had been buried in the old grave were the cause of Cen Shun's strange experience. When the pieces and the board were burned and the grave was filled up, the strange phenomenon ceased. Cen Shun's health also returned. This had been described as having happened in the Baoying first year (762, Tang Era).

Of course, this tale is a fiction. But there are some interesting aspects:

- ① Metal Chinese chess pieces.
- ② Supernatural powers in the Chinese chess pieces.
- ③ The Chinese chess pieces buried in the grave.
- ④ The Chinese chess pieces inflict an injury on a person who invades the grave.

We now shall discuss these four points. Concerning the metal Chinese chess pieces ① it has to be said from the preceding excavation data, that pieces of the time of this tale (Tang) have not been discovered. However, they look like bronze chess pieces of the Northern Song Era. Therefore we should re-examine the matter after having criticized "Xuan quai lu". ② suggests the magic usage of Chinese chess pieces. It has been thought that the Chinese chess pieces after the end of the Tang Era were used as a phantom army. Concerning the points ③ and ④: Because we do not have further examples of findings from graves, this consideration seems difficult to prove. At present, we have only one example of a ceramic chess piece from a Northern Song grave in Luoyang. Yet, it is an important problem whether this piece is for amusement in Hades or for protecting treasures from evil.

In the tale of Cen Shun there seems to be open hostility only in his dream. But in fact, Chinese chess pieces inflict an injury on a person who lives in the house built after destroying the grave. At this point, we prefer to accept that the Chinese chess pieces were used for protecting treasures from evil. Is this the reason why the pieces were buried in Kouzou hoards?

## IV. Conclusions

Thus, we suppose that the Chinese chess pieces in Song Era would not be used only as a gaming implement but also for magic like protection from evil. Ceramic and wooden pieces don't have icons and holes. And there are no examples that they have been buried in Kouzou hoards. Therefore, we think that ceramic and wooden pieces are more intended for real use than bronze ones.

Moreover, the form which has a character on one side and an icon on the other side has been considered the middle form while changing from the statue type

piece to the character type piece. However, it is necessary to re-examine and to consider the magic usage from now on. This use and its character will be inherited by Qiqian (a kind of a magical coin) (fig. 11) (B 18).

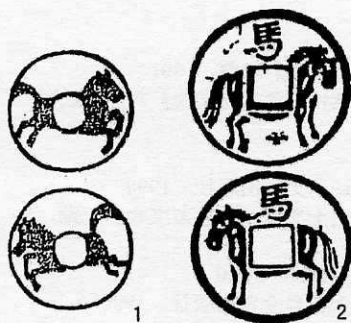


fig.11 Qiqian (棋錢)

The possibility of the magic usage of Chinese chess pieces is the main theme of this thesis. Whether it is correct or not shall be confirmed by investigating future excavations in detail with an increasing number of similar examples.



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## Note

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