

A Study on the Chess Culture of Ethnic Minority Groups in Gansu Province

Ying'an Wang¹, Xiaoming Ma²

¹College of Physical Education, Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou, China

²College of Physical Education, Qinghai Minzu University, Xining, China

Email: 13909785766@163.com

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Abstract

As a region inhabited by large populations of ethnic minority groups, Gansu province boasts rich ethnic cultural resources which reflect traditional culture and intangible cultural heritage that had taken shape thousands of years ago. Among these are various ethnic folk chess games. They are time-honored with many types such as the “Fang” chess of the Hui ethnic group, the “Jiu” chess of the Tibetans, the “King and Ministers” chess, the Mongolian chess, the Mongolian military chess, etc. These games embody distinctive ethnic and regional characteristics, as well as the cultural elements of a particular ethnic minority group. It is of great significance, therefore, to study the ethnic chess by collecting, documenting and comparing different types of related chess. The paper explores ways to standardize, protect and promote them scientifically in joint efforts, and draws a conclusion that examining their significance in the present era and the ethnic characteristics is the key to understanding the profound culture behind the chess.

Keywords

Ethnic Minority Groups in Gansu Province, Chess Culture, A Study

1. Introduction

China has a rich and profound traditional culture, which is a valuable spiritual asset of the people. However, the traditional chess culture of Chinese nation is now under the threat of extinction, with many excellent chess games being in decline and therefore crying for protection and preservation. At present, the chess games in Gansu province are recovering gradually, but far from satisfactorily. Extensive research on ethnic chess is being carried out, and events frequently held, but there are disparities between different types of chess across

different areas. The same chess games, for instance, have varied rules across different regions, and competitions are not held on a regular basis. At present, some platforms have been created to play such games as the “Jiu” chess and the “king and ministers” chess online, and a few Chinese universities are engaging in the R&D of AI chess games, including School of Information Engineering of Minzu University of China and Tsinghua University, which has a specialized chess research team called “Jueyi”. Other organizations like the “Yike” chess team and the online Tibetan “Jiu” chess game at WeChat are devoted to preserving and promoting ethnic chess culture, too. Besides, chess tournaments have been held such as the National Open Tournament in Lhasa, Tibet in October 2021, the National Intellectual Sports Open Tournament in Huzhu Tu autonomous county in Qinghai province in May 2023, and the National “Jiu” Chess Open Tournament in Huzhu in November 2023, in each of which representatives from Gansu province achieved good rankings. Those events have helped rescue and preserve many chess games, but more efforts are needed to promote the chess games by identifying the type, standardizing the name, terminology, rules and notations, and preserving the chess records. If nothing is done, the number of players will be continuously shrinking, probably leading to a pessimistic picture in which the masters are deceased or no longer play chess, and in which the ethnic chess in Gansu probably disappears, leaving nothing behind but fuzzy names, terms and notations that are difficult, if not impossible, to recognize. Therefore, this paper aims to collect and document the types of ethnic chess in Gansu province and explore ways to standardize, protect and promote them in joint efforts.

2. Types of Chess and Status

In the local histories of Gansu province, knowledge about chess games of ethnic minority groups is generally little or scarce, although some literatures devote a few paragraphs to this topic. The authors of the present paper, having collected and studied relevant literatures such as municipality records and county records, identify the following chess games as worthy of promotion and research.

2.1. The “Liubo” Chess (6 vs 6 Chess Game)

As an old chess game, this game has 12 chessmen which are divided into two parts by their white and black colors, each color with 6 chessmen [1], as shown **Figure 1**.

Figurines depicting the game have been unearthed in a tomb of the Han Dynasty in Wuwei, a city along the Hexi Corridor. The figurines were carved out of wood with a white base and colored drawings and patterns on them, vividly portraying two players who compete on a chessboard. Each, about 30 centimeters in height, sits opposite his opponent with different airs. The colored patterns on their clothes, as well as such details as the beard, hair, eye brows are clear and distinguishable. One of them stretches his right hand slantly downward, with the



Figure 1. A chessboard of the “Liubo” chess, from *Sports Chronicles of Gansu Province*.

palm being laid horizontally above the chessboard; the other player has his elbow bent slightly above his left hand, and his right hand slightly bent upon the knee. The chessboard, approximately 20 cm × 20 cm in size and with a slight damage on one side, has a black background and white lines. The relic vividly represents the intensity of the competition.

2.2. The “Fang” Chess

The “Fang” chess, literally meaning the square chess, enjoys huge popularity across centuries as an ethnic sport and recreational game to cultivate intelligence. Interesting and easy to play, it has been very prosperous in the vast rural areas of northwest China (usually with 49 [7 × 7] or 56 chess pieces [7 × 8]) [2].

Chess set needed: The square chess is very easy to play since small rocks, earth lumps, pieces of broken tiles or bricks, firewood sticks, coins, and even sheep droppings can be used as the pieces. Besides, it can be played anywhere the players find convenient, such as in the fields or in a yard, only requiring a chessboard to be drawn on the ground with 7 ranks (horizontal lines) and 7 lines (vertical lines) to start the game.

Rules: One variation of the game, which is popular in most areas of northwestern China, has 56 chessmen (7 × 8), and therefore is locally known as “Seven Files and Eight Files”. In the opening game, each player makes 28 moves, and in the middle game, the person playing first moves without attempting to “make a square”, while the person playing next moves his pieces to achieve that purpose. The odds to win and lose are equal, as practice shows.

In the other variation of the game, which is popular in some areas in Gansu province, there are 49 pieces (7 × 7), with 25 pieces for the person to play first, and 24 for the person to play next. They must deploy their respective pieces very deliberately. Technically, there are different names for the pieces, such as “Touma” (literally means the first code), “Liujiaozi”, (literally means hexagonal pieces) “Wuhuazi” (literally means five flowers), “Erma” (literally means the second code), “Changyao” (literally means short-waisted pieces), “Changyao” (literally means long-waisted pieces), etc. The two sides open by placing their own chess-

men before moving. The person who plays next can choose to take off one piece of his opponent. A piece of the other side will be captured once each player makes a square with four chess pieces of his own.

2.3. The “Yangwo” Chess (The Sheepfold Chess)

As a game of wit, it involves the following facilities and rules:

Chess set required: It needs to dig 10 or 20 holes (“sheepfolds”) in the ground in two rows, and place 5 or 10 pieces (such as small rocks) in each hole, totaling 50 or 200 pieces.

Rules: The two sides play Rock-Paper-Scissors to decide who goes first. The first to go chooses a “sheepfold” and moves clockwise or counterclockwise, dropping and collecting the chess pieces without changing the direction in the whole game. He drops one piece into each hole at one time until he drops all, and if the hole next to this hole is empty, he can collect all the pieces in the hole after the empty hole. However, he collects nothing if the two successive holes next to the hole into which he has dropped all his pieces have no pieces in them at all. The person who goes next chooses one “sheepfold” to start from, drops and collects the pieces according to the same rules. The player who collects more pieces will be the winner, while the player who collects less will be made to herd the sheep or something.

2.4. The “Tiaokujing” Chess (Literally Means Driving into the “Dry Well”)

This is an intellectual game for children, involving the following facilities and rules:

Chess set: It needs two groups of 6 pieces and a chessboard drawn on the ground.

Rules: The two sides play Rock-Paper-Scissors to decide who goes first, and each player moves his pieces in an attempt to drive his opponent’s pieces into the “dry well”.

2.5. The “Jiu” Chess (The Jigsaw Chess)

“Jiu” is actually a transliteration of the Tibetan word for “jigsaw” [3], so the game literally means the jigsaw chess. The chess is interesting and unpredictable, involving such phases as opening game, middle game and end game. In this strongly competitive game, there are usually 196 chess pieces (14×14), 81 (9×9), 49 (7×7), or 36 (6×6) chess pieces divided into two groups.

Chess set: It needs to draw a chessboard on any object available, such as a wooden board, a plate, cupboard, an animal skin or on the ground, but a fine wooden or cloth chessboard is used in a formal game. Besides, any materials at hand such as clays, clods, rocks or sheep droppings of different colors or shapes, can be used as the chess pieces, but Go pieces are used instead in an official game.

Laying the chess pieces: The diagonal intersection in the center square (called the seat) is the starting point for both players to start laying their pieces in turn before opening the game.

Rules: Moving the pieces: When moving, the pieces at the diagonal ends of the center square are removed before the black pieces move first (since the other player lays the white pieces first).

Capturing the pieces: Each player can take his opponent's one or more pieces if there is an empty position after skipping an adjacent piece of the opponent. In many areas, the number of each player's pieces seldom exceed 10, and usually 9×9 , 6×6 , or 7×7 , which is the most common. The rules of the jigsaw chess are basically unified across different regions but not without differences. For instance, some players use a 10×10 or 9×9 chessboard; some determine who goes first by playing Rock-Paper-Scissors while others let the white pieces go first. Besides, the victory can be determined either by the number of pieces captured or by a particular formation successfully made. In Tibet, this game can be seen everywhere, played by elderly people by the roadside. As is often the case, skilled players can achieve the victory within a few minutes, so they can play many rounds in an afternoon without slackening or being bored.

2.6. The "Weiheshang" Chess ("Encircling the Monk")

This is an intellectual game that is especially popular with young people. The chess set and rules required are as follows.

Chess set: It needs to draw a chessboard on the ground, taking 16 one-color small rocks or goat droppings as the chess pieces, with a larger one being the "monk" and the others, "kids".

Rules: One player moves the "kids" to encircle with four pieces the "monk" who sits in the "temple".

First, the "kids" move away from the "temple gate", moving one step at one time before the "monk" goes, who can move one or more steps at one time in a straight line.

Second, the "monk" captures two "kids" by moving and standing in-between.

Third, two "kids" can converge an attack at the "monk", who must go forward or retreat rather than stay where it is.

Fourth, once the "monk" is encircled by four "kids", but not in the temple, they must retreat, leaving the "monk" free to move.

Fifth: Once the "monk" is encircled in the "temple", the "kids" win; once there are only three "kids" left, the "monk" claims victory.

2.7. The "Jiawuma" Chess (Literally Means "Five Chessmen")

The chess is a fun game with equal number of chess pieces divided into two groups. It requires the following facilities and rules.

Chess set: It needs to draw a chessboard on the ground and prepare 10 pieces for each ps, as shown **Figure 2**.

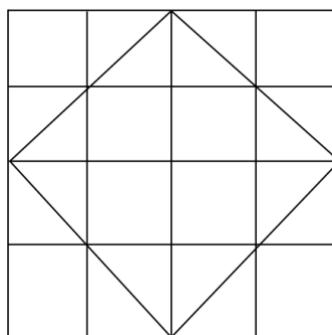


Figure 2. A chessboard of the “jiawuma” chess, *from the research group production.*

Rules: The players place their respective five pieces on two sides of the chessboard in a symmetrical pattern. A finger-guessing game is played to determine who goes first.

The two players take turns to move along a straight line or a diagonal line without making turns. One or more moves at one time are allowed. Each player can converge an attack at and capture one of his opponent’s pieces, or take his two pieces by moving and standing in-between. He can repeat this process until he captures all the opponent pieces toward victory.

3. Regional Distribution and Brief Introduction of Chess in Gansu

Since ancient times, Gansu has been inhabited by large populations of ethnic minority groups such as Hui, Manchu, Tibetan, Yugu, Dongxiang, Mongolian, Bao’an, Kazak, Tu, and Sala, etc., accounting for 9.38% of the total population. Among them, the Bao’an, Yugu and Dongxiang minority groups are unique of Gansu, and the distribution of their chess games is shown in **Table 1**.

The “Fang” chess (the square chess) is a traditional sports event very popular with the Hui, Dongxiang and Sala ethnic minority groups. “Fang” means forming a square by occupying the four points of a square on the chessboard with four pieces, thus capturing a piece of the opponent. The player who captures more pieces becomes the winner. Generally, it is played among young shepherds and farmers in their spare time, and has distinctive local colors and ethnic cultural characteristics. Because the chess requires but simple facilities and is easy to play, there are large numbers of enthusiasts in areas of Gansu province, such as Linxia Hui autonomous prefecture and Tianshui’s Zhangjiachuan Hui autonomous county. In the late Qing Dynasty and early Republican period, sports events prevalent in the rural areas of Linxia included the “Fang” chess, horse races, wrestling, swinging, waling the mule with a bowl of water on its back, etc. Although the origin of the square chess is not confirmed by the literatures the authors of the present paper have read, a piece of painted brick unearthed in a tomb of the Han Dynasty located in Ningxia’s Zhongning County reminds us of the square chess [4], as shown **Figure 3**. Since it is an ancient chessboard for a folk chess game resembling the square chess. The game is popular in Gansu

Table 1. Distribution of chess games of ethnic minority groups in Gansu.

No.	Chess Name	Category	Area
1	The “Jiu” chess	Competitive	Gannan Tibetan autonomous prefecture and Tianshu Tibetan autonomous prefecture
2	“King and Ministers”	Competitive	Gannan
3	Mongolian chess	Competitive	Jiuquan’s Subei Mongolian autonomous county and Zhangye’s Pingshanhu
4	The “Fang” chess	Competitive	Lanzhou, Linxia Hui autonomous prefecture, Pingliang, Tianshui’s Zhangjiachuan Hui autonomous county
5	The “Liubo” chess	Competitive	The Hexi Corridor (Wuwei, Jinchang, Zhangye, Jiuquan and Jiayuguan)
6	The “jiawuma” chess	Fun game	The Hexi Corridor (Jinchang, Zhangye and Jiuquan)
7	The “Yangwo” chess	Fun game	Lanzhou and Linxia
8	The “Tiaokujing” chess	Fun game	Pingliang (more popular) and Qingyang
9	The “Weireshang” chess	Fun game	Lanzhou, Linxia and Tianshui

Collected by the authors of the present paper.

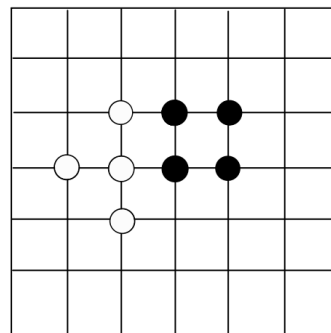


Figure 3. A chessboard of Fang chess when it taking the square shape, *from the research group production.*

province, has varying terms and rule across Gansu, Qinghai province, Shaanxi province, Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, and Ningxia Hui autonomous region.

Located in northwestern Gansu province, Subei Mongolian autonomous county is home to the Mongolians who had migrated from Xinjiang and Qinghai during the mid to late Qing Dynasty and therefore are living in two separate parts of the same county. The Mongolian herders pass their spare time by playing chess over centuries. In the Mongolian chess, there are different laws and rules but both sides are allowed to capture mutual pieces. Each player can choose to take or not take the other’s pieces when he has the chance. He wins once he checkmates the opponent’s King, but the game is a draw when both players end up with only a king or a single “camel” of the same color.

Gannan Tibetan autonomous prefecture, located at the upper reaches of the Yellow River, began to be inhabited by human beings since the Neolithic Age.

The CPC Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture Committee was established in 1952, when the place was inhabited by a large population of Tibetans. In 2017, Chinese checkers tournaments, Tibetan chess tournaments, “Ethnic Unity” Cup Chess Tournament and other events were held in this area. Tibetan chess is a paragon of the traditional Tibetan culture, playing a special role in the social and cultural life of the Tibetans. It is also an important part of traditional Chinese culture.

The “Jiu” chess is one of the games which plays an indispensable role Tibetan people’s life. The Tibetans, especially the nobles, are very fond of playing chess. The famous Tibetan epic *King Gesar* records the story of the King playing chess with his generals and ministers, for example [5]. Tibetan chess enjoys a long history and has become a popular instructive game for today’s people [6]. The Tibetans living in Gannan Tibetan autonomous prefecture and Tianzhu Tibetan autonomous county are particularly fond of this game, although some play the Mongolian chess due to the unique geographic location of Tianzhu. Unlike the Mongolian chess, the “Jiu” chess regards all pieces as equal in terms of the usage and rank. In the real games, both sides do not have clearly-designated “camps” or “territory”, but instead move flexibly according to the specific position.

4. Values of the Chess of Ethnic Minority Groups

4.1. Cultural Value

Traditional chess is an internal dynamic helping actualize the values of its people, and a never-ending spiritual power that unite and motivate all in a common cause. Besides, it helps enhance the image and influence of a community. For instance, literatures show that the “Fang” chess originated in Henan and Shaanxi provinces and spread to Ningxia Hui autonomous region and melted into the local folk culture during the Qin Dynasty and the Han Dynasty. Later, it gradually spread to other areas of the country, combining farming culture (such as scenes of farming) and military elements (such as deployment of troops), symbolizing ethnic unity and ethnic assimilation. In a word, traditional chess is not only a historical record but also a mode of thinking and acting as well as a set of moral norms that point to the fact that all ethnic groups are members of the Chinese family.

Many chess games of ethnic groups, such as the “Jiu” chess, the “Fang” chess and the Mongolian chess, are conducive to promoting the national values of wisdom, courage, goodness and love. Just like Xiangqi (Chinese chess), these games reflect the boldness and open-mindedness of the players. A gallery of various art forms, they also embody the customs, lifestyles and aesthetic sensibility of each ethnic group. Therefore, the popularization of these games will play an important role in the protection of history, culture and language, thus reinforcing national cohesion.

4.2. Educational Value

Playing chess can cultivate the attentiveness since a single mistake would lead to

loss. It is a gradual process which sets a time limit in a formal event but otherwise in an informal one which is played at any time and in any place that the players find convenient.

It efficiently trains the attention, especially for active children who dislike sedation. Besides, playing chess is a good way to foster a tenacious will and an unvanquishable spirit. No one can win or lose all the time, so playing chess will develop the will quality of being more courageous after experiencing setbacks. The player will probably determine to make a comeback by learning from failures.

5. Suggestions for Protecting the Chess

5.1. Creating Ethnic Chess Culture Reserves and Festivals

Global exchanges and the influence of Western culture have posed challenges to ethnic chess culture as to its inheritance and development. It is necessary, therefore, to make efforts in protecting and popularizing the games by standardizing and perfecting the chess sets, rules, laws, etc.

A good way is to build cultural reserves for traditional ethnic chess while protecting the environment and resources from the impacts of human activities and further promoting the harmonious coexistence of man and nature. Based on the unique cultural resources available at the reserves, related systems should be set up to register the inheritors. Modern technologies and tools should also be used to collect and preserve the chess games in the forms of books and videos. Besides, chess festivals can be held to promote the games.

5.2. Strengthening Education and Promotion

It is necessary to collect and integrate the rules of various chess games to formulate a set of unified rules from similar chess, in an effort to facilitate and promote chess competitions at a national level. This never means merging various games into one, for different games will be retained and played at local levels. It is our responsibility to explore and advance the chess culture of the 56 ethnic groups, and to collect and carry forward the cultural heritages, so that they will not be forgotten. What's more, schools and colleges are important sites for the inheritance and development of chess culture. Therefore, the names, rules and other details should be unified and standardized in coursebooks. Chess competitions must be held in the spirit of seeking common ground while reserving differences. Relevant policies ought to be formulated to support and guarantee competitions. Educational institutions should be guided and encouraged to educate students on chess culture inheritance, so that they will foster a love and passion for chess games. Educators need to develop concepts of developing national chess and making effective teaching plans according to the syllabus. In addition, on-line publicity campaigns, with the assistance of modern technologies, must be held to deepen the understanding about ethnic chess culture, and promote the participation in, and the inheritance and development of ethnic chess games.

6. Conclusions

The protection and promotion of ethnic traditional chess culture is a complex and arduous task. Development cannot be hindered by protection efforts, since development is the inevitable way for the chess culture. However, traditional colors and features cannot be sacrificed for the sake of development. In this case, it is necessary to make concerted efforts to protect and pass on the traditional chess of ethnic minority groups. Therefore, society and governments must shoulder the responsibility to make their own contributions to this end. Schools and universities must play a fundamental role in protecting the chess games and create a good atmosphere for chess culture.

Currently, the games discussed above are facing unfavorable challenges, and there is a long way to go before we set excellent examples of traditional culture protection for the world to follow. In order to protect traditional cultural resources, we need to collect and document different chess games, study and optimize them by standardizing the rules and other details. We will endeavor to make the “Jiu” chess an event of national chess tournaments before 2028. We should also conduct more national competitions and academic seminars on the chess games of ethnic minority groups, actively promote the skill level system, as well as publish books and audio-visual works on related chess. Besides, new technologies should be applied to preserve and promote the chess games, and organizations such as chess councils established, to create a good atmosphere for the development and protection of chess.

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Conflicts of Interest

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

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