

Chapter 27

China, Korea, Vietnam

[This chapter covers the second of the three major chess traditions, that of Xiangqi and its relatives. The most important difference between these games and our own chess lies in the presence of the cannon.]

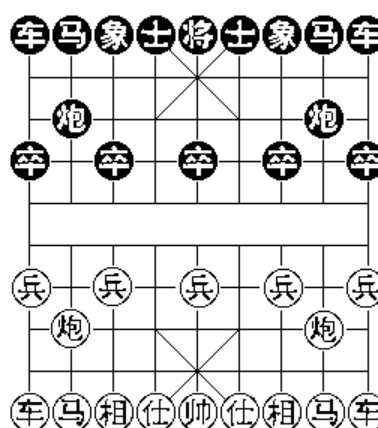
27.1 Xiangqi

Xiangqi, also known as **Chinese Chess** and sometimes called the **Elephant Game**, has been claimed as the world's most popular board game, with 200 million players according to one estimate. Origins uncertain; the first firm reference is in the 8th century, the array and rules of the modern game having evolved in the 12th century or shortly after. That xiangqi and orthochess have a common ancestor can hardly be doubted, similarities between the two games being many and remarkable. Although only one piece, the chariot, moves exactly like an orthochess piece, all men except the cannon have close parallels in orthochess or its ancestors. Xiangqi is played everywhere in China and in Chinese communities around the world. Major events in China attract thousands of spectators and get generous media coverage. Despite its long history, it is only in the last few decades that the game has been organized nationally within China, and only in recent years on an international scale. There is now a World Xiangqi Federation, which organizes a World Championship, also an Asian Xiangqi Federation as well as a number of national organizations in the U.K., the U.S., and elsewhere. A European Championship has been held for a number of years. Sets can be obtained at a range of prices from Chinese emporiums: wood or plastic sets with paper boards are remarkably cheap. Xiangqi computers and software are also available.

The game has a large literature. The first records of play and the first books date from the Ming dynasty, one of the best-known and earliest works being *Secrets inside the Orange* (1632). Modern introductory books in English are freely available, and more advanced works by leading Chinese writers are gradually being

translated. It is therefore open to Western chess enthusiasts not just to try the game, but to develop a reasonable level of proficiency.

Board 9x10 (play is on the intersection points), divided by a river and with a 3x3 'palace', marked by diagonal lines, at either end. The reason for the river is not known, but rivers are China's arteries and have commonly divided warring factions. Each player has 16 pieces, arrayed as shown below, which have historically enjoyed a variety of names: 1 x General or Governor (K), 2 x Chariot (R), Horse (H), Elephant or Minister (E), Guard, Counsellor or Mandarin (G), Cannon, Catapult or Ballista (C), 5 x Soldier (S).



Interpretation: RHEGKGEHR on ranks 1/10, cannons on ranks 3/8, soldiers on ranks 4/7.

Xiangqi pieces are normally circular discs with the ideogram for each piece embossed on one side in the appropriate colour (usually red or black, but other combinations of primary colours, such as red and blue or red and green, are by no means uncommon). The ideograms

for the chariots, cannons and horses are identical, or nearly so, for both sides, the remaining pieces being distinguished by ideogram as well as by colour.

The pieces move as follows.

General moves orthogonally, one point at a time, and is confined to the nine stations of the palace. Opposing generals cannot confront each other: if the two occupy the same file, there must be at least one man of either colour between them. The rules governing check and checkmate are the same as those of orthochess.

Guard moves one point diagonally in any direction but may not leave the palace, so the two guards are confined to just five points. They can defend each other.

Chariot moves exactly like a rook.

Horse moves as the orthochess knight except that the move is conducted in two steps, one step orthogonally and then one diagonally, and the intermediate point must be vacant.

Elephant moves two points diagonally in any direction but only if the intervening point is vacant. Elephants may not cross the river and so are confined to a total of eight points. Like guards, elephants can defend each other.

Cannon moves as a rook, but has a unique form of capture. Moving orthogonally over any number of vacant points, it must leap one man of either colour (the 'screen') to capture the first man on the same line anywhere beyond it. The cannon checks in the same manner as it captures.

Soldier moves or captures straight forward, one point at a time. When across the river it still moves one point at a time but may now move horizontally in either direction as well as forward. It does not promote, and on reaching the last rank it can only move laterally.

Capture is by displacement, as in orthochess. Except for those men whose movement is restricted, any man can cross the river and enter either palace. Stalemate is a win for the player giving it. Perpetual check is not permitted: the first player must vary. There appears to be as yet no universal rule governing repetition of moves.

Xiangqi has been sold in the West under a number of proprietary names such as Commander, Elephant Chess, Neo-Panzer, etc. A game marketed in 1982 as Chinese Chess (Peter Pan Playthings) had nothing to do with xiangqi.

[Text slightly revised. David believed that xiangqi deserved more attention from Western chess enthusiasts than it had received, and in the first edition he devoted a further ten pages to what amounted to a basic introductory treatise on the game. However, the ground it could cover was inevitably limited, and good introductory material in English is now much more readily available than it was even in 1994. I have therefore decided not to repeat this, and instead to encourage readers to seek out full-length specialist books which can treat the subject in a way that not even the most generous encyclopedia can afford the space to do.]

27.2 Indigenous and regional variants

Indigenous variants. The earliest known version of xiangqi was on a board of 11x11 points, the array for which was reconstructed by Karl Himlay from archaeological findings. The deployment is similar to the modern game except that the cannons are on the first rank and there is only one guard (baseline RHEC-G-CEHR), the general is in the centre of the palace (point f2 for Red), and the soldiers are increased to six (a4/c4/.../k4 for Red). The horse moved three squares diagonally, the chariots could only advance, and soldiers could move sideways as well as straight forward. The game is believed to have been played during the Tang and Sung dynasties.

Leventhal's quotation from Confucius (c.550-478 B.C.) that 'Chess playing is still better than doing nothing' (*Chess of China*), intimating that xiangqi in some form existed a millennium and a half earlier, strains credibility: 'Game playing' is probably a more accurate translation.

Around the 11th century, reference is made to a game on a 19x19 (weiqi?) board with 98 pieces (Dickins, *A Short History of Fairy Chess*). Other versions of xiangqi on large boards are known. One, played on a board of 11x10 points divided by a river, had the cannons between the chariots and horses and the soldiers increased to six (baseline

RCHEG-GEHCR but otherwise as in the 11x11 version above), whilst another, played unusually on the squares of an 11x11 board and dating from the 18th century, had the cannons in the corners and apparently without the customary palaces (baseline CRHEGKGEHRC, soldiers on b4/d4/.../j4). An advocate of the big-is-beautiful school once recommended that 'You may with little labour greatly augment the Chinese Chess ... By enlarging the board a little you make 18 houses more upon the banks of the river ... there will be 108 houses. Nine men on your first line, 6 on your second, 6 on your third and 9 soldiers on the fourth ... it will be an easy matter to invent peculiar names and moves for the additional pieces'.

A modern variant, strictly for gambling, and 'perhaps almost as popular as the actual game' according to Sloan in *Chinese Chess for Beginners*, is for the players to turn over the usual xiangqi pieces, shuffle them, and then place them at random on the array points. As the game progresses the pieces are revealed one by one. Predictably there is too a 'football chess' (6-a-side) played on the xiangqi board.

Korean Chess, also known as **Changgi**. Derived from xiangqi or sharing a common source, Korean Chess has features which link it to an early version of the Chinese game. It is little known outside Korea and there is very little literature, yet in 2005 it claimed 176 professional players. The first known changgi association was formed in Korea in 1956, since when players have been graded according to the dan system of weiqi (go); 14 players listed in 2005 were graded 9-dan.

The board as for xiangqi, but there is no river and it is wider in relation to its length so that the intersections on which the game is played form rectangles rather than squares. The pieces, usually green or blue and red, are the same as those of xiangqi but are octagonal in shape and are in three sizes: (large) K; (medium) R, C, H, E; (small) G, S. There are significant differences in both the movements of the pieces and the rules of play compared to those of xiangqi, but the game can perfectly well be played with a xiangqi board and men. Array as for xiangqi except that the kings are on e2/e9 and that players are at liberty, before moving, to interchange the positions of their H

and E on one or both sides of the board (some players only allow one interchange). However, a player may not have EE on one side and HH on the other. In North Korea, the initial positions of the R and E are sometimes reversed. According to Culin, it is usually advisable for the second player to copy the disposition chosen by the first player.

The pieces move as follows.

General moves one point in any direction along any marked line of the palace, to which he is confined.

Guard moves like the general and is also confined to the palace.

Chariot moves as in xiangqi, but within either palace it may also move diagonally one or two points along a marked line.

Horse as in xiangqi.

Elephant moves one point orthogonally then two points diagonally in the same general direction, i.e., to the opposite corner of a 2x3 grid, but the intervening points must be vacant.

Cannon generally like the xiangqi cannon, but must leap another man (the screen) to move as well as to capture. Within either palace a cannon can leap diagonally from one corner to the opposite corner provided the central point is occupied. However, a C can never leap another C nor capture one so, for example, it is possible to escape a cannon check by capturing the opponent's screen with a cannon.

Soldier moves and captures one point straight ahead or sideways. If within the enemy palace, it can also move one point diagonally (but forward only) along the marked lines. No promotion.

A player may pass his turn, hence no stalemate or zugzwang. The rule concerning facing generals is ill-defined. In theory, the player who in piece terms is materially weaker may face generals, directly or as the result of a capture, forcing the second player to avoid the confrontation or accept a draw. Perpetual check and repeated moves are permitted in Korean Chess but many players prefer to follow the xiangqi rules.

Because of the ease with which they can simultaneously block a file and acquire mutual protection, the soldiers have a bigger role than in xiangqi. By contrast, the cannon is weaker. Elephants can be easily blocked and are not as

formidable as they might appear. Since the cannons cannot move in the initial position, the game is normally opened with a horse or soldier move, one object being to get the cannons active quickly. Blue or Green starts. (Culin, *Korean Games*) [Text slightly revised]

Vietnamese Chess, also known as **Co-Tuong** (literally ‘Game of the Generals’). A Chinese import in most respects identical to xiangqi. Indigenous literature apart, there is a detailed discourse on the game and its background by Léon Slobodchikoff in the *Bulletin de la Société des Etudes Indochinoises* (Volume 28, number 4, 1953). The game is very popular and living chess displays used to be common during the seasonal festivals. One game, watched by ‘an immense crowd’, had a herald trumpeting the moves with two other heralds conducting the pieces to their positions. The Royal Executioner of Cochin China, armed with a sabre, expelled captured men (peacefully, one hopes) from the board (*Illustrated London News*, May 1865). At another well-attended gathering (reported in the *National Geographic Magazine*, October 1935) the pieces are represented by girls

sitting on stools holding aloft plaques indicating their rank, whilst the intersections are created by bamboo poles laid on the ground. The caption-writer regrettably identified the game as checkers.

There appear to be at least three variants. In one, the board is 10x10; 1 x General, Councillor; 2 x Cannon, Chariot, Elephant, Horse, 6 x Pawn; array (a1-j1/a10-j10) ChHECaGCoCaEHCh, (c3-h3/c8-h8) 6xP. The object is to mate the opponent’s General or to move a pawn to the 8th rank where it cannot be taken at once. Cannon moves as orthochess. Chariot moves as orthochess R but leaps to vacant square immediately beyond to capture. Horse moves as in xiangqi. Elephant is a 3-1 leaper. Councillor moves and captures 3 squares orthogonally or 2 squares diagonally, leaping intervening men if necessary. P moves and captures one square diagonally forward. An unmoved P can move 2 squares straight forward. General moves one square diagonally followed by another orthogonally. A General can check his rival. General and pawns must stay within files c-h. No castling, e.p. or pawn promotion. (Information from Lev Kisluk)

27.3 Modern non-indigenous variants

Imperial Dragon Chess (Paul Fredrix, 1973). An attempt to boost xiangqi for western players. Rules are as for the classic game except as modified below.

- (1) The horse moves as a western knight.
- (2) The elephant may take one or two steps diagonally, to move or to capture. It still may not cross the river.
- (3) A soldier on reaching the last rank is promoted to Dragon Elephant. The DE moves one point in any direction or two points diagonally, leaping an intervening man if necessary. A DE may cross the river.
- (4) A player without pawns may move one or both elephants across the river, when they promote to DEs.

Endorsed by John McCallion, Games editor of *Games* magazine. (*Nost-algia* 349)

Minixiangqi (S. Kusumoto, 1974) Board 7x7; moves as in xiangqi, but no guards or elephants; array (a1-g1 and forwards) RCNKNCr, S-SSS-S. (*Eterosacco* 86-88)

Eurasian Chess (Fergus Duniho, 2003). Board 10x10 crossed by a river. Each player has 1 x K, Q, 2 x R, B, N, 10 x P (all as in orthochess), 2 x Cannon (as in xiangqi), 2 x Vao (as cannon but diagonally). Kings may not cross river, nor face each other along an empty vertical or diagonal line; promotion only to captured pieces. (Chess Variant Pages)