

## Chinese games

### Weiqi 围棋

The board game *weiqi* was one of the 'four accomplishments' (*si yi* 四艺) of the Chinese scholar. For the educated elite of imperial China the arts of music, playing the zither (*guqin* 顾琴), painting, calligraphy and ability in playing *weiqi* were required skills for both men and women. *Weiqi* is a game of strategy for two players. Using sets of counters, one player with white the other with black, known as 'stones' (*shi* 石), the aim is to surround one or more of the opponent's pieces. It is a game of great skill and was considered in historical times to be an important part of an individual's education. In the West it is commonly known by the Japanese name of *Go*.

### Xiangqi 象棋

*Xiangqi*, often known as Chinese chess in the West, is a board game for two players. The board is divided down the middle by a river, known as *Chu he* 楚河 (the river of Chu). Two sets of counters are used on which Chinese characters are painted in contrasting colours (often red and black). The red side is led by a commander (*shuai* 帥) and the black side by a general (*jiang* 將). Other pieces include (*shi* 士 [black]) often translated as 'scholars' but perhaps more correctly as 'guards' and a different character with the same pronunciation *shi* 仕 (red) meaning 'officials'. There are also elephants (*xiang* 象 [black]) and ministers (*xiang* 相 [red]), two types of horse *ma* 馬 and *ma* 馮 and chariot *che* 俚 and *che* 車, both characters are pronounced *ju*. Although the exact origins of the game are unclear, it is known to have been played as far back as the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC.

### Liubo 六博

*Liubo* was a board game for two players, each with their own set of counters. Although Han dynasty (206 BC – AD 221) texts place the origins of the game in the Shang dynasty (c. 1600-1050 BC), archaeological evidence from tombs, in which *liubo* equipment was found, date no further back than the Warring States period (5<sup>th</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC). Ceramic models of people playing *liubo* were also excavated from tombs of the Han dynasty. The rules of the game are no longer known, since *liubo* had lost its popularity by the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD.

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## Card games

The earliest mention of cards appears in China during the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368), preceding the earliest mentioning of cards in Western records by roughly a century. In China, the individual cards were printed on thick paper and coloured by hand. They were often decorated with heroes from books such as the 16<sup>th</sup> century novel *The Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan* 水浒传). These early playing cards were considerably narrower and longer than the ones used in the West today.

## Majiang 麻将

Majiang, often known in the West by its Cantonese name Mahjong, has been an extremely popular game in China and in Chinese communities around the world since its invention in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The game is often played for money, and as gambling was made illegal after the Communist take over in China in 1949, it was banned by the communist government for a number of years. There are 144 tiles, each with a Chinese character written on its surface. The aim is to collect sets of these tiles.

## Chinese checkers (*Zhongguo tiaopi* 中国跳棋)

Chinese checkers is based on a game called Halma which was invented in the 1880s by an American plastic surgeon at Harvard medical school. It is not related to any traditional Chinese board games.

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