



## The Chess Game in the Tangerine

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### Brian Wald - Reflections on Learning and Teaching Xiangqi in Canada

I first learned of xiangqi while researching the history of Western chess. “Why have I never heard of Chinese chess until now?”, I asked myself, puzzled, while reading Harold J. R. Murray’s *A Short History of Chess*.<sup>1</sup> “Why am I unfamiliar with a chess game played by millions of people in Asia?”, I wondered. Shortly thereafter, intrigued by a hand-drawn diagram of a xiangqi board and pieces, I decided to search for more information on the Internet. Imagine my surprise when I realized that lots of information is available from many websites, and that xiangqi is played and enjoyed all over the world, including countries well beyond Asia such as Canada, the United States, Australia, Great Britain, France, Germany, and Finland.

Best of all, I learned that a highly active club in Toronto called the Toronto Xiangqi Association (TXA) hosts various events throughout the year. I therefore contacted Elton Yuen, president of the Toronto Xiangqi Association, indicating my interest in xiangqi and asking some particular questions about the club.<sup>2</sup> He quickly responded, answered all my questions, and recommended I also speak to Bill Brydon.<sup>3</sup> Coincidentally, Bill lived in the same district of downtown Toronto, and it wasn’t long before I met Bill, Elton, and others to play some xiangqi.

However, before visiting Bill or participating in any TXA activities, I attempted to learn as much about xiangqi as I could from two sources: (1) H. T. Lau’s *Chinese Chess*, an English-language book I purchased in Toronto;<sup>4</sup> and (2) playing games with some of my grade four students.<sup>5</sup> Of course, in order to properly acquaint myself with the game, it was necessary to buy a xiangqi set. Wandering in Toronto’s Chinatown one afternoon, I bought an old set complete with wooden pieces and a somewhat fragile paper board. To learn the characters, I practiced setting up the board over and over until I easily

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<sup>1</sup> Murray, Herbert J. R. *A Short History of Chess*. London: Oxford University Press, 1963. This book was originally written in 1917, and includes a special chapter entitled “Chess in Asia”, pp. 124-131.

<sup>2</sup> Elton Yuen is also presently the Vice Chairman of the Promotion Commission of the World Xiangqi Federation.

<sup>3</sup> Bill Brydon has written numerous articles about xiangqi.

<sup>4</sup> Lau, H. T. *Chinese Chess*. Rutland, Vermont, and Tokyo, Japan: Charles E. Tuttle, 1985.

<sup>5</sup> I was then teaching at a school in Mississauga, a city about thirty minutes west of Toronto.

recognized the pieces, and, within days, I was regularly playing some Chinese and Vietnamese students in my class.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, other students became curious about xiangqi and wanted to participate in this unique activity, and within a few weeks almost all my students were able to learn the Chinese characters and play xiangqi!

Nonetheless, despite the success of my chess club in the spring of 1999 - only a month or two after I discovered xiangqi - my most successful teaching experiences occurred in the 1999-2000 school year.<sup>7</sup> That year I was fortunate to have about ten students (out of a total of twenty-nine) in my class, in addition to a small number of students from other classes, who were very interested in xiangqi. Not only did they play regularly at school in my chess club, but they all purchased xiangqi sets so they could play at home. Some students even taught their parents how to play.

Occasionally, in computer class, students were allowed to play xiangqi, chess, or another educational game of their choice on the Internet. Fortunately, many of them played Chinese chess on Chesshub.com, then called *Friends of Xiangqi*, and improved by practicing with players from all over the world. Some students also explored the TXA website or Peter Sung's xiangqi home page and game database for additional information.<sup>8</sup> But probably the most effective method for teaching xiangqi was demonstrating to students how games can be recorded. This allowed them, under my guidance, to study famous game collections - such as *Chü-chung pi (The Secrets in the Tangerine, 1632)* and the *Mei-hua p'u (The Plum-blossom Manual, 1644-1911)* - and document their own games.<sup>9</sup> By recording their moves, students were able to learn from their failures and successes. What did I do wrong? What did I do right? How could I have improved my game? How is my opening, my mid-game, and my end-game? These are, obviously, questions all xiangqi players frequently ask themselves.

We also benefited very much from two English-language books published by the Asian Xiangqi Federation and the Chinese Xiangqi Association: *Victories All the Way* and *The End Game Technique*, both translated by C. K. Lai.<sup>10</sup> More recently, I have been studying Qian Jun's *Checkmate Methods in Xiangqi Mid-Games*, translated by Zhang Quansheng, and look forward to more translations of Chinese xiangqi literature into

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<sup>6</sup> Charley Wang, Aaron Ho, and Ashley Jong, all ten years of age, were my first opponents. Charlie, educated in mainland China until the age of nine, was a particularly intelligent boy who reluctantly defeated me many times until I improved my game.

<sup>7</sup> In Canada and the USA, the school year begins in the first week of September and ends in the last week of June.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Sung, Vice-President of the TXA, maintains a home page in English and Chinese featuring many interesting items, including an extensive database of xiangqi games. The website address is [txa.ipoline.com](http://txa.ipoline.com). The TXA website address is [txa.ipoline.com/club/txa/txa.htm](http://txa.ipoline.com/club/txa/txa.htm).

<sup>9</sup> I am using here the English translations as rendered by Dennis A. Leventhal. See his *The Chess of China*. Taipei, Taiwan, China: Mei Ya Publications, 1978, p.12. H. T. Lau translates these game collections as *The Secret Inside the Orange* and *The Plum-Blossom Meter*, and includes selected games and variations from them in *Chinese Chess*.

<sup>10</sup> Jingming, Tu. *Victories All The Way*. Asian Xiangqi Federation, Chinese Xiangqi Association, 1991. Ligu, Meng and Zhongjian, Li. *The End Game Technique*. Asian Xiangqi Federation, Chinese Xiangqi Association, 1990.

English.<sup>11</sup> Of course, and perhaps not fully appreciated in China, some special challenges confront English-speaking xiangqi players who wish to seriously study the game. Perhaps the greatest of these is the relatively small number of xiangqi books available in English, especially when compared to the immense quantity, quality, and variety of Western chess literature.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the World Xiangqi Federation has recently made great progress in assisting English-speaking xiangqi players throughout the world, and is to be congratulated for producing the high quality Chinese/English WXF website and the Chinese/English *Xiangqi Bulletin*. Indeed, Article 3.3 of the WXF Constitution states the following: “The official working languages of the Federation are Chinese and English.” Hopefully, the WXF, as well as other organizations and individuals, will continue to produce quality xiangqi material in English as a means of “[promoting] the practice of xiangqi in the world, to organize and develop xiangqi activities internationally”.<sup>13</sup>

Another challenge confronting players outside of Asia is finding opponents willing to learn xiangqi and/or play games on a regular basis. Fortunately, my students were invited to play in a tournament hosted by the TXA in June 2000 at the end of the school year. This allowed them the opportunity of demonstrating their xiangqi abilities in a public setting, and members of the TXA, the Scarborough Seniors Chess Club, and members of the general public also enjoyed participating in this exciting event.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, organized clubs, in addition to Internet servers, are essential in Canada and other western countries to promote and encourage the learning and playing of xiangqi.

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In conclusion, my xiangqi teaching experiences have permitted me certain insights that I would like to share with you.

**1. Traditional Chinese characters are an integral part of xiangqi.** Many Westerners derive great pleasure from the aesthetics of xiangqi. After all, one of the great distinguishing features of xiangqi is the use of Chinese characters on flat wooden or plastic playing discs, a centuries-old tradition. Not only are these pieces artistically beautiful and an integral part of Chinese history and culture, but they are, at the same time, eminently practical. Xiangqi literature and computer software easily adapts them to the printed page or the video monitor. Furthermore, given the option of playing with three-dimensional pieces, my students overwhelmingly preferred the traditional discs.

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<sup>11</sup> Jun, Qian. *Checkmate Methods in Xiangqi Mid-Games*. Chinese Xiangqi Association, World Xiangqi Federation, 1985.

<sup>12</sup> The same could be said for other languages, too. I am presently writing a detailed article surveying and evaluating xiangqi literature available in English, French, and German.

<sup>13</sup> Please refer to the objectives as stated in the World Xiangqi Federation Constitution, Articles 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3.

<sup>14</sup> Thirteen students (six boys and seven girls) competed in the Millennium Canada Day Cup Toronto Xiangqi Tournament, June 10, 2000, at the Chinatown Center, Toronto. In the junior division, Brandon Balliram won first place, Camillo Rambang won second place, and Marsha Krcmar won third place.

2. **Western children and adults can easily learn the Chinese characters.** In addition to teaching about fifty children xiangqi over the past few years, I have also had the pleasure of introducing the game to many adults, including my brother, mother, and some friends. On average, I estimate that most Westerners can learn the characters in about fifteen minutes, and become comfortable after playing a few games.
3. **The WXF English piece names and notation system is excellent.** The names of the xiangqi pieces in English are standardized and hopefully xiangqi publications will consistently use this terminology. Even more important, I think, is the continuity between the English and Chinese notation systems. This way an eager xiangqi player like myself can learn to read Chinese notation with little difficulty, so that C2=5 or N2+3, for example, are straightforward in either language.
4. **A knowledge of xiangqi can only enhance one's appreciation of chess, and a knowledge of chess can only enhance one's appreciation of xiangqi.** Both xiangqi and chess are excellent games with large numbers of players around the world.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps one day in the future millions of people in North America, Europe, Asia, and elsewhere will be able to skillfully play both games. In the event that giant tangerines appear, magically, very distant from the property of "The Man from Pa-ch'iung", we may understand why and not be too surprised!<sup>16</sup>

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Special thanks to TXA members for their help, information, and support. Also, thanks to the WXF and other xiangqi organizations for their hard work.

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<sup>15</sup> Other traditional games such as shogi, go, and backgammon are centuries old and very difficult to master, too.

<sup>16</sup> Familiar to many xiangqi players, especially in China, is the story about "The Man from Pa-ch'iung" by Niu Seng-ju. In this legend, two giant-sized tangerines were split open, and found inside each of them was a pair of old men playing xiangqi.

