

# A Comparative Study of the Chinese Folk Chess Games “Fang” and “Jiu”

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## Abstract

This paper, through the methods of literature review and field investigation, starts from the evolution and connotation, rule characteristics and cultural connotations of “Fang” and “Jiu” chess, analyzes the relationship, similarities and differences, as well as the distinctive features between “Fang” and “Jiu” chess, and puts forward its own viewpoints and insights. This is conducive to helping people to better distinguish and master the characteristics of “Fang” and “Jiu” chess, so as to promote the modern development of the skills of chess games and the dissemination of cultural values, and provide references for the protection of intangible cultural heritage and the promotion of the diversity of Chinese culture.

## Keywords

“Fang” Chess, “Jiu” Chess, Comparative Study

## 1. Introduction

The culture of chess games is the crystallization of human civilization’s evolution, integrating competition and leisure. The folk chess games of Chinese nation have a long history and a wide variety, embodying profound cultural heritage and folk wisdom. In the northwest region of China, there are many popular folk chess games such as “Fang” chess and Tibetan chess, among which “Jiu” chess is a typical representative of Tibetan chess. Currently, research on “Fang” and “Jiu” chess has been comprehensive and in-depth. However, most of the articles mainly focus on the origin, board shape, layout, movement, and rules of the chess games. The research on the relationship between the folk chess games is not clear; especially, the comparative study of “Fang” and “Jiu” chess is relatively scarce. Therefore, this article aims to clarify the schools and characteristics of folk chess games by

discussing the historical evolution process and the intrinsic connection between “Fang” and “Jiu” chess, and to provide a new perspective and thinking for the exchange and integration of chess games culture.

## **2. The Concept and Classification of “Fang” and “Jiu” Chess**

### **2.1. The Evolution and Connotations of “Fang” and “Jiu” Chess**

Regarding the origin of “Fang” chess, there are various folk tales. One of them claims that it was created by Han Xin, a founding general of the Han Dynasty, to train his troops’ cooperative combat skills and educate them in tactical thinking through the game of “Fang” chess (Xian & Zhang, 2018). However, this claim has not been substantiated by historical documents. In 2007, archaeologists in Ningxia discovered a brick with lines in a Han tomb in Zhongning County, which closely resembled the chessboards of ancient folk games. Some speculate that this brick might have some connection to the origin of Ningxia Fang chess (Zhang, 2020), but this discovery does not directly prove that “Fang” chess originated in the Han Dynasty. To this day, the activity of playing “Fang” chess is still popular in the vast fields of Northwest China, including Ningxia, Gansu, and Xinjiang. Its rules are simple and clear, with chessboards mostly designed with vertical and horizontal lines, emphasizing practicality and simplicity. The gameplay is closely related to terms like “Cheng Fang” and “Wei Kun”, demonstrating high logic and accessibility.

As for the origin of “Jiu” chess, historical documents such as “Old Book of Tang: Tubo Biography” and “New Book of Tang: Tubo Biography” mention the history of chess playing among the Tibetans, indirectly confirming the long history of Tibetan chess (including “Jiu” chess) in the Tibetan region (Ding & Phuntsok, 2012). The Tibetan epic “The Epic of King Gesar” records the story of King Gesar and Xima Meiruzhe playing chess with the minister of the demon country (Jiao, 2007a). Although this cannot directly prove the origin of “Jiu” chess, it reflects the long history and wide spread of Tibetan chess. Some scholars, through the methods of ethnology and cultural studies, believe that “Jiu” chess has its “footprints” in Tibetan-inhabited areas such as Tibet, Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu and Xinjiang (Ma & Shang, 2017). Its rule design is more complex, with more lines on the chessboard, emphasizing the changes in the formation of the game and strategic thinking. In the specific rules, “Jiu” chess introduces innovative forms such as “Cheng Zhengxing” and “Fei Zi”, significantly enhancing the strategic and competitive nature of the chess game.

### **2.2. Classification of the Folk Chess Games**

From the perspective of chessboard design, they can be classified into grid-type (such as “Fang” chess, “Jiu” chess), area-distribution type (such as Mongolian chess), and special-shaped type (such as circular chessboards).

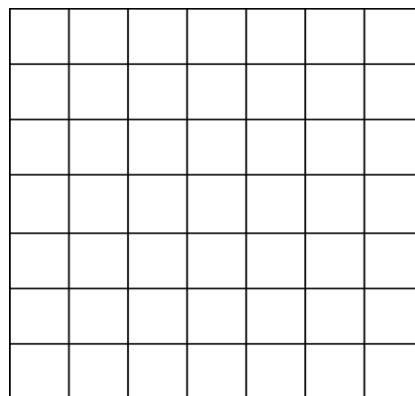
From the perspective of functional positioning, they can be classified into strategic, recreational, and competitive chess. “Fang” and “Jiu” chess mainly belong

to strategic and recreational chess, stimulating the spatial thinking ability and overall perspective of participants through gameplay, and also having certain social interaction functions. In certain cultural contexts, some types of chess also have ritualistic elements. For instance, the “Jia” chess move in Tibetan chess contains traditional elements of religious divination.

### 3. Cultural Characteristics of “Fang” and “Jiu” Chess

#### 3.1. Basic Rules of Play

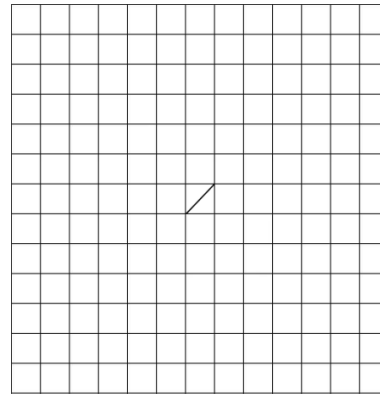
“Fang” chess has board sizes such as  $5 \times 5$ ,  $6 \times 6$ ,  $7 \times 7$ , and  $7 \times 8$ . Among them, two types are widely spread. One type is the standard board in regions such as Gansu, Shanxi, Xinjiang and Qinghai, which is a square grid with seven horizontal and seven vertical lines, totaling 49 intersections and 49 pieces, with 24 white pieces and 25 black pieces (As shown in **Figure 1**). The other type is the standard board for Ningxia Fang chess, which is approximately a rectangular grid with seven horizontal and eight vertical lines, totaling 56 intersections and 56 pieces, with 28 pieces for each side, black and white (**Zhang, 2020**). The gameplay is divided into two stages: layout and continuous strategy implementation. During the layout stage, the board is empty, and both sides place all their pieces on the desired positions on the board one by one until all intersections are filled. The continuation stage begins after the layout is completed, where both sides start playing by forming squares and capturing pieces, and can also form other patterns such as long lines or diagonals to capture pieces.



**Figure 1.** Fangqi board ( $7 \times 7$ ).

“Jiu” chess has board sizes such as  $6 \times 6$ ,  $10 \times 10$ , and  $14 \times 14$ . The most common one is the  $14 \times 14$  board (**Liu, 2020**), which has been designated as the official competition board (As shown in **Figure 2**). The board is square, with a diagonal line in the center square, called “Jiu Wu” in Tibetan. This diagonal line is used for placing pieces at the beginning of the game, similar to the “pedestal” in Go. There are a total of 196 pieces on the board, 98 for each side. The gameplay is divided into two stages: placing pieces and moving pieces. During the placement stage, the white side goes first, followed by the black side, and both sides place pieces in the

center “Jiu Wu” and then fill the board alternately. During the moving stage, the black side goes first, capturing the piece on “Jiu Wu”, and then alternately moving pieces to capture or form winning patterns. The capture methods include jumping capture, forming “Jiu” to capture, forming patterns, and the unique technique of “Fei Zi”.



**Figure 2.** Jiuqi board (14 × 14).

### 3.2. Symbolic Meaning of the Chess Games

The board of “Fang” chess often adopts a grid layout with crisscrossing lines, emphasizing the balance and order between lines, reflecting the Confucian idea of order and harmony. The patterns such as “Cheng Fang” and “Wei Kun” in the game convey the pursuit of order and unity through specific geometric shapes, expressing the aspiration for harmonious social relations and a stable life.

“Jiu” chess incorporates more Tibetan cultural traits into the game. The greatest value of the Tibetan chess culture lies in promoting communication, interaction and integration among the ethnic groups during the game (Zhou & Ma, 2024). The design of the “handicap stone” in the center of the board is regarded as a cultural symbol of the center and authority, closely related to the Tibetan society’s emphasis on religion and power. The pattern designs in “Jiu” chess, such as “Jixiang Pattern” or “Dalian Formation”, reflect the wisdom of the Tibetan ancestors and symbolize the pursuit of a good life and spiritual protection. The specific cultural values of the two are reflected in the fact that the 56 ethnic groups do not limit themselves to playing chess within their own ethnic groups, thus forming cultural exchanges among the ethnic groups.

### 3.3. Regional and Ethnic Characteristics

“Fang” chess is mainly popular in the northwest regions of China, such as Ningxia and Xinjiang. It has distinct ethnic characteristics and is a traditional sports and intellectual game passed down by ethnic minorities like the Hui people for many years. The fields and roadsides, the streets and alleys are all spaces for playing “Fang” chess. Pebbles, grass sticks, sheep dung and bottle caps, as well as cement and soil, are all sources of the game pieces for “Fang” chess. The elderly, the weak,

women and children, as well as social elites, are all players of “Fang” chess (Zhou & Ma, 2023). In Ningxia and Xinjiang, “Fang” chess has been included in the list of intangible cultural heritage at the provincial level and has become a widely spread chess game in Hui-inhabited areas, especially in rural areas.

“Jiu” chess is mainly popular in Amdo Tibetan areas such as Qinghai and Sichuan, and is also widely spread in Tibetan areas of Gansu and other places. The design of the board and rules of “Jiu” chess fully incorporate the characteristics of the plateau environment and nomadic life. For example, the “Dalian Formation” is consistent with the shape of the backpacks used by Tibetans in daily life, reflecting the practical wisdom of the nomads.

### 3.4. Social Functions and Values

From the perspective of entertainment function, “Fang” chess has simple rules and is easy to learn, making it suitable for people of all ages to participate in, providing a platform for people to relieve stress and relax. “Jiu” chess, on the other hand, attracts a large number of enthusiasts with its complex rules and ever-changing game situations, making it not only a form of entertainment but also a part of competition.

In terms of educational functions, previously, “Fang” and “Jiu” chess were merely casual games. Now, by offering chess courses, it helps students to accept and face up to frustration, thereby enhancing their mental faculties. “Fang” chess trains the logical thinking ability and spatial imagination of participants through the layout and strategies in the game, while also cultivating their overall perspective and patience. “Jiu” chess, on the other hand, places more emphasis on exercising the adaptability and creativity of the participants, especially how to reverse the situation through the rules when at a disadvantage in the game. This process has a positive significance for enhancing the individual’s willpower and psychological quality.

## 4. The Development Scale and Bottlenecks of “Fang” and “Jiu” Chess

### 4.1. The Current Development Status of “Fang” and “Jiu” Chess

Through literature review (Zhang et al., 2020; Gao & Zhang, 2020; Shi, 2014; Jiao, 2007b), it is known that the most studied types of “Fang” chess are Ningxia Fang chess and Xinjiang Fang chess. Since the successful holding of the first Fang chess competition in Guyuan District in 1985, Fang chess was included as an official competition event in the First Ethnic Minority Games of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region in 1986. The regions where it is most concentrated are Yuanzhou District, Jingyuan County, and Pengyang County in Guyuan City, Tongxin County in Wuzhong City, and Haiyuan County in Zhongwei City. Xinjiang Fangqi was officially listed as a competition event in the Second Ethnic Minority Games of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region in 1991 and was announced as one of the first batch of autonomous regional intangible cultural heritage in 2007. It is mainly

played in Urumqi, Changji, Miquan, Turpan, Shanshan, Hami, Yili, and Kuqa.

“Jiu” chess is a type of chess popular in Tibetan areas such as Tibet, Qinghai, and Sichuan, and is an important part of Tibetan culture. On June 12, 2018, the Jiu chess game was listed as one of the fifth batch of autonomous regional intangible cultural heritage representative projects in the Xizang Autonomous Region and was officially included in the fifth batch of national intangible cultural heritage representative project list in May 2021.

#### **4.2. The Development Scale of “Fang” and “Jiu” Chess**

Regarding the market scale of “Fang” chess, although it is difficult to quantify precisely, it is deeply loved by the masses as a traditional folk game in western provinces, especially in Guyuan, Ningxia. A large number of people participate, not only local residents but also many tourists and chess enthusiasts. In terms of competitions and activities, Fang chess has been included in some local official sports competition events, and there are also self-organized competitions and activities by enthusiasts.

“Jiu” chess, as one of the representatives of Tibetan chess, is deeply loved by the agricultural and pastoral masses and is an important part of folk competitive entertainment activities. A large number of people participate, especially in Amdo Tibetan areas such as Qinghai and Sichuan. In terms of competitions and activities, “Jiu” chess competitions are relatively common in Tibetan areas, such as the national Tibetan chess competition held in Qinghai Province, where Jiu Chess is an important event.

#### **4.3. The Development Bottlenecks of “Fang” and “Jiu” Chess**

“Fang” chess, due to its simple rules and wide spread path, has strong vitality in folk society, especially in the northwest region, where it remains an entertainment form in rural gatherings and festivals. However, with the diversification of modern entertainment methods, the audience of “Fang” chess has gradually shrunk, especially in the process of urbanization, its appeal as a traditional entertainment form has significantly declined.

“Jiu” chess, due to its complex rules and fine board design, can only be fully mastered through oral transmission and personal instruction. This single mode of inheritance makes it highly susceptible to the passage of time and the loss of inheritors. Although “Jiu” chess has been listed in the intangible cultural heritage protection list and a Tibetan chess association has been established in the Xizang region to promote its inheritance, the overall participation and popularization rate remain unsatisfactory.

### **5. Development Expectations and Prospects for “Fang” and “Jiu” Chess**

“Fang” and “Jiu” chess are the crystallization of the wisdom of various ethnic groups in the northwest region. They share similarities, such as similar boards and

some similar playing methods, which makes it difficult for outsiders to distinguish them at first glance. However, they each have distinct characteristics in terms of moves and playing steps, without any similarities. It is precisely this internal difference that provides chess enthusiasts with diverse choices and challenges, showcasing unique charm.

### **5.1. Intelligent and Personalized Development**

Develop digital products based on the “Fang” and “Jiu” chess, and realize remote games through online platforms, such as online game platforms and VR games, so that the way of playing is not limited to face-to-face, and the playing place is not restricted to fields, streets or alleys. Attract more young people to participate in a novel and convenient way. At the same time, integrating their historical and cultural backgrounds, creating characteristic cultural IP, telling chess stories through animations, comics, and other forms, and developing peripheral products aim to expand the influence of chess culture and attract more audiences to pay attention and participate.

### **5.2. Improvement of the Education and Training System**

The inheritance of chess culture requires the promotion of education, with schools as the main battlefield. Firstly, a multi-level training system should be established, with classes divided according to the players’ levels. Secondly, the construction of teaching staff should be strengthened, organizing training and introducing both folk experts and professional players. Finally, a feedback mechanism for trainees should be established, regularly collecting opinions to optimize training and ensure that the content is closely aligned with the needs, thereby enhancing the training effect.

### **5.3. Cross-Field Cooperation and Innovative Integration**

Relying on local characteristics to create “Fang” and “Jiu” chess brand events is the key to the modernization of chess games. Adjusting the rules to enhance competitiveness, integrating modern event models, and attracting participants and audiences. For example, Japanese Gobang has stepped onto the world stage, enhancing the participation of amateur enthusiasts globally. Strengthening publicity and media promotion to form a cultural industry chain and promote sustainable development. Meanwhile, integrating them with tourism, developing cultural and creative products, and holding experience activities to facilitate the coordinated development of local cultural tourism and cultural protection.

## **Conflicts of Interest**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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