

Introduction to Chinese Chess

Chinese Chess, or 象棋 *xiàng qí* as it is called in the Chinese language; is a popular game and pastime throughout the Chinese cultural sphere and many places in Asia with a significant Chinese community, such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia and Singapore. It is also popular in Vietnam, where it is known as *cờ tướng*.

Since its conception centuries ago, the game has stayed true to original form. When the name is translated, it is called the **Elephant Game**. It comes from the same family of traditional chess games as Western *Chess* and the Japanese *Shōgi*.

Playing the Game

When setting up the game please refer to the starting position diagram at the back of this instruction manual while following this setup instructions.

The game board consists of nine vertical lines (files) and ten horizontal lines (ranks) with the pieces being played on the intersections of the lines. On each side of the board against the back edge is a 宮 *gōng* **Palace**, which is a 3 by 3 lines (9 positions) with four diagonal lines that extend outward from the center forming a cross shape that connects the four corners of the Palace. Dividing the two opposing sides of the board with a gap is the **River**, located between the fifth and sixth ranks. The River is sometimes marked with the Chinese characters, 楚河 *Chǔ Hé* meaning Chu River, and 漢界 *Hàn Jiè* (汉界 in simplified Chinese), meaning Han Border, a reference to a conflict in Ancient Chinese history known as the *Chu-Han Contention* (206 to 202 BC). Some boards have the starting points of Soldiers and Cannons marked to indicate their initial placement.

Each player begins with one **General**, two **Guards**, two **Elephants**, two **Horses**, two **Chariots**, two **Cannons**, and five **Soldiers**. They are placed from starting from middle to the sides on the bottom and top rows in a symmetrical way, from the General in the middle, then the Guards, Elephants, Horses, and Chariots. Cannons are placed two intersections in front of the Horses. Finally, the Soldiers are placed at every other intersection one rank back from the edge of the River.

The Object of the Game is to capture the enemy General. When the General is under attack, this is a 將 *jiāng* (**Check**) and the player in Check must move in such a way that their General is no longer threatened. If a player's General is under attack and has no means of escape, this is 將死 *jiàng sǐ* (**Checkmate**), and they have lost the game.

Another way to win the game is if the enemy General is not under immediate threat but there is no legal and safe move to perform. This is 困毙 *kùn bì* (**Stalemate**).

However, should neither player be able to force a Checkmate or make the enemy General unable to make a legal and safe move, then it is a 平局 *píng jú* (**Draw**).

If a player checks or attacks an unprotected piece three times in a row while repeating the same board position, the player forcing the repetition must do something else. If they cannot, then they have forfeited the game. Similarly, if a player checks the other player three times in a row in a way that repeats their positions, the checked player has forfeited the game.

The Game Begins with **Red** making the first move. Each side alternates, moving one piece each turn. Once a piece has been captured by an enemy piece, it is removed from the board and the capturing piece takes its place.



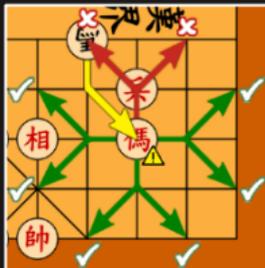
General Moves



Guard Moves



Elephant Moves



Horse Moves

The Pieces and Their Moves

The **General** (King) moves one point back, forward, right, or left but **cannot** make a move diagonally, and **cannot** move outside the nine intersections of the Palace area.

The General **may** capture enemy pieces which moves into the Palace area **except if** that piece is protected by another piece. Generals on the opposite sides of the board **cannot** be on the same file with each other **without** any other piece in between them.

The **Guard** (Advisor) is a defensive piece that **stays in** the Palace area and **cannot** leave it. The Guard moves and captures other pieces one point along the diagonal lines of the Palace in either directions.

The **Elephant** moves and captures other pieces **exactly** two points diagonally and **cannot** cross the River. The Elephant also **cannot** move if there is a piece in between the two points. Note that this means that a pair of Elephants could be blocked and **cannot** defend each other.

The **Horse** moves and capture other pieces one point in any direction then one point diagonally. The Horse **cannot** move if there is a piece in front of the Horse blocking its path in any directions. Note that this means that it is possible for one Horse to be unable to counterattack against another Horse attacking it.

General

帥

shuài

將

jiāng

Guard

仕

士

shì

Elephant

相

象

xiàng

Horse

馬

馬

mǎ

Chariot 車 The Chariot moves as many points in a straight line horizontally or vertically along the rank and file, until it meets with another piece or the edge of the board.

Cannon 炮 The Cannon moves as many points in a straight line horizontally or vertically along the rank and file, until it meets with another piece or the edge of the board, *but* when it captures, there *must* be any one other piece to jump over from, *either* a friendly or an enemy piece.

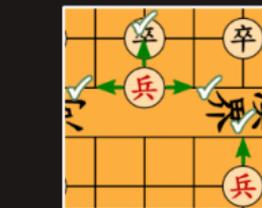
Soldier 砲 The Soldier (Pawn) moves and captures other pieces one point forward. Once crossing the River, the Soldier *may* also move either one point to the left or right *but not* backwards.



Chariot Moves



Cannon Moves



Soldier Moves

Approximate Relative Values of Pieces

Piece	Point(s)
Soldier before crossing the river	1
Soldier after crossing the river	2
Guard	2
Elephant	2
Horse	4
Cannon	4½
Chariot	9

車

炮

砲

兵

卒

卒

Notation System

There are several types of notation used to record *xiàng qí* games. Listed here is the commonly used notation system throughout the world. Each move is made up of four parts. Either Simplified or Traditional Chinese *Hàn* characters or Roman alphabet can be used to represent the piece moved.

The first part is a symbol of the piece. The notations for the various pieces are as follows:

General (King)	Guard (Advisor)	Elephant	Horse	Chariot (Rook)	Cannon	Soldier (Pawn)
K	A	E	H	R	C	P
帥 將 or 帅 将	仕 士	相 象	馬 or 马	車 or 车	炮	兵 卒

The second part is the file number one to nine in which the chess piece is located. In notations that uses *Hàn* characters, Red use the *Chinese* numeral, while Black use the *Arabic* numeral. These number positions are counted from right to left on each player's side; everything is relative to their positions. So, a player's right file is the other player's left file, and vice versa.

The third part is the direction of chess piece movement. These are as follows: 進 *jìn* or + plus sign for forward, 退 *tuì* or - minus sign for backward, or 平 *píng* or . dot / period sign or = equals sign for sideways movements.

The fourth part is the information of the number of the new intersection moved into. When referring to vertical movements, this indicates the number of intersections passed through. If the pieces move sideways or are pieces that does

not move linearly, such as Guard, Elephant, or Horse pieces, this number refers to the file number in which they move into.

Thus, the most common opening in the game would be:

1. C2.5 H8+7 or **1. C2=5 - H8+7** or **1. 炮二平五 馬8進7**

There may be instances where pieces of the same kind are positioned in tandem on the same file. In these cases, refer to the following system:

(Piece symbol) (前 *qián* or + plus sign for the front piece and 後 *hòu* or - minus sign for the rear piece) (Direction of movement) (Number of intersections passed through or new file number it was moving into)

There might even be rare cases where there are two or more Soldiers on the same file. In these cases, refer to the following system:

(Soldier number starting from 1, from the frontmost one) (File number on which it was on) (Direction of Movement) (File number it was moving into)

Thus, the notation to move the middle of a three tandem Red Soldiers in the 5th file to the 4th file would be:

1. 25.4 or **1. 25=4** or **1. 二五平四**

Once we had learned how the pieces moves, we can move on to learning about basic killing moves, then openings, midgames and then endgames. We can also learn more about xiàng qí puzzles and problems, look up for records of past games on the internet, or do post-mortem analyses of the games we had played. But this is beyond the scope and purpose of this small instruction manual, so please refer to the Links and Resources section for this purpose.

Facts, History and Trivia

象棋 *Xiàng qí* has a long history, and although its precise origins have not yet been definitely confirmed, the earliest indications reveal the game may have been played as early as the first century AD. It is still hotly debated by scholars up until today what the name *xiàng qí* really means.

Those who believe they mean the **Elephant Game** thought that the game is a war simulation that portrays two armies facing off against each other on the battlefield, was used to prepare for an upcoming battle, and had evolved from an earlier Indian counterpart upon its arrival in China, sometime in the *Warring States era* (453 to 221 BC).

Others believe they mean the **Figure Game**, since the character 象 *xiàng* could also mean *figure, image or to resemble*. The character originated as a stylized drawing of an elephant, and have that meaning because in Ancient China, paraphrasing philosopher and statesman 韩非子 *Hán Fēi Zǐ* (circa 221 BC); People rarely see living elephants and mostly came across skeletons of dead ones, from which they imagine its living form according to its features. Thus the character 象 *xiàng* came to be used for imagining reality.

Still others believe they mean the **Constellation Game**. There are other games with board and pieces, such as 六博 or 陸博 *liù bó*, an early iteration of the game Backgammon that uses dice, and has many similarities with *xiàng qí*. It have markings on the board, five Pawns and a King, and a River on the board. *Liù bó* carries a strong astronomical theme, this also because the board could be used independently as a tool for divination, based on many excavations that had unearthed the board game. The game could have represented the movements of

heavenly bodies and other celestial objects in the night sky, and features such as the River might represent the Milky Way.

Some believe that the *Xiàng qí* was not related to the Persian *Shatranj*, from which many argued that the traditional chess games known around the world develops; but was based on the *Liù bó*. It was transmitted from China to India during the *Eastern Jin era* (317 to 420 AD), where it developed into the *Chaturanga*, which was the game from which the both the Persian chess and the Chinese chess developed. However, the status of this claim is disputed.

The current form of *Xiàng qí* that is played nowadays took form no later than the *Southern Song Dynasty* (1127 to 1279 AD). In the past, Chess (used in a generic term to mean strategic board games) was one of the key factors to determine if you were a gentleman or not. Chess (Go and *Xiàng qí*) was listed second in the 四藝 *sì yì* *Four Arts* (琴棋書畫 *qín qí shū huà*) that gentlemen were supposed to be proficient. The other three were the playing the Zither (music), Chinese Calligraphy, and Chinese Paintings.

With the economic and cultural development during the *Qing Dynasty* (1636 to 1912), *xiàng qí* entered a new stage. Many different schools of chess circles and players came into prominence. With the popularization of *xiàng qí*, many books and manuals on the techniques of playing the game were published. They played an important role in popularizing *xiàng qí* and improving the techniques of play in modern times. Finally, a Western-style Encyclopedia of Chinese Chess Openings was written in the year 2004, and in the year 2018 the *World Xiangqi Rules* was published, which has strict rules as to how to write the Chinese chess notation.

Gallery of Awesome Sets



courtesy of [BoardGameGeek](#) and [eBay](#)

Links and Resources

- www.xqinenglish.com The most complete *xiàng qí* resources available in English. Contains learning materials such as the basics of the game, basic kills, ancient manuals, opening, midgame, endgame, match records, and many more.
- www.plateriver.net/community/xiangqi.php A website with animated learning materials and an app practice board where you can play against the computer.
- www.xiangqi.com by Paul English. A website where you can play and compete against other players online in tournaments. Easy interface, free of charge but you would have to sign up for an account.
- www.01xq.com A huge amount of *xiàng qí* games database. Would be useful for analyzing moves of past matches, events and competitions.
- wxf.ca/wxf/ The World Xiangqi Federation (WXF) website, in both Chinese and English.

Appendix

If you've purchased the Pictorial Style Set, the featured pieces below are those used, instead of the ones using traditional Chinese *Hàn* characters.



General

Guard

Elephant

Horse

Chariot

Cannon

Soldier

