

## Presentation to the Chess Collectors International Meeting, Princeton, NJ, May 2009

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The chess we play today is over 500 years old. Our modern rules were born in Italy or Spain, toward the end of the 15th century. This new “chess of the rabid queen” quickly replaced older versions throughout Europe. Since that time, our chess has developed a tradition of literature and analysis far beyond that of any other board game.

But this modern European chess was never the *only* chess. Looking a few centuries back into our history, and expanding our view across neighboring continents, we can see *chess* as a cross-cultural phenomenon with a wide range of traditions. In effect, these other variants of chess may become a window into the distant reaches of time and culture.

Let’s take a brief look at some of the world’s strongest chess traditions.



#### Ancient Chess

Chess was already being played in Persia when Muslim armies conquered that area in the 7th century. It quickly spread through the Muslim world, and on into southern Europe. This chess, known in Arabic as *shatranj*, differed from the modern game in that its queen (then a king’s advisor) only moved one space diagonally, and the bishop (then an elephant) moved only two spaces diagonally. The conventional pieces were simplified forms representing the members of the ancient army (chariot, horse, elephant, etc.)



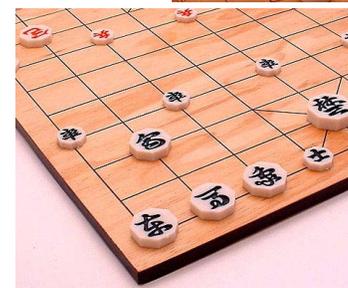
#### Chinese Chess

Chinese chess, *xiangqi* (“shyahng-chee”), is probably played by more people than any other board game. Even more than *go* (Chinese *weiqi*) and even more than our “international” European chess. There are just so many Chinese, and so many of them play this game! Although it looks very different from our chess, the rules are so similar to the ancient Persian chess that it is certainly a variation of the same game. The pieces are disks with Chinese characters on each one. They are played not on the squares of the board, but on the intersections (like *go* stones). The board also features a “river” in the center, blocking elephants (ancient bishops) and allowing pawns a nominal promotion. This game develops quickly and high level games can become extremely long and complex.



#### Korean Chess

Korean chess, *janggi*, looks very similar to Chinese chess. But there are many differences in the rules. Some Korean rules date from from ancient Chinese forms; others are rather quirky innovations. The playing set is almost identical to that of Chinese chess, except for these differences: The pieces vary in size, the board has no “river,” the pieces are octagonal in shape, and the “green” side pieces are inscribed in a quick “cursive” style. Korean chess is still played throughout Korea, North and South.



## Thai Chess

Known in older literature as “Siamese” chess, *makruk* is still played in Cambodia and Thailand at a very high level. The conventional pieces are smooth, lathed forms — except for the large figurative horse’s head on the knight. Like our old regency sets, it can be tricky to tell some pieces apart. This game is very close in play to the ancient Persian/Islamic game. However, the elephant (bishop) has a peculiar move, and the pawns begin on the third rank. Very peculiar in this game are complex rules for drawing the game, which cause many games to end without a winner.

## Japanese Chess

The chess of Japan, *shogi*, is said to be derived from the Chinese *xiangqi*, but also shares some peculiarities with the Thai *makruk*. It is certainly the most complex of the mainstream chess forms, and derives from a history of even more complicated variants. Most extraordinarily, in *shogi* 1) 17 of the player’s 20 pieces promote to stronger pieces, and 2) captured pieces are never out of play, but are placed back onto the board as part of the captor’s army. Because all pieces remain in play, the game never winds down into a sparse endgame, but continues to be dense and complex until a mating attack is achieved. The pieces are flat, 5-sided tiles, with one angle pointing forward. They are flipped over to reveal their promotional values, and they simply point the other way when they switch allegiance to the other side.

## Mongolian Chess

Mongolian chess, *shatar*, is derived from the Persian/Islamic game, but has the move of our modern bishop (usually a camel in *shatar*). The pieces have a great deal of variety, since each set represents the family or clan of its origin. For instance, a rook may be shaped like a horse-drawn cart, a truck, a tent, a karmic wheel, a yin-yang symbol, or a bunch of flowers or peacock feathers. Most peculiar in the play of this game is the queen. She moves like a rook or an ancient queen (*one* space diagonally). The traditional rules of *shatar* have been widely replaced with modern, European rules, since the advent of Soviet domination.

## Courier Chess

Also known as the courier game, this chess variant was played for several centuries, mostly in southern and central Germany. With a span of about 600 years (some 20 generations of players), it existed a little longer than the rules of modern chess have been in use to date. Derived from the ancient Islamic chess, the courier game stretched the board to 12 by 8 squares, adding three novel pieces — including a courier with the move of our modern bishop. It is most famously depicted in Lucas van Leyden’s painting of 1508, and most clearly described in Gustav Selenus’s treatise of 1616. The game shown by van Leyden has recently been recreated as a full set (by me, Rick Knowlton), and is described in detail in the website [www.CourierChess.com](http://www.CourierChess.com)

