

Rudiments of Xiangqi

-Felix Tan

Xiangqi, also known as Chinese Chess, is a game simulating the battle between two armies. It has existed in China for at least a thousand years.

The Board

The board is made up of 9 vertical lines (files) and 10 horizontal lines (ranks), forming 72 squares. The central row of 8 squares are merged into a 'river', dividing the board into two halves. On each side of the board, there is a 'palace' consisting of 4 squares and two long diagonals. The files are numbered as 1 through 9, from right to left, and from each player's perspective. (fig 1).

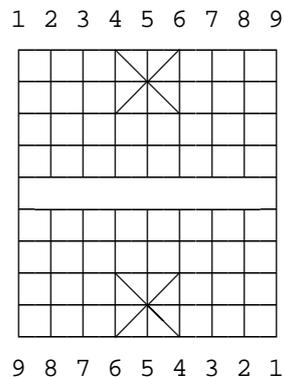


Fig 1

The Pieces

Each side has 16 pieces, as shown in fig 2. The pieces are placed on the intersections of the lines (points). Fig 3 shows the initial setup of the pieces.

Number	Red	Black	English Translation	Letter Representation
1	帥	將	King	K
2	士	士	Adviser	A
2	相	象	Elephant	E
2	車	車	chaRiot	R
2	馬	馬	Horse	H
2	炮	炮	Cannon	C
5	兵	卒	Pawn	P

Fig 2

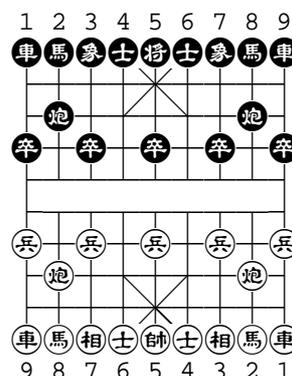


Fig 3

Object of the Game

The object of the game is to win by either capturing the opponent's King (checkmate) or rendering all the opponent's pieces immobile (stalemate). Unlike International Chess, stalemate in Xiangqi is not a draw.

Movements of Pieces

The King: It only moves within the palace, one point either horizontally or vertically. There is a unique rule about the King. The two Kings must not be facing each other directly i.e. unobstructed by any other piece, along a file.

The Adviser: It moves one point at a time along the diagonals within the palace. In other words, it can only occupy the centre and the four corners of the palace.

The Elephant: It moves exactly two points diagonally. It cannot cross the river, so there are only seven spots in the home camp which can ever be occupied by the Elephant. Further more, its movement will be blocked if there is a piece, be it friend or foe, at the intervening point. Thus, in fig. 4, the black Elephant cannot go to point A.

The Chariot: The most powerful piece. It can move forward, backward, or sideways any number of points in a single move, as long as the path is unobstructed.

The Horse: Its move can be regarded as a combination of two steps: (1) one point in any direction vertically or horizontally, followed by (2) one point diagonally further away. However, if the point next to the Horse is occupied by a piece (friend or foe), it's movement in that direction is blocked and two spots become inaccessible. In fig.4, the red Horse cannot go to point E nor point F, owing to the presence of the red Pawn. Suppose we have a black Horse on point F, the black Horse can capture the red Horse, whereas the red Horse cannot capture the black Horse.

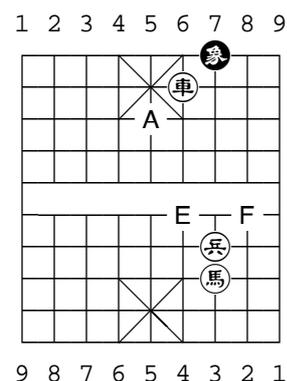


Fig 4

The Pawn: The Pawn never moves backward. It moves one point at a time, and can only move sideways after crossing the river.

The Cannon: We describe the Cannon last because it is the most unique and interesting piece in Xiangqi. All the other six types mentioned earlier move and capture in like manner. Whereas the Cannon moves like the Chariot, but capture by jumping over a piece (friend or foe).

Rules on Repetitions

Repetitions can occur in a game. In International Chess, if either player does not wish to break the repetition, the game is a draw. However, things are much more complicated in Xiangqi. You may wish to check out the AXF (Asian Xiangqi Federation) rules at the following web site: <http://www.asianxiangqi.org/English/AXFrulesEng.htm>.

For beginners, one may just bear in mind the following two rules:

- (1) At no time is perpetual checking allowed.
- (2) With the exception of King and Pawn, no piece is allowed to chase (threatening to capture on the next move) an opponent piece perpetually unless his opponent can capture the attacking piece immediately.

Notation System

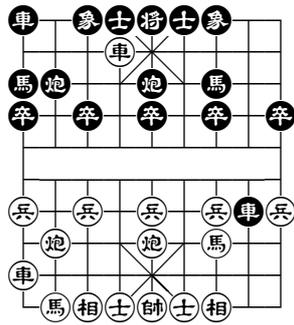
Any person serious about mastering the game must learn the Chinese Notation System of writing down the move. For the benefit of those who do not write Chinese, the AXF has devised an English translation of this system using alphabets, numerals and mathematical symbols. In this system, every move is written with four characters e.g. C2=5. The first character names the piece moved, the second character denotes the number of the file where the pieces sat before the move, the third character is either + (forward), -(backward), or =(sideways), and the last character either tells the number of the new file where the piece landed or the number of points moved by the piece. The notation C2=5 means Cannon on file #2 move sideways to file #5.

For the Adviser, the Elephant and the Horse, because of their oblique movement, the file number will always change after making a move. Therefore, the 4th character always denotes the new file number. For the rest i.e. King, Pawn, Chariot, and Cannon that move along a straight line, the 4th character also denotes the new file number when they move sideways. Only when they move forward or backward, the 4th character then counts the points they have covered. Sometimes you may have two pieces of same type

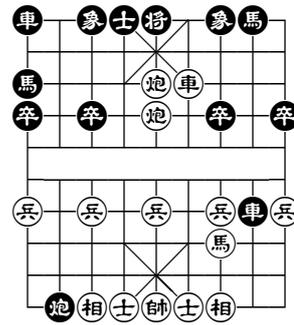
along a file. In that case, change the second character to + or - to differentiate between the front one and the back one.

Below is the record of a complete game from a Xiangqi Manual of the Ching Dynasty. With the help of the two diagrams and a little patience, you should be able to follow this game, and understand the notation system.

- | | | | | | | | |
|----------|-------------|----------|------|----------|------|----------|------|
| 1. C2=5 | C8=5 | 2. H2+3 | H8+7 | 3. R1=2 | R9+1 | 4. R1=6 | R8+6 |
| 5. R6+7 | H2+1 | 6. R9+1 | C2+7 | 7. C8+5 | H7-8 | 8. C5+4 | A6+5 |
| 9. R9=6 | K5=6 | 10. R++1 | A5-4 | 11. R6=4 | C5=6 | 12. R4+6 | K6=5 |
| 13. C8=5 | (checkmate) | | | | | | |



Position after 6. R9+1



Ending position