

# Wei qi



## *A Symbol of the Chinese Experience*

**T**he co-existence of a gigantic bureaucratic state with an overall social plasticity and transformation whose scale has no equivalent in world history is an apparent paradox that puzzles the observer of Chinese society.

Why is China so comfortable with change while Western democracies are dangerously lacking in the capacity to question their assumptions and could, in the long term, be threatened by inertia and complacency?

As the Chinese renaissance gradually reshapes the 21st century and takes the global system to another level, understanding China has become a practical necessity. Instead of continually lecturing in a tone of superiority about what it poorly frames as an “emerging market”, the West would gain much by a more modest approach: accepting inspiration from a civilization whose resurgence, far from being a threat, is a contributor to global equilibrium. As Chinese intellectuals endeavor to reconnect with the universal message of their tradition, China’s humanistic revival is also the promise of a more harmonious global village.

By considering the board game *wei qi* (known as go in Japanese and familiar in the West under that name), one of the most significant symbols in the Chinese mental geography, one can develop a better understanding of Chinese dynamics in politics, in business, and even in more trivial social interactions. The Tao of *wei qi* envelops an esthetic and an intellectual experience that takes us closer to Chinese psychology and gives us insights on Chinese strategic thinking, but are also, to a certain extent, a way to approach the fundamental patterns of China’s collective success.

Beyond their ritualistic rigidity, the bureaucrat-mandarins of the Chinese Communist Party are, above all, individuals whose behavior is determined by an under-lying cognitive culture that also explains what can appear, at first glance, to be paradoxical.

• By David Gosset •

Using a universally relevant metaphor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, former national security adviser to US president Jimmy Carter, wrote in *The Grand Chessboard* (1997): “Eurasia is the chessboard on which the struggle for global primacy continues to be played.” But is Beijing playing chess? In Eurasia and beyond, Chinese strategists are more spontaneous, designing a series of moves compatible with their own understanding of strategy. While Westerners might navigate a world mapped as a chessboard, the Chinese mind circulates on a *weiqi* board.

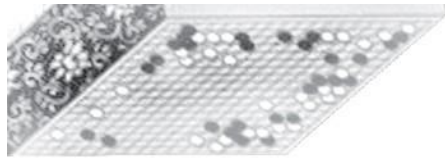
The chronicle by Japanese writer Kawabata Yasunari (1899-1972) of an intense intellectual duel, translated in English as *The Master of Go*, certainly contributed to the popularity of the game in the West, but *weiqi* is a product of Chinese civilization and spread over time in the educated circles of Northeast Asia. Kawabata, who viewed Master as one of his favorite creations, knew that for China the game of “abundant spiritual powers encompassed the principles of nature and the universe of human life”, and that the Chinese had named it “the diversion of the immortals”. [1]

In imperial China, *weiqi* had the status of an art whose practice had educational, moral and intellectual purposes. In a Chinese version of the scholastic quadrivium, the mandarins had to master four arts, known as *qin*, *qi*, *shu* and *hua*. It was expected of the gentlemen to be able to play the *guqin* (*qin*), a seven-stringed zither, [2] but also to write calligraphy (*shu*) and demonstrate talent at brush-painting (*hua*).

The second artistic skill, *qi*, is a reference to *weiqi*, a strategy game played by two people

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who alternately place black and white stones on the vacant intersections of a grid. The winner is the one who can control, after a series of encirclements, more territory than his opponent; one can translate *weiqi* as “the board game of encirclement” or “the surrounding game”. For centuries, literati have been fascinated by the contrast between the extreme simplicity of the rules and the almost infinite combinations allowed by their execution.

Traditionally, the game was conceptualized in relation to a vision of the world. In the early 11th-century *Classic of Weiqi in Thirteen Sections*, arguably

the most remarkable essay on the topic, the author uses notions of Chinese philosophy to introduce the game’s material objects: the stones “are divided between black and white, on the yin/yang model . . . the board is a square and tranquil, the pieces are round and active”. In *Classic of Weiqi*, the famous *Book of Changes (Yi Jing)*, which presents the cosmology of Chinese antiquity, is quoted several times. [3]

The game, “a small Tao”, [4] was so popular that it generated some obsessive behavior. Addiction to *weiqi* was considered by the Chinese philosopher Mencius (372-289BC) one of the five types of unfilial behavior. [5] Through the centuries, the game remained an important element of Chinese society. Ming Dynasty painter Qian Gu (1508-78) realized an exquisite masterpiece when, in a mood of ease and poise, he portrayed *A Weiqi Game at the Bamboo Pavilion*, where the breeze, water and young maidens revolve around the circulations of black and white stones. One of the famous set of 12 screen paintings from the Emperor Yongzheng

period (1678-1735) portrays an elegant and refined lady sitting beside a *weiqi* board.

Under criticism during the Cultural Revolution, the game is once again fashionable among China's elites, and the master Nie Weiping and his disciple Gu Li, among the top players in the world, are acclaimed celebrities.

As indicated in the introduction of *Classic of Weiqi*, the Tao of weiqi cannot be separated from Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, which stands since the Warring States Period (476-221BC) as the very foundation of China's strategic thinking. Mao Zedong used the weiqi metaphor, for example, in his 1938 *Problems of Strategy in Guerrilla War against Japan*. [6] In 1969, American mathematical sociologist Scott Boorman displayed genuine perceptiveness by using weiqi to interpret Mao's tactical and strategic moves. [7]

While in chess or in Chinese chess (*xiangqi*) the pieces with a certain preordained constraint of movement are on the board when the game begins, the grid is empty at the opening of the *weiqi* game. During a chess game, one subtracts pieces; in *weiqi*, one adds stones to the surface of the board. In *Classic of Weiqi*, the author remarks that "since ancient times, one has never seen two identical *weiqi* games". [8]

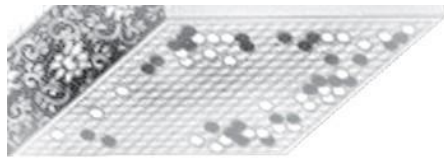
Three golden axioms expressed in *Classic of Weiqi* give a stimulating perspective on China's strategic thinking but also on the Chinese mind.

"As the best victory is gained without a fight, so the excellent position is one which does not cause conflict," says the *Classic*. [9] It introduces what can be called the axiom of non-confrontation. In *weiqi*, the objective is not to

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*Classic of Weiqi*



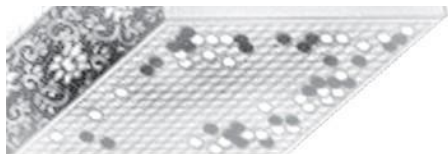
checkmate the opponent: only positions in relation to others really matter. *Weiqi's* innumerable circumambulations aim at increasing influence without reducing the opponent's forces to nothing. The ability to manage the paradox of a non-confrontational opposition requires the highest emotional and intellectual qualities

The *Classic* adds: "At the beginning of the game, the pieces are moved in a regular and orthodox way, but creativity is needed to win the game." [10] What can be named the axiom of discontinuity is a variation on a postulate that is central to Sun Tzu's *Art of War*: [11] at the beginning of the engagement the action is guided by accepted rules, but victory often requires "irregular" decisions or unorthodox resolution, and only visionary intuition leads to breakthrough. The notion that an unimaginative China would be destined to repeat, imitate, or perform mechanically is a misconception largely based on a partial knowledge of the Chinese world but which, despite the admirable research of British sinologist Joseph Needham (1900-95) in *Science and Civilization in China*, persists to distort the debate.

The postulate of discontinuity is the very essence of innovation. To a certain extent, Deng Xiaoping's extraordinary concept of "one country, two systems" to engineer Hong Kong's retrocession was an application of this second postulate. Chinese leaders from Beijing and Taipei will also make full use of the second axiom to reinvent their relations in the coming years. China will not only innovate in technology or in business management, but will enrich the vocabulary of political science. Western political, business and opinion leaders have to be ready to act in a world with material or immaterial

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products not only “made in China” but “created by China”.

The *Classic* mentions a third dimension: “Do not necessarily stick to a plan, change it according to the moment.” [12] The axiom of change commands the player to adjust to the situation and to beware of blind adherence to a preconceived system, doctrine or ideology. Deng Xiaoping’s emphasis on the necessity to “seek the truth from the facts” profoundly continues this pattern of Chinese strategic thinking. At the diplomatic level, Mao’s unexpected rapprochement with Washington in the 1970s was in the spirit of the third postulate.

These minimalist axioms create the cognitive conditions to act with maximized effectiveness. Generally non-confrontational, ready for paradigm change and fundamentally non-ideological, China is in a process of renaissance, reinventing its tradition but open to the future. In that sense, the analyst should not look for a Chinese “model”, because Beijing has only an experience to offer.

In *Written in a Dream*, polymath and statesman Ouyang Xiu (1007-72), a magister ludi, [13] captures the depth and mystery of *weiqi*:

*The weiqi game comes to an end, one is unaware that in the meantime the world has changed.* [14]

## Notes

1. The *Master of Go*, translated from the Japanese by Edward G Seidensticker.
2. Robert van Gulik’s essay “The Lore of the Chinese Lute” (1941) is the best introduction to the Tao of the qin.
3. *The Classic of Weiqi in Thirteen Sections (Qijing Shisanpian)*, Section 7 or Section 9. The translation is our own.
4. *Ibid.* Section 9.
5. *Li Lou*, Second Part.
6. Mao wrote in the context of the war against Japan: “There are two forms of encirclement by the enemy forces and two forms of encirclement by our own rather like a game of *weiqi*.”
7. *The Protracted Game: A Weiqi Interpretation of Maoist Revolutionary Strategy*, 1969.
8. *The Classic of Weiqi in Thirteen Sections*, Chapter 1.
9. *Ibid.* Section 4.
10. *Ibid.* Section 4.
11. Sun Tzu’s *Art of War*, “On Momentum” (shi).
12. *Ibid.* Section 5.
13. *Magister ludi*, master of the game, title under which Hermann Hesse’s magnum opus *The Glass Bead Game (Das Glasperlenspiel)* has been also published.
14. Ouyang Xiu, *Meng Zhong Zuo*, Verse 3

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