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Director, Academia Sinica Europaea at China Europe International Business School

**Weiqi Versus Chess**

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Using a universally relevant metaphor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, former National Security Adviser to US president Jimmy Carter, wrote in The Grand Chessboard (1997): "Eurasia is the chessboard on which the struggle for global primacy continues to be played." China's New Silk Road strategy certainly integrates the importance of Eurasia but it also neutralizes the US pivot to Asia by enveloping it in a move which is broader both in space and in time: an approach inspired by the intelligence of Weiqi has outwitted the calculation of a chess player.

The chronicle by Japanese writer Kawabata Yasunari (1899-1972) of an intense intellectual duel, translated in English as The Master of Go, contributed to the popularity of the game in the West, but Weiqi is a product of the Chinese civilization and spread over time in the educated circles of Northeast Asia. Kawabata, who viewed the Master as one of his favorite creations, knew that for China the game of "abundant spiritual powers encompassed the principles of nature and the universe of human life," and that the Chinese had named it "the diversion of the immortals."

In imperial China, Weiqi had the status of an art whose practice had educational, moral and intellectual purposes. In a Chinese version of the scholastic quadrivium, the mandarins had to master four arts, known as qin, qi, shu and hua. It was expected of the literati to be able to play the guqin (qin), a seven-stringed zither, but also to write calligraphy (shu) and demonstrate talent at brush-painting (hua).

The second artistic skill, qi, is a reference to Weiqi, a strategy game played by two individuals who alternately place black and white stones on the vacant intersections of a grid. The winner is the one who can control, after a series of encirclements, more territory than his opponent; one can translate Weiqi (围棋) as "the board game of encirclement" or "the surrounding game."

For centuries, literati have been fascinated by the contrast between the extreme simplicity of the rules and the almost infinite combinations allowed by their execution.

Traditionally, the game was conceptualized in relation to a vision of the world. In the early 11th-century Classic of Weiqi in Thirteen Sections, arguably the most remarkable essay on the topic, the author uses notions of Chinese philosophy to introduce the game's material objects: the stones "are divided between black and white, on the yin/yang model... the board is a square and tranquil, the pieces are round and active." In the Classic of Weiqi, the famous Book of Changes (Yi Jing), which presents the cosmology of Chinese antiquity, is quoted several times.

The game, "a small Tao," was so popular that it generated obsessive attitude. Addiction to Weiqi was considered by the Chinese philosopher Mencius (372-289BC) one of the five types of unfilial behavior. Through the centuries, the game remained an important element of the Chinese society. Ming dynasty painter Qian Gu (1508-1578) realized an exquisite masterpiece when, in a mood of ease and poise, he portrayed A Weiqi Game at the Bamboo Pavilion, where the breeze, water and young maidens revolve around the circulations of black and white stones. One of the famous set of 12 screen paintings from the Emperor Yongzheng period (1678-1735) portrays an elegant and refined lady sitting by a Weiqi board.

As indicated in the introduction of the Classic of Weiqi, the Tao of Weiqi cannot be separated from Sun Tzu's Art of War, which stands since the Warring States Period (476-221BC) as the very foundation of China's strategic thinking. Mao Zedong used the Weiqi metaphor, for example, in his 1938 Problems of Strategy in Guerrilla War against Japan. In 1969, American mathematical sociologist Scott Boorman displayed genuine perceptiveness by using Weiqi to interpret Mao's tactical and strategic moves.

While in chess or in Chinese chess (xiangqi) the pieces with a certain preordained constraint of movement are on the board when the game begins, the grid is empty at the opening of the Weiqi game. During a chess game, one subtracts pieces; in Weiqi, one adds stones to the surface of the board. In the Classic of Weiqi, the author remarks that "since ancient times, one has never seen two identical Weiqi games."

Three golden axioms expressed in the Classic of Weiqi give a stimulating perspective on China's strategic thinking but also on the Chinese mind. "As the best victory is gained without a fight, so the excellent position is one which does not cause conflict," says the Classic. It introduces what can be called the axiom of non-confrontation. In Weiqi, the objective is not to checkmate the opponent: only positions in relation to others really matter. The decision to establish the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the position it occupies vis-à-vis the Bretton Woods financial system are, in a sense, extensions of Weiqi moves.

Weiqi's innumerable circumambulations aim at increasing influence without reducing the opponent's forces to nothing. The ability to manage the paradox of a non-confrontational opposition requires the highest emotional and intellectual qualities.

The Classic adds: "At the beginning of the game, the pieces are moved in a regular and orthodox way, but creativity is needed to win the game." What can be named the axiom of discontinuity is a variation on a postulate that is central to Sun Tzu's Art of War. At the beginning of the engagement the action is guided by accepted rules, but victory often requires "irregular" decisions or unorthodox resolution, and only visionary intuition leads to breakthrough.

The notion that an unimaginative China would be destined to repeat, imitate, or perform mechanically is a misconception largely based on a partial knowledge of the Chinese world but which, despite the admirable research of British sinologist Joseph Needham (1900-1995) in Science and Civilization in China, persists to distort the debate.

The postulate of discontinuity is the very essence of innovation. To a certain extent, Deng Xiaoping's extraordinary concept of "one country, two systems" to handle Hong Kong's retrocession was an application of this second postulate. Chinese leaders from Beijing and Taipei will also make full use of the second axiom to reinvent their relations in the coming years. China will not only innovate in technology or in business management, but will enrich the vocabulary of political science. Western political, business and opinion leaders have to be ready to act in a world with material or immaterial elements not only "made in China" but "created by China."

The Classic mentions a third dimension: "Do not necessarily stick to a plan, change it according to the moment." The axiom of change commands the player to adjust to the situation and to beware of blind adherence to a preconceived system, doctrine or ideology. Deng Xiaoping's emphasis on the necessity to "seek the truth from the facts" profoundly continues this pattern of Chinese strategic thinking. At the diplomatic level, Mao's unexpected rapprochement with Washington in the 1970s was in the spirit of the third postulate.

These minimalist axioms create the cognitive conditions to act with maximized effectiveness. Generally non-confrontational, ready for paradigm change and fundamentally non-ideological, China, which has regained centrality, is increasingly at the source of initiatives shaping the global agenda.

In Written in a Dream, the polymath and statesman Ouyang Xiu (1007-1072), a magister ludi, captures the depth and mystery of Weiqi: "The Weiqi game comes to an end, one is unaware that in the meantime the world has changed."

David Gosset is director of the Academia Sinica Europaea at China Europe International Business School (CEIBS), and founder of the Euro-China Forum. He established the New Silk Road Initiative.