

## **Selected News on Old Xiangqi**

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### **Abstract**

Several Chinese findings of chess historical interest are reviewed and discussed. The discussion deals with the development of xiangqi, but more generally with the initial stages of all forms of chess. Xiangqi quotations in the ancient Chinese literature are shortly commented on, and then attention is especially focused on recent archaeological findings.

### **Riassunto**

Sono passati in rassegna e discussi alcuni ritrovamenti cinesi d'interesse scacchistico. La discussione riguarda lo sviluppo dello xiangqi, ma anche gli stadi iniziali degli scacchi più in generale. Sono brevemente commentati i principali riferimenti dalla letteratura cinese classica, e nel seguito l'attenzione è rivolta specialmente ai recenti reperti archeologici.

### **Introduction**

This article is intended as a review of some early information on xiangqi. A particular interest of this topic derives from the possibility that it includes not just a discussion on a specific chess variation, but also on the initial steps of all chess variations.

One of the authors has already published an article in this journal on the particular elements of xiangqi, more than twenty years ago. (1) The other author has made long studies on the history of weiqi (or go, as it is better known abroad, from the Japanese). It has been precisely in the field of weiqi that both authors have attained mutual acquaintance, esteem, and collaboration. This article is the result of a common decision to dedicate some attention to the early stages of xiangqi. It is to be noted

that all direct selecting and first reading of the corresponding documents, published in the Chinese language, has been possible thanks to Ding, because Pratesi is not able to read this language.

As a first decision, limits have been fixed in terms of time investigated and main sources used. The time limit set to this review is the beginning of the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279). Xiangqi was by then well established and practically the same game as its present form. Here the main attention has been dedicated to the previous stages of the game. Obviously, the later history of xiangqi has a great interest too, and also is increasingly better documented the more recent times are approached. However, the history of xiangqi in its initial times can be more easily connected with the history of chess in general, valid for the whole world.

Another initial decision has been to use as a main source the book on the history of xiangqi written by Zhang Ruan, originally published in 1991. The relevance of this history had soon received due attention by one of the authors of this article. (2) Zhang Ruan is now a professor of old Chinese literature in Ningbo University, but has continued his studies on Chinese board games. In particular, his main work indicated above has been published again in 1998, (3) with a few corrections, and this second edition has been used for this review. Moreover, a book dedicated to xiangqi literary references (4) has been consulted, and a general reference work has been used when dealing with historical Chinese personages. (5)

As for the numerous Western sources, Murray's book (6) is universally acknowledged as the fundamental reference work for all chess history; unfortunately, its section for Far East Asia is the weakest one in the whole book. Remarkable reviews of the old Chinese references to board games had been previously published by Himly in several articles, which recently have been collected and republished in book form. (7)

A synthetic description with reasonable comments can be found in a more recent book, written by an author who is a historian by profession, at the University level. (8) A few pages by David Parlett in his major work on board games are at a similar level of a reasonable synthesis of the questions connected with the origins of chess. (9)

Many other authors have published contributions to the discussion on the origin of xiangqi, and especially on the origin of chess in more general terms. One of the most interesting is that of Josten. (10) Other

useful contributions and discussions have been recently emerged thanks to the “Initiative Group Königstein”. (11) However, no universally accepted reconstruction does yet exist. There are various kinds suggested, which are indicated as particular “theories” in the following. The word theory will not be written in inverted commas later on; however, its meaning here is that of a work hypothesis instead of a real theory, verified and accepted.

## **Two key suggestions for the origin of xiangqi**

There are many theories about the origin and the early development of chess, and of xiangqi in particular. Many chess writers in the Western world have debated the topic, with a lot of different opinions. However, only very few of these authors were renowned experts of ancient Chinese history and literature!

Unfortunately, no local tradition has been kept in China about the early stages of our game. The first quotations in the Chinese literature of a game that can surely be identified as a form of xiangqi only come from the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD. Earlier documents may refer to other games; in particular, due to the use of a different character for indicating this kind of board games, typically xi instead of qi, or simply with just qi – used without any further specification – for indicating any board game.

Most of the early quotations for qi games are vague and the board game of liubo is first mentioned. Then we find weiqi as the game intended, even when it was not explicitly mentioned in full. For centuries weiqi remained the preferred game of the literati, also after that xiangqi had encountered the favor of common people. This may explain why there are several theories on the origin of various chess forms in China. Let us focus our attention on just a couple of these hypotheses, both suggesting that the very first form of chess was introduced in China and did not arrive there from India, as often assumed by Western experts.

As for the particular event of chess birth, Joseph Needham (12) maintained that it was to be positioned exactly in the year 569 AD, with the introduction by Emperor Wu-Ti of a new kind of divination, in which the various pieces (the same that were to become chessmen later on, but which originally represented planets) were placed onto the board that just represented our Earth. Curiously enough, the date of this event is either too early or too late to agree with other references. On the one

hand, the document is centuries earlier than any other Chinese reference to xiangqi; on the other hand, it appears to be too late for allowing chess to transform into a game with its known military character and to spread toward the West in time to agree with the early Indian and Persian quotations.

What is certain is that xiangqi (or a very similar Chinese game set) was indeed intended in the past both as a tool for divination and a tool for a pastime consisting in the simulation of a battle. The year 569 can thus be seen in two different ways. If we consider this date as relatively late for a chess quotation in China, we have to conclude that it marked a successive new utilization of already existing chessmen. This would however proceed in an unusual direction: historically, it was the inverse trend that occurred; namely, starting from a traditional method of divination, in the course of time a common game was slowly obtained. For instance, detailed evidence for this general process was collected and discussed by Culin, in a long research that started with tribes of American natives and was extended to many populations of other places and times. (13)

The second key theory has been advocated in great detail by David Li in his bulky book. (14) In this case, the origin suggested for xiangqi (which is here intended as that for any form of chess) is much earlier, many centuries before any explicit quotation in the old Chinese literature. In this case, however, the environment of the origin appears to be more appropriate to the known spirit of the game: it was General Han Xin, in the year 204 BC, to invent chess, in order to keep his troops occupied and trained during the winter, when real battles were not possible. (By the way, a rather similar theory of battles early simulated on a board – related to the first Han Emperor and the year 202 BC – had been independently proposed on the basis of another quotation in Needham's fundamental work.) (15)

### **Summary of other theories**

There are further possibilities. The question of the origin of chess has been discussed several times by Chinese literati, in various times. No generally accepted conclusion was found, and several different theories have been supported by various experts; in particular, Zhang Ruan listed seven different theories of xiangqi birth in his book, including the

two theories already mentioned, which happen to correspond to the two most recent dates. They can be summarized as follows.

1 - The inventor was Huangdi (Yellow Emperor), a legendary ruler ancestor of the Chinese nation, who approximately lived from 2800 to 2600 BC. One legend reports that he lived for 133 years. According to Chao Bozhi (1053-1110): “Xiang Xi was a game of war. When Huangqi was fighting against Chiyou (a rebellion legendary figure of remote antiquity), he lined up wild beasts in the front. Xiang (elephant) was the strongest animal; therefore, he used Xiang Xi to name this game of war.”

2 - The inventor was Shennong Shi, or Shennong, a legendary figure of remote antiquity, and later Niu Sengru (780-848) made a modification. Shennong also invented agriculture, commerce, music, and medicine. One legend says that he lived before Huangdi, another legend says that he lived at the same time with Huangdi. According to a monk named Nian-Chang of the Yuan Dynasty: “Shennong used the sun, the moon and the stars for images (Xiang), and Niu Sengru replaced them with Ju (chariot), Ma (horse), Shi (adjutant), and Zu (foot soldier), then added Pao (cannon) for a game.”

3 - The inventor was Shun, a legendary ruler of remote antiquity in Chinese history. Shun lived after Yao (the legendary ruler who invented weiqi), approximately 2200 BC. According to contemporary scholar Chang Renxia (1904-1996) in his book *Zhong Yin Yishu Yinyuan (The relationship of Chinese and Indian arts)*: “Shun had a brother named Xiang (the same character!) who was obstinate and unruly. Shun confined him but worried that he was too lonely, so invented a board game for his amusement. Shun named the game after Xiang, therefore the game was called Xiang Qi. (i.e. the game of Xiang)”

4 - The inventor was King Wu of Zhou Dynasty (?-1048 BC?). According to Xie Zhaozhe (1567-1624) of the Ming Dynasty: “It’s said that Xiangxi was invented by King Wu while leading his expedition army to fight against that of King Zhou, of the Shang Dynasty. If not, then Xiangxi must have been invented by a military strategist in the Warring States, because warfare was much more relied on chariots fight at the time.”

5 – This is just an independent formulation of the latter part of the precedent theory: the inventor was a military strategist in the Warring States (475-221). According Gao Cheng of the Song Dynasty: “Because at the Warring States time states fought wars for supremacy, people

(military strategists) used the images (Xiang) of warfare to make a board game (Qi).”

6 - The inventor was Han Xin. According to Liang Tongshu (1723-1815) of the Qing Dynasty: “It was also said that xiangqi was started from Han Xin.” Li accepts the theory of Han Xin in his book, mentioning however another source, dated 1793 AD, probably a few years earlier than Liang’s.

7 - The inventor was Emperor Wu-Ti of the Northern Zhou Dynasty. There are several sources mentioning this event. *Tai Ping Yu Lan* (a series of books reaching 1000 volumes, compiled in the years 977-983, as ordered by Emperor Tai-Zong of the Northern Song Dynasty) was probably the earliest source. Later, Luo Qi and Zhu Yingqiu of the Ming Dynasty were the other sources. They wrote almost the same sentence, “Emperor Wu-Ti of the Northern Zhou Dynasty made Xiangxi (Xiangqi)”.

It is apparent from this list that the date suggested for the invention of xiangqi by various Chinese scholars is in any case remarkably older than the oldest certain references to our game. Obviously, other possible theories can be found and moreover the task should be extended to include traditional knowledge from other ancient countries regarding different chess forms. However, it is evident that the task of comparing the Chinese theories with those coming from India, Persia, and other ancient civilizations is not yet familiar among Chinese historians, who in practice take only their own sources into account. When Chinese David Li wanted to analyze these different theories in his book, he did something very unusual in basically describing debates occurred among Western experts.

On the other hand, the opinion expressed by Zhang at the beginning of his book is as follows. In China, the initial functions invented for the early board games were for practicing divination or predicting a destiny, or serving as an effective tool to spread astronomy, or symbolizing military combats. Anyway, it never was a game purely for amusement, and it was closely related to *Zhou Yi* (another name for *Yi Jing*, best known to Western world as *The Book of Change* or *I-Ching*). The original board game gradually lost its initial function and, in a process of development, was transformed into a tool for amusement. It is only starting with the Tang Dynasty (618-907) that the early stage of xiangqi can be examined from reliable documentation. It is still under discussion

whether Xiang-Xi of the Northern Zhou Dynasty was an earlier form of xiangqi. Xiangqi with such playing pieces as chariot and horse, and so on, possibly a symbol for military war at its beginning, was a game abstracted from military combats. It can be affirmed that xiangqi was born and grown in China, as a product from the ancient Chinese environment with continuous innovations, and was not something imported from other countries.

### Summary of references in the Chinese literature

Let us review the references to xiangqi in the old Chinese literature, focusing our attention on the most significant ones.

At a given time in the later part of the Warring States Period (457-221), the Chinese word of two characters Xiang-Qi first appeared in a literary work named *Chu Ci (The Songs of Chu)*, a collection of poems mainly by Qu Yuan (340-278), chapter of *Zhao Hun (Calling back the spirit from the dead)*; the author was either Qu Yuan himself or his student Song Yu. The Chinese character Xiang that we discuss here has two major meanings, “elephant” and “image”, and Qi here means game playing piece for liubo, the oldest Chinese board game, in which remarkable elements of chance are present. The meaning of this Xiang-Qi combination in the poem actually was “game playing pieces made of ivory”. Therefore this Xiang-Qi had nothing to do with xiangqi as Chinese chess, but we have to deal with this reference because the same words were used in writing.

In 569 AD, Emperor Wu-Ti of the Northern Zhou Dynasty (543-578, reign 561-578) invented a “game” that he called Xiang Xi. He wrote a text *Xiang Jing (Manual of Xiang Xi)* to describe it, and also gathered all ministers of his court and explained the game to them. Later on, he ordered Minister Wang Bao to add notes to his *Xiang Jing* to further explain the game, and Wang himself added a preface. After reading *Xiang Jing*, minister Yu Xin wrote a poetic prose, *Xiang Xi Fu*, and another article to praise Emperor Wu-Ti. Both Wang Bao and Yu Xin are famous writers in Chinese history, and their articles have survived, but Emperor Wu-Ti’s *Xiang Jing* with Wang’s commentary has been lost after the Tang Dynasty.

Many scholars, generation after generation, have tried to understand and reconstruct the game of Xiang Xi from the articles written by Wang

and Yu mentioned above, but they did not propose a fully convincing interpretation. Some scholars believe that modern xiangqi is somewhat related to the Xiang Xi invented by Emperor Wu-Ti, and some believe they are totally different games, except for their names. It may thus be useful to introduce a distinction for the word xiang-xi: when it was used in connection with the game of Emperor Wu-Ti, probably it only indicated a similarity in game pieces, but other quotations with the same name could directly refer to “our” xiangqi.

With another jump, we arrive at 762 AD, the first year of Bao Ying era, named by Emperor Dai-Zong (727-779, reign 762-779) of the Tang Dynasty. According to the tale *Cen Shun* written by Niu Seng-Ru (780-848), Cen Shun saw the game of Xiang Xi in this year. Later generations called the xiangqi in the Tang Dynasty as “Bao Ying Xiang Xi”. *Cen Shun* is a tale included in Niu’s work *An Anthology of Mysterious and Strange Tales*. It is one of the most important documents that has been usually taken into account in the studies of the origin and initial stages of xiangqi.

This tale is so important because it describes what xiangqi looked like in the Tang Dynasty. The playing board was square; each side had at least four different playing pieces representing fighting forces: general, horseman, chariot, and foot soldier. They were made of gold or copper, real standing-up figurines, a few inches tall, which were lined up on opposite sides before the beginning of a game. Their moves were: general moved one step into all four directions, horseman moved three steps forward and one step aside, chariot moved any steps in straight line, and foot soldier moved one step forward at a time. The similarity with our “usual” kind of moves is evident. There is also a hint on the usual succession of the opening moves: when the game started, horsemen moved first, then foot soldiers, and then chariots.

“Bao Ying Xiang Xi” is also called as “8x8 xiangqi” by Chinese experts, because they believe that the xiangqi playing board in the Tang Dynasty was 8x8, namely with 64 squares. The foundation of this opinion is a figure on silk brocade from the Northern Song Dynasty. Its interpretation is however not so sure, because the 8x8 chequered board (similar to an international chessboard of nowadays) should indeed represent weiqi, one the four performing arts. There are some doubts that the chessboard pictured could truly represent a xiangqi board of the time, but it is certain that it could not truly represent a weiqi board!



Playing chess on a chequered chessboard, and directly using the 64 squares instead of their intersections, is in any case a remarkable event. Unfortunately, its correct interpretation is again uncertain: on the one hand this can easily be associated with the 64 hexagrams forming the basis of *I-Ching* of very ancient traditional Chinese utilization – and indeed traces of this association have been kept! – but on the other hand it may directly derive from the ashtapada board, associated with the Indian form of chess that many historians consider as the oldest one in the whole world.

Into the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127), we assist to a significant flourishing of the game. In particular, it acquired a large following at the Emperor's court and several different forms of xiangqi were invented. The new playing piece Cannon was added in all forms of xiangqi. Sima Guang (1019-1086) invented a Heptagonal xiangqi, which was played on a 19x19 weiqi board. Da Xiang Xi (big xiangqi) was played on an 11x11 board, with 32 playing pieces. Chao Buzhi (1053-1110) invented Guang Xiang Xi (extended xiangqi), which was played on a 19x19 weiqi board, with 49 pieces for either side. Yin Zhu (1001-1047) wrote the book *Xiang Xi Ge* (also named *Xiang Qi* or *Xiang Qi Jing* from other sources), provided with five different illustrations of the game; unfortunately, this book has not been kept. According to Chao Gongwu, who wrote about 100 years later, during the Southern Song Dynasty, these games were not the same as the forms of his period.

By the end of the Northern Song Dynasty, xiangqi was well established, using the same playing board and pieces as in modern xiangqi.

## Discussion of xiangqi references

After examining the Chinese literature, we are left with the problem of different theories suggested for explaining how xiangqi assumed its final form. It is certain that many different variants were played, especially in the 8<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries; sometimes one variant substituted another, sometimes various rather similar kinds of games were played at the same time. One possible interpretation is that this occurred because chess had only recently first arrived in China from abroad and especially the 8x8 version (with chessmen placed within the squares) could represent its oldest variant there – an interpretation far from familiar

among Chinese historians! One of the advantages of using this chessboard was that it was possible to link its 64 squares directly with all the hexagrams of the ancient *I-Ching* method of divination (but again, considering that this traditional use could be very old, one may suppose that the “game” was born in China). Unfortunately, evidence from reliable documents on the ancient interchanges of this kind between the major civilizations of Asia is missing.

The other, alternative, interpretation is that xiangqi slowly developed from ancient to modern times on the basis of its disk-shaped pieces, placed on intersections of the board: in this longer history, the indicated period of the 8<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries would only correspond to a period of greater diffusion and experiments, with new variants, often with a short life, frequently appearing at the court and elsewhere – with the 8x8 variant being just a new experiment among many others.

### **Further comments on xiangqi references**

Further comments on the weight of all literary quotations may be useful. Many experts have studied the origin and the first spread of chess, as their only sector of research. If one tries and extends this kind of investigation to other games, what seemed a typical situation for chess becomes a typical situation for most of the games that have been played in the past in the various civilizations! Many games could have been played for centuries before we find a document of their use. Only for very few games, which can thus be considered as the exception and not at all as the rule, we got reliable knowledge of their first introduction and spread.

The problem in this case is thus to be examined in the two specific contexts of chess history and of Chinese literature. As for chess history, we can refer to a study jointly published by the two most renowned chess historians now active in Italy: (16) their conclusion was that a reliable suggestion for chess origin could be located in any time between 400 BC and 400 AD.

Now, if one admits that the birth of chess could be so early and far from the first literary references, China becomes one of the best candidates for any theory (also because there is no local tradition of having borrowed chess from elsewhere). The real problem is thus reduced to an evaluation of the likelihood of xiangqi having existed for centuries

without leaving significant traces within the ancient Chinese literature. If the origin of chess was attributed to some population of Central Asia (as a few experts believe), this problem had no reason to exist, because the written works of these peoples only have a recent origin. Chinese literature, on the contrary, is among the earliest and the richest of the whole ancient world.

A simple answer for the oldest times considered is that games could not be quoted, just because they did not yet exist. It was the very idea of a game played as a pastime that was still missing. It seems that the ancient Chinese literature confirms the opinions of Culin and colleagues: games did not exist originally, but were subsequent modifications of already existing methods used to getting in touch with gods, or simply to read future events. Many further centuries were required before a game could be played as a simple pastime, between two players who could dedicate a prolonged attention to such a futile engagement. First to appear were thus some games of chance, such as liubo in China.

The main question is thus how frequently could a game be described, or even simply mentioned, among the many old works of the ancient Chinese literature. When the Chinese literati mentioned proposed the seven theories listed above, they did not give weight to the lack of historical documents for early times. Whole books explicitly dealing with games were not frequent at all; the first one (or one of the first ones) was a *Da Bo Jing (Encyclopedia of Games)*, in two volumes, written by Lu Cai (600-665), which unfortunately has not been preserved. Apart from xiangqi, literary quotations of other games, such as liubo, weiqi, “Bo Luo Sai Xi” (backgammon), and later on card games are not frequent too.

The most important board game based on skill in China was weiqi, the game of the courts and the literati. When xiangqi arrived to enjoy an even greater success, this occurred among ordinary people, so that weiqi kept its greater amount of quotations among the literary references. It seems that some xiangqi enthusiasts tried to assign to their game part of the role that was previously typical of weiqi. In particular, in some cases, xiangqi was directly considered in the place of weiqi as one of the four arts that any educated person had to master. (A typical example of this attitude may be the appearance of an 8x8 chequered chessboard among the corresponding four symbols.)

## **Necessity of new archaeological findings**

From what has been discussed above, it is easy to deduce that an exhaustive solution, if any, of all the questions connected with the origin of chess will require further investigations and presumably still a long time. Nevertheless, it may be interesting to check what has been the progress in the last years.

The first impression is that no essential new information has been obtained from the literary sources. The discussion on the ancient quotations is going on, both in China and in the Western world. It is almost impossible to propose a new hypothesis in this field – there have been so many of them already that any new complete theory can be associated with parts suggested by one or another author, who already supported them in the past.

Different may be the case with archaeological findings. It is precisely in this sector that we find a greater amount of new information and corresponding debates.

The usual form of the xiangqi pieces is less eye-catching than most of the figurative chessmen of the Western world. Their humble aspect is however associated with a great advantage among archaeological findings. When a “usual” chessman is found alone in an excavation, it cannot be acknowledged as such with certainty: it may instead simply represent a soldier, a knight, a bishop, a queen, a king, a chariot, and so on, any of them being figurines possibly produced for aims that have nothing to do with chess, in particular as devotional offers, typically in religious environments. This does not appear to be the case with disk-shaped xiangqi pieces, even if some use of xiangqi pieces for magic did actually exist.

## **Three Gorges Dam**

An exhaustive review of the recent contribution of the Chinese archaeology to the history of xiangqi is beyond the scope of the present article. A general comment may be that any archaeologist has to describe and discuss a lot of different findings and it is not common that the given specialist also has a good background knowledge of the ancient history of chess, something that represents our own interest, but

must be acknowledged as a very minor topic among archaeological matters.

There is however a case that cannot be ignored: excavations in the places of the renowned Three Gorges Dam, see Fig. 1. (17) The exceptional project of TGD has originated a lot of discussions, and particularly strong ones have been the debates in the environmental field. The weight of this huge work and its impact on the nature and life in the region is evident. However, there is something that is even more relevant here: the destiny of the places that have been submerged into the basin. Probably, the most evident consequence has been the necessary dislodgement of one and a half million people who lived in these places.

What has all the above to do with the specific context of xiangqi history? The question is that the whole region was not only inhabited recently – it was already one of the most interesting parts in the early history of the Chinese civilization. Many sites of historical, architectural, and archaeological interest have been submerged at the bottom of the TGD basin.

There are many historical and ancient sites, structures and tombs along the Yangtze River, the longest river in China. Because of the TGD project, many areas of its upper range are going to be underwater for ever, after the dam started to reserve water. Some famous ancient structures have been relocated or moved to upper grounds. For unmovable tombs, the government decided to speed up excavating them before they sink into water. The excavating project was started in 1997. In 2001, 141 sites and more than 200,000 square meters were excavated in the Chongqing area alone, much more than in previous years.

There is a group of ancient tombs on Lao-Guan-Qiu, all with brick or stone structures, dated from the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220) and the Kingdom of Wei (220-265). An archaeological exploring team from the Historical and Archaeological Research Institute of the Yunnan Province explored the area for three months, from September to December 2001. The team excavated 3000 square meters and explored 50,000 square meters. The discoveries include potteries, bronze and copper wares, iron wares, and porcelains.

## The supposedly oldest xiangqi piece

In March 2002, an initial report of the ten major archeological discoveries of 2001 in the Chongqing area was published, and the discovery of a ceramic xiangqi piece was listed as No. 9; (18) the discoveries were then announced in the English edition of the official news in 2003 (19) and fully described in the final report. (20) The piece was discovered in a place called Lao-Guan-Qiu (Old Coffins Hill) in Wan-Zhou, a suburb district of Chongqing, which is the largest city in Southwestern China, right next to the Yangtze River. It was unearthed from the tomb labeled as Number 1 by the team, on the aisle to the coffin chamber.

This ceramic piece of xiangqi, a Ju or chariot, shown in Fig. 2, represents the major discovery of our interest here. The character Ju is manned; namely, with the symbol for man written before that of the chariot. It is a known version – from later times – of this xiangqi piece.

If the newly discovered ceramic piece Ju (chariot) were indeed belonging to the time period between Eastern Han (25-220) and Kingdom of Wei (220-265), then credible xiangqi history could be pushed back for several centuries, in agreement with some of the theories mentioned above. If the xiangqi playing piece Ju is that old, we are left with the question of the existence of xiangqi during the next 500 years without leaving any trace in the Chinese literature, as discussed above. However, the new discovery is not without any question.

Prof. Zhang thinks that this solitary piece is questionable, and not enough to prove the existence of xiangqi in the 2<sup>nd</sup> -3<sup>rd</sup> centuries. (21) In particular:

1 - This specific Chinese character of Ju (manned chariot) did not occur before the Song Dynasty (960-1297, including both Northern and Southern Song Dynasty), according to a search result from an electronic version of Siku Quanshu (the largest collection of important literary works of all kinds in Chinese history, compiled from 1773 to 1788). Whether it already existed in the East Han Dynasty and Kingdom of Wei, more supports from other literary works are needed.

2 - From a calligraphic point of view, this writing of Ju does not agree with the style of that time and is against the evolution process of Chinese calligraphy.

3 - This Ju (manned chariot) was used in xiangqi only and after its final establishment (at the end of the Northern Song Dynasty). To use

it as an evidence to prove the existence of xiangqi in the East Han Dynasty and Kingdom of Wei cannot obtain any support from all references that we know so far.

As a confirmation of points indicated above, Zhang Chaoying, a renowned xiangqi collector, states that he found xiangqi Ju manned pieces only starting from those produced in Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368).

Another comment can be added to those already indicated. This Ju was unearthed from the aisle to the coffin chamber, not inside the chamber, and one can imagine that tomb robbers had visited the tomb for many times (since the name of the place is Old Coffins Hill, local people evidently knew of the existence of these tombs). Therefore it is possible that the piece was dropped in there by tomb robbers and originally came from some other place.

Even if a given amount of scepticism appears to be justified, there are experts who believe that this Ju may indeed belong to the old age of the tombs. For instance, a recent article reports the favourable opinion of another expert of xiangqi history, who expresses his satisfaction because this finding can eventually support the theories of an ancient age for the birth of xiangqi. (22)

### **Xiangqi standing pieces**

Most chess historians believe that xiangqi pieces only assumed the disk form in later times; others suppose, however, that using chessmen in the form of figurines was just an intermediate fashion connected with court habits. In any case, tall Chinese chessmen of the kind used in the Western world can only belong to many centuries ago; it should thus be very interesting to discover some such specimens.

Unfortunately, only one such item is known, and associated with several questions too. It has been described in a book published by Zhang Chaoying, a collector of xiangqi playing equipments, see Fig. 3. (23) Zhang bought it in 1998 at an antique flea market in Tianjin, a big city about 130 km South-East from Beijing. According to the seller, an old man who did not know what this object could be, the piece was unearthed from the Hubei Province in Southern Central China.

This standing three-dimensional xiangqi piece appears to be the only one ever found in China. The playing piece is about 85 mm tall (this dimension was misprinted as 5.8 mm in the book) and has a 37 mm

diameter at the bottom. Its main body is made of copper, with a lead part inside, and coated with gold.

Later on, Zhang has published articles about it and has shown his discovery on television, inviting all experts to express their comments. Nobody among the many experts and readers who could express their doubts has ever questioned the chess nature of this piece – all have agreed that it cannot be anything else. If this is a xiangqi piece, however, it must belong to times in which this kind of chessmen were used. Indeed, Zhang interprets this chessman as a xiangqi playing piece Zu (another name to call a xiangqi foot soldier) from the Tang Dynasty (618-907). All experts agree, on the basis of the tale Cen Shun by Niu Seng-Ru mentioned above, that xiangqi pieces were by then standing three-dimensional ones.

The technique to make this piece was named as Chui Ye in Chinese, and was originally developed by craftsmen in the Mediterranean area, with the obvious advantage to save great amounts of precious metals. First, craftsmen form a model of their designed artwork using a less costing material. Then a foil of precious metal is hammered and tightly coated on the model, so that the object looks just as if it were directly obtained from a piece of gold, or silver. The earliest record of the use in China of the Chui Ye technique to make statues of Buddha is dated 371 AD. By the Tang Dynasty (618-907), Chinese craftsmen had fully mastered the technique and applied it to all kind of gold and silver artworks.

Zhang Chaoying states in his book that many Chinese experts insist that it was unquestionable a Chinese who invented “Bao Ying Xiang Xi” (the formal name for xiangqi in the Tang Dynasty) and made its playing equipment. However, Zhang himself thinks that the shape of his playing piece was possibly influenced by Western chess.

### **Other xiangqi pieces**

All other pieces, belonging to the private collection of Zhang Chaoying, have the usual flat and round shape. In addition to the book already mentioned, a useful article has been published by the same author, describing these historical xiangqi pieces. (24) Moreover, they have also been reproduced in the web pages of the World Xiangqi Federation. Let us look at a selection of the oldest ones.



The second and third item are shown in Figs. 4 and 5. The top one is a Ju (chariot), and the bottom one is a Xiang (elephant); they probably belong to the Tang Dynasty. Zhang Chaoying believes that these disk-shaped pieces come from the same period of the standing one, the Tang Dynasty (618-907), but some experts disagree.

The fourth piece is a Bing (soldier), Fig. 6. It is made of jade and belongs to the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127). As common in that time, one side has the image of a real soldier, and the other side has the corresponding Chinese character.

The piece shown in Fig. 7 is made of bronze and belongs to the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279). The front side is a Chinese character Zu. The playing pieces from the Song Dynasty (including Northern Song and Southern Song) generally have two sides, the front side is a Chinese character and the backside is an artwork to match the character. There are quite a lot of xiangqi playing pieces made of copper alloys from the Song Dynasty excavated in China, over 100 sets.

The following piece, see Fig. 8, has a Chinese character Xiang (elephant) probably from the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127); it is made of wood with gold tinsel on the character, and the wood has been a little carbonized.

The following xiangqi pieces come from a somewhat later date, outside of the time limit set to this review, but some of their properties could be present in earlier pieces.

The rare complete playing set from the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368) shown in Fig. 9 is made of porcelain. In the second bottom row, manned Ju are on the end of both left and right side, next to them are manned Ma (horse).

A rare and valuable playing piece of Ma (horse) from the Ming Dynasty, made of so called "bloody ivory", is shown in Fig. 10. According to Zhang Chaoying, the best ivory is from Burma, ivory from other Asian countries comes next, that arriving from Africa is the less adequate. The heavier the ivory, the better is its quality. In cases of this kind, the tusk was extracted from the living elephant, so blood was still in it.

## Conclusions

Interesting results have been obtained recently by Chinese historians, archaeologists, and xiangqi collectors. They appear to be worth knowing even outside of their country, and this has been the main motivation for the present review.

There is a very significant point stressing the interest of xiangqi early history for the whole history of international chess: namely, the possible Chinese origin of all ancient forms of chess. Different from other countries, there is no tradition in China that chess arrived there from abroad. Chinese historians have often suggested a local origin of their game, thus implicitly suggesting that the actual initial path was from China to India and not vice versa (because the hypothesis of two independent origins is virtually impossible to support).

Some of the recent discoveries have been interpreted in a way that gives a strong support to these opinions. Of course, the more clues that are gathered, the more plausible these theories of an ancient local origin become, but no certain conclusion can yet be derived after examining all the details available. In particular, no single object described can yet be considered as a real proof for this kind of reasoning.

What appears to be certain nowadays is that if some real proof can be obtained of a Chinese origin of all chess, this can only be derived from Chinese archaeological findings. Such being the case, all supporters of a Chinese origin of chess must hope that a more decisive one will soon be described.

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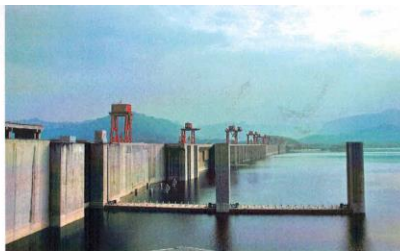


Fig. 1 – Three Gorges Dam. From Ref. 17.



Fig. 2 – Ju (chariot). From Ref. 22.



Fig. 3 – Zu (soldier). From Refs. 23-25.



Fig. 4 – Ju (chariot). From Refs. 23-25.



Fig. 5 – Xiang (elephant). From Refs. 23-25.



Fig. 6 – Bing (soldier). From Refs. 23-25.



Fig. 7 – Zu (soldier). From Refs. 23-25.



Fig. 8 – Xiang (elephant). From Refs. 23-25.



Fig. 10 – Ma (horse). From Refs. 23-25.



Fig. 9 – Complete set of xiangqi. From Refs. 23-25.

See: F. Pratesi and G. Ding, pp. 37-43

Bao Ying Xiang Xi ( 宝应象戏 )	Ma (horse) ( 马 )
Bing (foot soldier) ( 兵 )	Nian-Chang ( 念常 )
Bo Luo Sai Xi (backgammon) ( 波罗塞戏 )	Niu Sengru ( 牛僧孺 )
Chao Bozhi ( 晁补之 )	Pao (cannon) ( 炮 )
Chao Gongwu ( 晁公武 )	Shennong Shi ( 神农氏 )
<i>Cen Shun</i> ( 岑顺 )	Shi (adjutant) ( 士 )
Chang Renxia ( 常任侠 )	Shun ( 舜 )
Chiyou ( 蚩尤 )	<i>Siku Quanshu</i> ( 四库全书 )
<i>Chu Ci</i> ( 楚辞 )	Sima Guang ( 司马光 )
Chui Ye ( 锤鏝 )	Southern Song Dynasty ( 南宋 )
<i>Da Bo Jing</i> ( 大博经 )	<i>Tai Ping Yu Lan</i> ( 太平御览 )
Da Xiang Xi ( 大象戏 )	Wang Bao ( 王褒 )
Emperor Dai-Zong of the Tang Dynasty ( 唐 代宗 )	Wan-Zhou ( 万州 )
Emperor Wu-Ti of the Northern Zhou Dynasty ( 北周武帝 )	Warring States ( 战国 )
Gao Cheng ( 高承 )	<i>Xiang Jing</i> ( 象经 )
Guang Xiang Xi ( 广象戏 )	<i>Xiang Xi Fu</i> ( 象戏赋 )
Han Xin ( 韩信 )	<i>Xiang Xi Ge</i> ( 象戏格 )
Huangdi ( 黄帝 )	Xiang Xi ( 象戏 )
Ju (manned) ( 倅 )	Xiangqi ( 象棋 )
Ju (chariot) ( 车 )	Xie Zhaozhe ( 谢肇淛 )
King Wu of Zhou Dynasty ( 周武王 )	Yao ( 尧 )
King Zhou of Shang Dynasty ( 商纣王 )	Yin Zhu ( 尹洙 )
Lao-Guan-Qiu ( 老棺丘 )	Yu Xin ( 庾信 )
Liang Tongshu ( 梁同书 )	Zhang Chaoying ( 张超英 )
Liubo ( 六博 )	Zhang Ruan ( 张如安 )
Lu Cai ( 吕才 )	<i>Zhao Hun</i> ( 招魂 )
Luo Qi ( 罗颀 )	Zhu Yingqiu ( 朱应秋 )
	Zu (foot soldier) ( 卒 )