

What Kissinger Saw in Chess and Weiqi

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Abstract

In *On China* (2011), Henry Kissinger compared chess and weiqi, the game known in the West as Go, to describe two traditions of strategy, one centered on the decisive battle and the other on the protracted campaign. This interactive essay sets out the comparison and its limits, notes earlier readings of Chinese strategy through weiqi by Scott Boorman and David Lai, and invites the reader to play the final move on each board. It argues that strategy begins with identifying which game is being played.

This is the print edition of an interactive essay. The playable boards, the slider and the strategy laboratory are in the web version at www.sinogulfinstitute.com/two-boards.

Chess asks: How do I defeat you?

Weiqi asks: How do I shape the world in which you must move?

In *On China*, Henry Kissinger reached for two board games to describe two traditions of strategy: chess, and weiqi, the game that originated in China and is known in the West by its Japanese name, Go.

“If chess is about the decisive battle, wei qi is about the protracted campaign.”

Henry Kissinger, *On China* (2011), chapter 1, p. 23

Kissinger's two boards

In chess, Kissinger observes, every piece is deployed from the start, so the opponent's whole strength is always in view. A weiqi player has to weigh something more: the reinforcements the opponent could still bring onto the board.

The pieces are not equal. By convention a pawn is worth one, a knight or bishop about three, a rook five, a queen nine. The king is worth the game itself, and the whole contest is organized around it.

Chess, he writes, trains a player in Clausewitz's "center of gravity" and "decisive point"; the opening is usually a fight for the middle of the board. Its aim is checkmate: the king attacked, with no escape.

Weiqi begins with an empty board: nineteen lines by nineteen, 361 points. Every stone is identical. A stone's power comes entirely from where it stands and what it touches.

The name, Kissinger notes, translates as “a game of surrounding pieces,” and carries the idea of strategic encirclement. Several contests run at once in different parts of the board, and the position tilts a little with every move.

By the end of a well-played game, he adds, strength lies across the whole board in overlapping zones, and the winning margin can be too small to see at a glance.

In our reading, the difference comes down to who chooses the ground.

A chess player looks for the point where the game will be decided. A weiqi player works so that the opponent never gets to choose where that point is.

A comparison with limits

No civilization can be reduced to a board game, and nothing here assumes that every Chinese strategist thinks in weiqi or every Western one in chess. Kissinger offered the comparison as a way into a strategic style, and he did not invent it: Scott Boorman read Maoist strategy through weiqi in 1969, and Kissinger’s own notes point to the scholar David Lai. It is an illustration, and scholars of Chinese strategy have warned against reading it as a theory of national character.

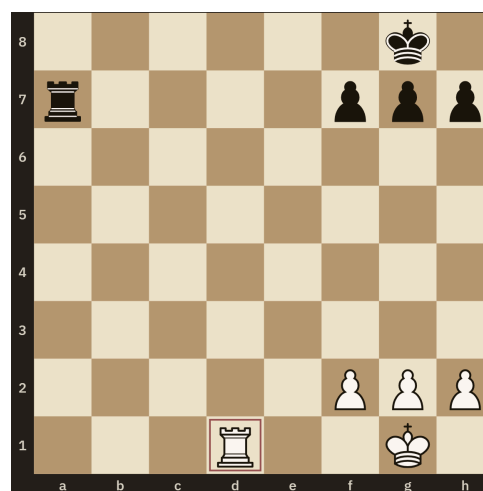
The games themselves refuse tidy borders. China has its own chess, xiangqi, played in parks and on street corners across the country. Weiqi is just as much at home in Korea and Japan, and is played worldwide. Chess began in India, passed through Persia, and reached Europe by way of the Arab world, where it was played as shatranj and where some of its earliest books of strategy were written.

Every serious tradition of strategy knows both patience and decisiveness; what differs is emphasis.

Make the last move

Each board is waiting for one move. Play both, then compare what each game does with it.

Chess: What does victory look like?



White to play and finish the game. Rook to d8, check along the eighth rank.

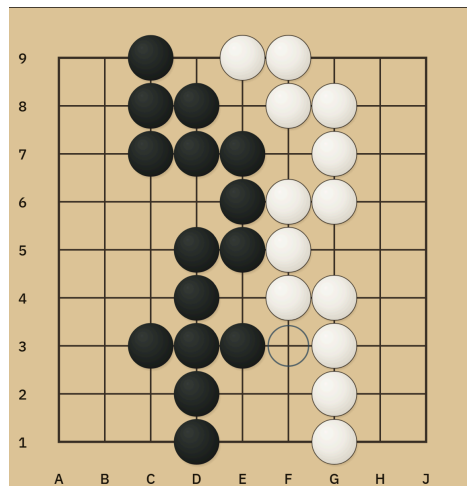
One move transforms advantage into finality.

The opponent's future collapses to zero legal possibilities.

0 legal replies left for Black

Any other move by White would have left Black at least eighteen.

Wei qi 围棋: What does advantage look like?



Black to play. Place a stone on the marked point, F3.

The position simply becomes better.

The opponent still has moves.

But the board has become less favorable to them.

White +2.5 → Black +3.5

52 legal replies left for White

The lead is an estimate; the final score may differ.

Two definitions of winning

Kissinger sums up the two aims in four words: “total victory” for chess, “relative advantage” for weiqi (*On China*, p. 23).

Chess

1. Win the confrontation.
2. Find the decisive point.
3. Concentrate force.
4. Remove critical capabilities.
5. Force resolution.
6. Turn advantage into finality.

Weiqi

1. Shape the environment.
2. Accumulate influence.
3. Expand optionality.
4. Trade local losses for global advantage.
5. Avoid premature confrontation.
6. Make future choices increasingly favorable.

Which game are you playing?

Five situations. Choose a response to each. Nothing is scored right or wrong; the point is to notice which logic each situation calls for.

Situation 1. A competitor attacks your core business.

- A. Counter-attack their core, hard and fast. *Chess logic.* It moves the fight onto their weakness. *When it works:* You hold the stronger position and their core is exposed. *When it fails:* The attack was a feint, and the real contest is somewhere you are now neglecting.
- B. Hold the core, and quietly build positions in the segments they ignore. *Weiqi logic.* You decline the battlefield they chose. *When it works:* Time is on your side and your core can absorb the pressure. *When it fails:* The core erodes faster than the new positions grow.
- C. Repel the attack first, then use the respite to reshape the market. *Hybrid logic.* In weiqi terms, you answer locally but keep the initiative, so the next large move is yours. *When it works:* The defense can be completed quickly and cleanly. *When it fails:* The defense drags on and consumes the time it was meant to buy.

Situation 2. A new market is forming, and nobody controls the rules.

- A. Pick the single biggest customer and win them outright. *Chess logic.* It treats the market as a prize to be taken now. *When it works:* One customer sets the direction for everyone else. *When it fails:* You win the account while someone else writes the rules for the market.
- B. Shape the standards, partnerships, and defaults before anyone competes. *Weiqi logic.* You build the board others will have to play on. *When it works:* The market is early, and its standards will lock in. *When it fails:* Coalitions form too slowly, and a direct rival takes the customers.
- C. Win one flagship account, and use it to set the standard for the rest. *Hybrid logic.* A clean win becomes the first stone of a wider position. *When it works:* The flagship is credible enough that others will follow it. *When it fails:* The flagship demands so much that nothing is left for the wider game.

Situation 3. You are negotiating ten issues, but only two are truly decisive.

- A. Concentrate everything on those two. *Chess logic.* You identify the center of gravity and refuse distraction. *When it works:* You are sure which two issues matter, and so is your counterpart. *When it fails:* Your counterpart reads your priorities and prices them accordingly.
- B. Trade generously across the eight minor issues to build goodwill. *Weiqi logic.* Concessions now make the next negotiation smoother. *When it works:* This is one round of a long relationship. *When it fails:* Goodwill is banked, but the two issues that matter are lost.
- C. Concede on minor issues in ways that build leverage on the two that matter. *Hybrid logic.* The minor issues become currency to trade. *When it works:* Each concession is timed and traded for something in return. *When it fails:* The concessions read as weakness.

Situation 4. A stronger rival dominates the center of the market.

- A. Challenge them head-on for the center. *Chess logic.* In chess, control of the center is the first principle of the opening, so you contest it. *When it works:* Their dominance hides a real weakness you can strike. *When it fails:* You fight on the ground where they are strongest, at the time they choose.
- B. Build strength at the edges, where they are not looking, until the center shifts. *Weiqi logic.* A weiqi proverb calls the corners gold, the sides silver, and the center grass: take what is easiest to hold first. *When it works:* The edges are growing and the center is slowly losing value. *When it fails:* The edges stay small, and the center keeps its value.
- C. Take the edges, then strike when the balance turns. *Hybrid logic.* Patience here is preparation for the strike. *When it works:* You can recognize the moment when it comes. *When it fails:* You keep waiting for a moment that never quite arrives.

Situation 5. A competitor is building relationships around your perimeter.

- A. Confront the competitor directly, and force a choice. *Chess logic.* You seek resolution before the encirclement completes. *When it works:* The relationships are still shallow and a clear choice favors you. *When it fails:* Forcing a choice pushes partners toward the side that asked less of them.
- B. Deepen your own relationships, one partner at a time. *Weiqi logic.* In weiqi, a group strong enough to live cannot be captured, however closely it is surrounded. *When it works:* You offer partners something lasting that the competitor cannot. *When it fails:* The competitor gets there first, and your partners are already committed elsewhere.
- C. Secure the few partners that matter most now, and widen the network over time. *Hybrid logic.* Speed where it counts, patience everywhere else. *When it works:* You know which partners are pivotal. *When it fails:* You misjudge which partners matter, and spend your strength in the wrong places.

The most dangerous strategic error may be playing chess on a weiqi board.

The game can be lost before any move is misplayed, through misreading it: looking for

- a decisive battle
- a single competitor
- a single victory
- a single negotiation
- a single breakthrough

when the real contest is about

- ecosystems
- standards
- partnerships
- positioning
- influence
- time

The reverse error is just as real.

Endless positioning can become a way of avoiding decisions. Some moments demand concentrated force, a deadline, a clear yes or no. A player who only ever shapes the board can be checkmated while admiring the shape.

First identify the game. Then choose the strategy.

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