

# The Classic of *Weiqi* in Thirteen Chapters 棋经十三篇<sup>\*</sup>

Zhang Ni 張擬 (11th century)

## Introduction

*Zuozhuan* stated, “Those who stuff themselves with food all day without applying their mind to anything are in a hard situation. Are there no *weiqi*

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<sup>\*</sup>Translation by **Dr Paolo Zanon**, with a few minor changes. The fully annotated Zanon edition can be profitably consulted at [this link](#).

players then? It is certainly better to be one of them than to be idle!”<sup>1</sup>

In his *Xinlun*,<sup>2</sup> Huan Tan wrote, “There is now a game called *weiqi*, concerning which some say that it is a kind of simulation of war. The skillful player, fully cognizant of its configurations, places his pieces so as to encircle those of his opponent and thus win. The average player, although he aims at gaining advantages, can isolate his adversary. Therefore, whether he wins or loses, he must always be attentive and circumspect, and must also carefully calculate and evaluate in order to be certain of winning. The inexperienced player, although able to defend sides and corners, moves in small areas, limiting himself simply to surviving in small portions of territory.” Since the period of the Springs and Autumns all ages have had play-

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<sup>1</sup>The quotation is actually from Confucius’ *Analects* (*Lunyu*), 17:22. 左傳 *Zuǒ zhuàn* is an ancient history text, paragon of Classical Chinese prose.

<sup>2</sup>*Xīn lùn* 新論 “New Discussions”, is a political and philosophical work written during the Later Han period (25–220) CE.

ers of these categories, so that the Way of *weiqi* has always prospered.

The most important problems dealing with victory and defeat, divided into thirteen chapters, are now examined. Extracts from Sun Tzu's *Bingfa*<sup>3</sup> have sometimes been inserted in the text.

## Chapter one: On the pieces and the board

The number of the Ten Thousand Beings originates from the One. Therefore, the three hundred and sixty intersections of the *weiqi* board also have their One. The One is the generative principle of numbers and, considered as a pole, produces the four cardinal points. The three hundred and sixty intersections correspond to the number of days in

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<sup>3</sup>The *Bīngfǎ* 兵法 “Art of War”, an ancient work on military strategy written by Sun Bin 孫臏 and sometimes conflated with Sun Tzu's homonymous treatise.

a year. Divided into four corners, like the four seasons, they have ninety intersections each, like the number of days in a season. There are seventy-two intersections on the sides, like the number of *hou* in a year.<sup>4</sup> The three hundred and sixty pieces are equally divided between black and white, modeled on *Yin–Yang*. The lines on the board form a grid called *píng* 枰, and the squares they compose are called *guà* 罫. The board is square and quiet, the pieces are round and active.

Ever since ancient times, no player has ever happened to place the pieces on the board in exactly the same way as he did during a preceding game. *Zuozhuan* states, “Every day is new.” Therefore, reasoning must go deep and analysis must be perfect, and an attempt must be made to understand the processes that lead to victory and defeat: only in this way is it possible to attain that which is still

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<sup>4</sup>A *hòu* 候 is a period of five days within the ancient decimal division of the year in thirty-six “weeks” of ten days (*xún* 旬). At some point in history, officials of the empire were required to rest every five days.

unattained.

## Chapter two: On calculations

The player whose configurations are correct can exercise power over his adversary. He must therefore establish his strategy internally, so that his configurations are complete externally too. If he is able to work out who will win while the game is still being played, he has calculated well. If he is not able to work this out, he has calculated badly. If he does not know who is the winner and who is the loser at the end of the game, he has made no calculations at all!

It is written in Sun Tzu's *Bingfa*: "Those who calculate greatly will win; those who calculate only a little will lose. But what of those who don't make any calculations at all?" This is why everything must be calculated, in order to foresee victory and defeat.

## Chapter three: On control of territory

Control of territory means the need to lay down the general lines of the game while the pieces are being positioned. At the beginning of the game, the positions are divided up at the four corners. Then play begins, and pieces are placed obliquely, missing out two intersections and placing one “below”. Starting from two adjacent pieces, three spaces may be skipped; with three adjacent pieces, four. Five spaces may be skipped, if the player wishes to be nearer another configuration; but nearness does not mean adjacency, nor must distance be excessive.

All these things were debated by the ancients, and the rules were then studied by their successors. Therefore, those who do not wish to accept but who wish to change their methods, cannot know what the results may be. *Shijing* states, “Without a good beginning, there can be no good end.”

## Chapter four: On engaging conflict

In the Way of *weiqi*, it is important to be careful and precise. At the end of the game, the skillful player will have succeeded in occupying the centre of the board, the inexperienced player will have occupied the sides, and the average player will find himself in the corners. These are the eternal methods of players. It is generally believed that sometimes many pieces may be lost, provided that the initiative is not lost. This is because losing the initiative means passing it to the other player, who did not have it before. Before attacking to the left, observe the right; before invading the space behind your opponent's lines, observe what is in front of them.

(Sun Tzu: A distant army must pretend to be close; a nearby army must appear to be distant.)

It is not necessary to divide two living groups, because both will live in any case, even if they are not linked together. The distance between pieces must

be not excessive; nearness must not be adjacency. Rather than keeping endangered pieces alive, it is better to abandon them and acquire new positions.

(The *I Ching*: In the same way that two autonomously “living” formations should not be divided, there is no sense in attempting to join two practically dead ones.)

Instead of expending effort in making worthless moves, exploit every opportunity which allows you to strengthen your position. When there are many enemy pieces but few of your own in a given territory, first of all carefully consider your own chances of survival. If the opposite situation arises, when your own pieces are numerous and your enemy is in difficulties, exploit that situation to extend your configurations. As the best victory is that gained without fighting, so the best position is one which does not provoke conflict. In any case, if you fight well you will not lose, and if your ranks are not in disorder, you will lose well. Although at the beginning of the game, you must arrange the



pieces according to the rules, at the end you must use your imagination in order to win.

(Sun Tzu: In any battle, engage conflict with the enemy in the ordinary manner, but in order to win, use your imagination.)

Carefully observe the most minute details of all territories: if they are solidly constructed, they cannot be overwhelmed, but, if you surprise your adversary with an idea which has not occurred to him, you will be able to overwhelm him where he is unprepared.

(Sun Tzu: Attack where the enemy is not prepared, advance where he cannot even imagine you to be)

If your adversary defends himself without doing anything, it is a sign that in reality he intends to attack. If he neglects small territories and does not play in them, he is in fact plotting to make great conquests there. A player who puts down his pieces haphazardly is devoid of strategy: if he does not reflect and simply responds to his adversary's

moves, he is on the path towards defeat. As *Shijing* observes, “Trembling with fear on the edge of the precipice.”

## Chapter five: On emptiness and fullness

In *weiqi*, if you follow too many main strategies, your configurations will become fragmented. Once they are disrupted, it is difficult not to succumb. Do not play your pieces too close to those of your opponent, for if you do, you will make him full but you will empty yourself. When you are empty it is easy to be invaded; when you are full, it is difficult to overwhelm you.

(Sun Tzu: The formation of the army is like water: like water, it moves from high places and flows downwards, In the same way, military formations should avoid whatever is already full and occupy the void.)

Do not follow a single plan, but change it according to the moment. *Zuozhuan* advised, “If you see

that an advance is possible, then advance! If you encounter difficulties, retreat.” It also observed, “If you seize something but do not change your method, at the end only a single thing will have been seized.”

## Chapter six: On knowing oneself

The wise man is able to foresee even things which are not yet visible. The foolish man is blind even when the evidence is placed in front of his eyes. Thus, if you know your own weak points, you can anticipate what may benefit your adversary, and thereby win. You will also win if you know when to fight and when to avoid conflict; if you can correctly measure the intensity of your efforts; if, exploiting your preparation, you can prevent your adversary from being prepared too; if, by resting, you can exhaust your adversary; and if, by not fighting, you can subdue him. In *Laozi* it is written, “He who knows himself is enlightened!”

(Sun Tzu: If you know when to engage battle and when to avoid conflict, you will win; if you know how to measure the intensity of your efforts, you will win; if, by exploiting your own degree of preparation you can prevent your adversary from being equally prepared, you will win.)

## **Chapter seven: On observing the game**

The configurations taken on by the pieces must be harmoniously linked together. Try therefore, to take the initiative and maintain it, move after move, from the beginning to the end of the game. If, when engaging conflict on the game-board, one adversary does not know which is the stronger and which is the weaker player, he must examine even the tiniest details. So, if you notice from the arrangement of the pieces that you are winning, you must take care to maintain your configurations; if, instead, you realize that you are losing, you must astutely invade larger territories. If

your advance along the sides only allows you to survive, you will be defeated. The less you retreat when in difficulties, the greater your defeat will be: a desperate struggle to survive leads to many defeats. If two configurations are encircling each other, first constrain your adversary from the outside. However, if there are no nearby configurations granting you support and the pieces are arranged unfavourably, do not place further pieces there. When danger looms, when your adversary has penetrated one of your configurations, do not play there, because to do so would simply mean placing pieces and not placing them. This is not proper play. There are many ways of committing errors by yourself, but there is only a single path which leads to success. Many victories go to the player who knows how to observe the board properly.

In the *I Ching* it is written, “He who cannot see the way ahead must change: it is only by changing that connections may be made, and only thus may he live long.”

## Chapter eight: On examining feelings

At birth, a person is calm and his feelings are difficult to discern. However, after he has received sensations from the outside world, he becomes active and, consequently, his states of mind may be perceived. If we apply this theory to *weiqi*, we will be able to predict victory or defeat. Generally, if you are sure of yourself yet modest, you will often win; if you are uncertain and proud, you will often lose. If you can maintain your positions without fighting, you will win: if you continually kill pieces without worrying about anything else, you will lose. If, after a defeat, you reflect on its causes, you will improve your skill at the game, whereas if you flatter yourself on your victories, you will lose your ability. To seek the error in yourself and not blame others, therefore, is advantageous.

(*I Ching*: Insatiability leads to numerous defeats, timidity to little success.)

Attacking the enemy without caring about the attacks which he may make on you is disadvanta-

geous. Thinking is perfected by carefully observing the entire development of the conflict on the game-board. If you are distracted by other matters, your mind will be confused. Skillful players correctly weigh up all aspects of the game. Unworthy players prepare themselves for battle in a superficial or incorrect manner. You are strong if you are really able to intimidate your adversary. Merely glorying in the fact that he cannot attain your level is a sure way of being defeated. If you are competent, you will be able to make associations of ideas; if you only have one plan in your mind, you have little indeed! Abstain from making comments but remain inscrutable, so that your adversary will not be able to guess your plans and will be in difficulties. If first you are agitated and then calm, without finding a proper equilibrium, you will irritate him. In *Shijing* it is written, "If others have something in mind, I will try to discover what it is."

## Chapter nine: On correctness and incorrectness

Some have stated, “*Wei qi* considers change and deceit as necessary, invasion and killing as technical terms; is this not perhaps a false *Dao*?” But I answer: Not at all!

In the *I Ching* we may read, “When an army is out on a mission, it needs well-defined rules, otherwise it is in danger.” An army must never be deceived: false words and the path towards betrayal belong to the, “Horizontal and Vertical,” doctrine and the Warring States. Although *wei qi* is a small Tao, it is exactly the same as fighting. Thus, there are many levels of play and not all players are equal: those who are at a low level play without thinking or reflecting, and simply act in order to deceive. Others aid their thinking by pointing at the positions of the pieces, and yet others talk and allow their intentions to become known. But those who have reached a high level



certainly do not behave like this. On the contrary, they think deeply and ponder on remote consequences, exploit the possibilities offered by the shapes which come into being as the pieces are laid down, and let their thoughts travel around the game-board before putting down a single piece. They aim at conquest before conquest becomes manifest, preventing their adversaries from placing pieces even before they think of placing them. Do such skilled players base their method of play on talking too much and making frantic gestures?! *Zuozhuan* states, “Be honest and not incorrect!” Is that not precisely what we are talking about?

## Chapter ten: On observing details

During play, there sometimes appears to be an advantage where in fact there is not; at other times, the opposite is the case. It is usually considered advantageous to invade, although there are invasions which only cause damage to those who

make them. At times the advantage lies in playing to the left, at others to the right. Sometimes you have the initiative, sometimes you are subjected to it. Sometimes the pieces are arranged close together, at others they are far apart. When you connect, do not forget what has happened before. When you abandon pieces, reflect on the consequences. Sometimes you begin playing close to certain pieces and end up far from them; at others you have only a few pieces in a given spot and end up with many. If you wish to strengthen the outside, first take care of the inside. If you wish to consolidate to the east, attack to the west. Pieces laid down by your opponent which are aligned, but which do not yet form eyes, must be broken as soon as possible. Play a *jie* (*ko*) if it does not damage other groups of pieces. If your opponent plays with handicap pieces, arrange your own pieces amply: the player who uses handicap pieces avoids battle but extends his positions.

Invade territories only after you have selected them carefully. Once you have ascertained that

they contain no obstacles, penetrate them. These are some of the most excellent methods used by expert players, who naturally know them well. The *I Ching* states, “Who but the most intelligent and elevated person in the world can attain such a position?”

## Chapter eleven: On terminology

*Weiqi* players have given precise names to all dispositions. Some configurations may be understood easily, like “life or death” and “establish oneself or disappear.”

These technical terms are:

沖，斡，綽，約，飛，關，劄，粘，  
頂，尖，覷，門，打，斷，行，捺，  
立，點，聚，蹺，夾，拶，避，刺，  
勒，撲，徵，劫，持，殺，松，槩。

*chōng, wò, chuò, yuē, fēi, guān, zhā, zhān,*

dǐng, jiān, qù, mén, dǎ, duàn, xíng, nà,  
lì, diǎn, jù, qiāo, jiā, zā, bì, cì,  
lēi, pū, zhēng, jié, chí, shā, sōng, pán.

Although there are only thirty-two technical terms, players must think of ten thousand variations. But all the changes made on the game-board, according to distance and nearness, horizontality and verticality, are so many that even I will never be able to know them all. However, it is difficult to disregard these terms if you are aiming at victory. And in *Zuozhuan* you will find written, “Certainly the names must be rectified!” Can’t this sentence be applied to *weiqi* too?”

## Chapter twelve: On mental levels

There are nine mental levels into which players are distinguished. The first is called, “being in the spirit”, the second, “seated in enlightenment”, the third, “concreteness”, the fourth, “understanding

changes”, the fifth, “applying wisdom”, the sixth, “ability”, the seventh, “strength”, the eighth, “being quite inept”, and the ninth and last, “being truly stupid”.

Levels lower than these cannot be enumerated successfully and, as they cannot form part of the above list, they will not be dealt with here. It is written in *Zuozhuan*, “The superior man already possesses perfect knowledge from birth; the man who attains it only after study is at a slightly lower level; the inferior man studies only after having encountered difficulties.”

## Chapter thirteen: Miscellaneous

On the game-board, the sides are not as important as the corners, and the corners are not as important as the centre. Playing a *na* is better than playing a *yue*, but playing a *bai* is better than playing a *na*. If your opponent plays a *zhuo*, answer with a *yue*. If he plays a *za*, your response should often

be a *zhan*. A large eye can overcome a smaller one. A diagonal line is not as useful as a straight one. If two *guan* face each other, play a *qu* immediately. Do not undertake a *zheng* if there are enemy obstacles in your path. If an attack is not completed successfully, do not immediately play at that point again.

At the end of the game, a *jiaopansusi* (four pieces arranged in an L-shape in a corner of the board, forming a territory comprising two free intersections) group will certainly be dead, whereas *zhisi* (six pieces arranged in a corner of the board, enclosing a territory with four free intersections) and *banliu* (thirteen pieces arranged so as to enclose a territory of two lines of three free intersections each) groups will certainly be alive. If it is struck in the centre, a rose formation (seventeen pieces enclosing five free intersections, of which the central one is adjacent to each of the other four) will have practically no life left. If a cross formation (four intersections forming a square occupied by four pieces, two of each color, arranged so

that no piece is next to one of the same color) is in a corner, do not try to capture it at first. When a handicap piece is played in the centre, do not play a corner figure.

*Weiqi* should not be played many times consecutively, otherwise its players become exhausted, and once you are exhausted you cannot play well. Do not play when you are indisposed, because you will forget the moves and be defeated easily. Do not boast of victory, nor complain about defeat! It is proper for a *junzi*<sup>5</sup> to appear modest and generous; only vulgar persons manifest expressions of anger and rage. A good player should not exalt his skills; the beginner should not be timorous, but should sit calmly and breathe regularly: in this way, the battle is half won. A player whose face reveals a disturbed state of mind is already losing.

The worst shame is due to a change of heart, the lowest baseness is to deceive others. The best way

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<sup>5</sup>君子, the model “prince” or “gentleman” of Confucian wisdom.

to play is to lay down one's pieces in an ample fashion; there is no more stupid move than to repeat a *jie*. Change your play after playing three pieces in a line; playing a *fangjusi* (a formation like cross but one in which all the pieces are of the same color: a useless and unrefined move) is not acceptable.

Winning by occupying many intersections is called *yinju*; losing without having acquired even one intersection is called *shuchou*. When both players have won one game each they are equal. A game is declared a draw when both players have acquired the same number of intersections. Matches should not be composed of more than three games each. When you count your pieces, do not worry about how many you have won. Remember that a *jie* may be double (which creates an alternate figure) or even triple, which leads to an infinite configuration. As all players are equal, you must sometimes concede the initiative, or two, or five or seven handicap pieces.

It may be said that, in *weiqi*, the life of one is



the non-life of the other, that the near and the far complement each other, that the strong configuration of one corresponds to the weakness of the other, that the advantage of one is the disadvantage of the other. This means peace but not serenity, it means that one may establish oneself but not remain inactive. In the same way that danger may lurk behind peace and serenity, remaining inactive means being annihilated. Remember the words contained in *I Ching*, “The *junzi* is at peace but does not forget the danger; he affirms his position but does not forget the possibility of being destroyed!”



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