



Competing for a Better Role Relation: International Relations, Sino-US Rivalry and Game of Weiqi

Chih-yu Shih¹  · Chung-chiu Huang²

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Abstract

We rely on the Chinese game of weiqi to conceptualize China's rival role conceptions and self-role conceptions. Since weiqi compels rivals endowed with the culture of harmony to outplay each other, rivals have no role relation between them. We argue the most apparent but least acknowledged practice that they compete on who enhances self-role performance better for the world to emulate. Exactly because the rivals compete intensely, they give an American watcher a reason to believe that they belong to the same strategic kind familiar to a chess player. We explore Sino-US rivalry accordingly. We maintain that, as rival, China has not expected the US to seriously honor any role duties, meaning they are not mutually obliged to any significant extent. Therefore, on the one hand, China is ready to both practice and bear squeezing and harassing as if no role obligation exist between them. On the other hand, China's obligation being a rival is to enhance the recognition of China in the world as always being more beneficial than the US is, hence the balance of role relations. This beneficial role conception necessitates China's pursuit of strategic partnership all over the world, which subdues the US influences.

Keywords Weiqi · Chinese foreign policy · Role theory · Role relations · Sino-US relations

Introduction

Despite being one of the best-known realists in the modern world, Kissinger [24] is arguably the only influential strategic practitioner in the Anglosphere who has shown

✉ Chih-yu Shih
cyshih@ntu.edu.tw

Chung-chiu Huang
cc.huang@nccu.edu.tw

¹ Department of Political Science, National Taiwan University, No. 1, Sec. 4, Roosevelt Rd., Taipei, Taiwan 10617

² National Cheng-chi University, No. 2, Sec. 2, Chi-nan Rd, Taipei, Taiwan

appreciation for the differences in the philosophical orientations of the United States of America and China toward their own roles in world politics. To share his reflections, he adopts the metaphor of *weiqi*, the classic Chinese board game, and juxtaposes it with chess. Such a metaphor enables him to comfortably formulate a narrative that explains the strategic intent behind China's rise [30]. However, scholars and practitioners in the Anglosphere have not taken up Kissinger's metaphor. Their disinterest provides a clue as to why studies so rarely theorize the role of rivals in international politics, beyond rudimentary and undifferentiated understandings of rivals as being simply bodies who oppose each other [e.g. 52]. Therefore, we believe that a discussion of *weiqi* can facilitate a more sophisticated theory of rivals and their roles in international politics. This approach may help to deepen the analysis of contemporary China-US relations.

We will first explain how an understanding of *weiqi* can help with theorizing international relations (IR) and Chinese foreign policy. We will then introduce the strategy of playing *weiqi*. While we will later stress its differences in regard to chess, we will not go into details about the game of chess itself: we assume most readers are basically aware of it. Nevertheless, a noteworthy contrast is that every chess piece abides by rules specifically written for it, whereas all stones in *weiqi* behave identically. We will present our understanding of the distinctive culture of *weiqi* and proceed to argue that the essential role relations of the players are the relationships between each player and the stone-board. The players are role-seekers on the board, which symbolizes all-under-heaven (i.e. the Chinese concept of world order). Their mutual roles are not apparent, however, instead they are indirectly related through their relative positions on the board, which are dictated by the aim to outperform each other. A parameter actor, i.e. a referee, declares who has played the role better at the end. In order to win, one has to engage in rivalry, which is never really harmonious or *guanxi*-obliged.

We explore Sino-US rivalry accordingly. We maintain that China, cast into the role of a power rival, has not expected the US to seriously honor any role duties, meaning that the two countries are not mutually obliged to any significant extent [10]. If cast as a friend, China would certainly have different expectations, but friendship is not the main topic of this paper.¹ Therefore, on the one hand, China is ready to both engage in and suffer harassment, as if no role obligation existed between itself and its rival. On the other hand, China's obligation as a rival is to enhance the recognition of China as always being more beneficial to the world than the US is, i.e. to better balance its role relations with others [16]. This beneficial role necessitates China's pursuit of strategic partnerships all over the world, which subdues US influences. Finally, we suggest how Washington's expectations of China as a rival misunderstand the entire rationale behind China's style of competition.

Weiqi and International Relations

In this paper, we argue that from the perspective of Chinese *weiqi* strategy, competitive relations between rivals are fluid. This is different from IR theories, which assume that role identities are fixed. In *weiqi*, a prior relation between rivals is that the board of *weiqi* constitutes both players ontologically, to the effect that rivals are necessarily

¹ For more on Chinese diplomatic friendship see [34, 35].

reconfiguring positions inside of each other. In weiqi, one's potential is restricted by the expansion of their opponent, but one can also manage to survive inside of the other.² Therefore, one's present gain is not equal to the other's future loss. All of these factors suggest that a player's existential security relies primarily on their position on the board, not on any relationship with the other player. While striving for more space on the board, one's relationships with their rival will remain fluid and unregulated; there are no rules as to how rivals should treat each other. The strategies adopted in weiqi include expand, kill, or squeeze; the players decide the timing of the application of these strategies as the game proceeds.

The strategic Chinese game of weiqi (literally “encircling stones”) incorporates Chinese cosmology and Chinese cultural wisdom [27, 37]. Some IR scholars have even framed weiqi as being illustrative of contemporary Chinese strategic culture [5, 36, 39]. This metaphor is plausible. On the one hand, weiqi is clearly an elitist tradition, one that all scholar-officials had to learn and practice ([31]: 3). On the other hand, several studies have noted the parallels between the strategy of weiqi and Chinese strategic patterns in examples of Chinese guerrilla warfare [5], the Cold War [24], the South China Sea ([4]: 55–58), in China's Belt & Road initiative (BRI) [36], etc. In brief, the game of weiqi provides analysts a metaphor through which they can better show the influence of Chinese culture on Chinese strategic thinking and behavior. Noticeably, among other Chinese philosophical clichés, the game of weiqi reproduces the practical philosophy of *guanxi*,³ the proclivity for long-term thinking, the culture of *yin-yang*, and the peculiar stress of *shi* (勢)⁴ [27, 48].

There is a logic problem in this line of research, however. While it can be taken for granted that weiqi may accurately reflect Chinese culture, the additional value that weiqi offers to explaining Chinese strategic behavior has so far remained unexplored in the literature. In light of this, we argue that weiqi actually reveals a role relation that is not usually considered relevant in the literature of Chinese strategic culture. We question the notion that interactions between rivals or opponents make any sensible kind of *guanxi* in the Chinese culture. To discover harmonious *guanxi* between rivals contrarily distorts the purpose of the game, which is to outperform the opponent. It also distorts the process of the game, which easily incurs fierce competition. Such competition defies the ethical, often hierarchical in one way or another, relationships that exist outside the game. As weiqi cannot be sufficiently informed by the value of harmony or *guanxi*, it is valid to reframe weiqi as an illustrative metaphor that provides additional implications for Chinese strategic behavior [22].

Specifically, we argue that as weiqi compels rivals endowed with the culture of harmony to outperform each other, these rivals have no role relation between each other. This is distinctly unlike other types of *guanxi* in Chinese society, including those between princes and officials, parents and children, teachers and students, and spouses,

² This resonates with the Chinese philosophy of yin-yang. Yin and yang are configured in such a way that they are inside of each other, and their colors are the same as the stones of weiqi—black and white. Yin-yang informs a worldly IR, where actors are mutually constituted and their relationships are fluid, making it unlikely for one to act unilaterally without at the same time reconstituting the entire world, and also one's own identities [11, 28].

³ That is, the mutually obliged relationship embedded in the metaphor of kin.

⁴ That is, the impression of a macro-trend affirmed by individual events taking place either in a row or simultaneously.

brothers, and friends. There is a rich array of sociological literature that suggests how artificially-constructed *guanxi* can emerge between strangers, through use of gift-giving to oblige both sides to take certain roles [18, 55]. Each dyadic relationship generates reciprocal role obligations for the actors. However, none of these dyadic roles can guide interactions with rivals. At best, rivals can manage to reduce their tension by neutralizing their rivalry through a layered or a coexisting relationship, e.g. friendship. We believe the game of *weiqi* provides the inspiration for understanding how a player coming from a culture of role sensibilities can take the rival role, while also engage their rival in a manner that does not require role relations. In summary, we argue that the players in *weiqi* compete on the capacity to benefit the rest of the world. Meanwhile, exactly because the rivals compete intensely, they give an American observer reason to believe that they are likewise chess players.

The Stone-Board of Weiqi

The board of *weiqi* provides a configuration that is ontologically more important than the checkerboard of any other strategic game. The board, a metaphor of the earth, symbolizes the overall cosmology that enables the stones to seek possibilities on the board. The black and white colors of the two troops symbolize the *yin* and *yang*—the philosophized genesis of living forces, which the stones represent. All players of *weiqi*, regardless of who, where, or when they are playing, owe their role to the board. The board in turn defines the scope of their lenses, the criterion of their success, and the inevitability of rivalry. Modern players achieve rankings even though some of them have never participated in the same games as each other. These rankings therefore only relate them indirectly, as they represent the accumulation of one's demonstrated skill in taking spaces on the board in each game. They do not reflect who the player's opponents are. In the end, one's role performance on the board comprises one's own record ([31]: 8–9); the other player's moves on the board in each game are not conclusive. However, there is no way a player can eliminate or disqualify their opponent. The board guarantees the coexistence of both players, but this coexistence does not in any way guarantee harmony. In fact, the board almost determines that the two players must meet each other in rivalry. Their mutual roles are exclusively as rivals to each other, but they do not engage in this rivalry at all times. In other words, the rival role does not oblige them to directly confront each other, rendering rivalry an inadequate description of their relationship.

Given that the board encompasses all space, rivals are related nonetheless. They each have to enhance their own role relations with the board. One's role relation refers to *the condition of one's role being accepted*, and one's role refers to *the expected functions for one to fulfil*. The players feel no need to acquire the acceptance of each other regarding their role performance, meaning that role relations are thin. Therefore, in *weiqi*, a role relation on the board comprises primarily the imagined relationships one gradually establishes through the course of the game. They begin with the initially open space in various configurations on the board. A player's primary role relation does not involve exploration or the enhancement of mutual relationships with the rival, who by definition opposes one's role performance by aiming to encircling space. As there are only two players on the board, the only proper role relation for both players is to be

the winner, as declared by the referee on behalf of the board. This setting determines that the two rivals cannot coexist harmoniously, as one of them has to win.

We think that previous literature has misunderstood this point, as weiqi has been romanticized into a metaphor of Chinese cultural values related to harmony, guanxi, and coexistence, as opposed to checkmate in chess. Winning settles the final role relations of both players, with the winner being the symbolic leader of cosmology and the loser accepting the leader. Before the end, they have no relation with each other; although, separately, they each imagine a role relation with the board and its spaces.

Weiqi is not a cultural anomaly, though. Rather, we argue that weiqi allows us to understand how Chinese culture deals with rivalry, a potential role relation that the culture of guanxi evades. The board is a crucial clue. As it compels both coexistence and rivalry, there is no threat to survival at the beginning of the game. However, one's success depends on one's skill in out-performing the rival. The criterion of performance is to take as much space as possible on the board. In short, one's role relations with the board make it key, while one's opponent stands in the way of one's effort to enhance them. Players can either strive to enhance their relation with the board on their own, or try to disrupt their opponent's relation with the board. The two rivals are playing exactly the same role, and are therefore obliged to stand in the way of each other; they are steadily relational only to the extent that they perform on the same board.

A culture of harmony cannot theorize this rival relationship into certain normative role expectations, as it does to the five aforementioned social dyads. In Confucianism, friendship as a normative role copes with the embarrassment that the majority of the population in society is not kin. The game of weiqi, in contrast, precludes friendship. Accordingly, weiqi illustrates the non-ethical, thus discursively inexpressible, side of Chinese culture, pertaining to rivalry. Exactly because rivals are not expressible roles in the culture of harmony, and yet rivalry is common in daily life, weiqi distinctively reveals how Chinese culture intellectually deals with rivalry. It explains how rivals explain away the ultimate relevance of rivalry by caring for their role relations with the board, rather than with each other. Their rivalry therefore becomes technical rather than epistemological. Rivals do not oblige each other with expectation, duty, or entitlement. Space, greater as well as lesser, is of the same quality after all. Epistemologically, their lens is ultimately through the perspective of the board, although technically they have to stop each other at times from taking space. If space is still sufficient, players do not engage, although they both anticipate that they may have to engage at some point.

One significant theoretical implication of weiqi is that it distinguishes roles from role relations. A role made for oneself that is not accepted by others does not have role relations. For the rivals of the game, who may sabotage each other at times, their role relations are thin. The game therefore evades the necessity to specify the rival role; one's opponent has no role to play at all in one's own role relations. Later, we will reveal that the rival is not even an enemy, as it is possible that rivals of weiqi do not always engage each other. In conclusion, weiqi demonstrates how China can proceed with coexistence and rivalry at the same time, without a clear role having to be made for the rival ([32]: 153). Indeed, one grants the rival a role only after winning or losing, but paradoxically the rival will no longer be a rival at this point, as the game has finished. One's role relations are therefore ultimately a matter of one's own goodness, rather than compliance with any all-encompassing prior rule or norm. This distinction is one critical aspect of US's misperception of China's intent.

The importance of role relations suggests that the pressure of harmony between the actor and the entire population is much stronger than that between rivals. One enhances their overall harmony by performing one's self-role faithfully, thereby winning the trust of all others. The highest level of self-actualization is therefore through continuous self-rectification, which exempts one from any lingering self-centric desire. This has the effect of one being recognized as being harmoniously related everywhere, which is called internal transcendence [19, 53]. This state contrasts with the external transcendence that is familiar to Christian tradition, in which compliance with external truth and goodness is essential to overcoming original sin or deficiencies. Both Christian compliance to truth and goodness and Confucian selflessness are practices of self-restraint, but they are apparently different. Instead of destroying devils that abort the prior-given imperative of goodness, weiqi requires a player to establish connections everywhere on the board. In Confucianism, role relations can remain for long periods of time and can extend great distances only after self-rectification has successfully cleansed one's desires. The assumption of Confucian humanity is that restored selflessness reflects original goodness of humanity, as opposed to faith towards an external God. Therefore, a Confucian actor that shows a more sincere goodness presumably achieves better role relations than their rival. Therefore, it has nothing to do with seeking the kingdom of God or servicing his righteousness, and success is ultimately an internal process of one's self-rectification.

In IR literature, however, roles made for rivals are implicitly very common [2, 26], as seen in chess. For example, in Wendt's constructivist formulation ([52]: 283), rivals are a prior and collective representation, which supervenes on their individual states. These states rationally coexist in the state of nature. There are not only the expectations of how the other player will and has to continue to act as a rival, but also the need to predict how they will act as a rival. In fact, rivalry is part of world order in the English School tradition [6–8], as well as in "the liberal international order" [57]. Weiqi's rivalry looks beyond these role expectations between rivals. It focuses on one's role relations, meaning in this case the acceptance of one's self by the entire world, particularly the part of the world not involved in the current rivalry. Once accepted, one simultaneously restricts their rival's options, according to the way one is accepted. In the context of intersubjectivity between rivals, there is no requirement to achieve role relations, however. Role theory, which considers the role's source and the intersubjective making of the role, has not attended to intersubjective construction between the role taker and its imagined audience [9, 15, 51]. Current role theory, which explains rivalry embedded in the European tradition of natural law, sometimes makes no sense to a weiqi rival, who can avoid entering into rivalry, or make moves that do not make any apparent contribution to one's position in said rivalry. From the lessons of weiqi, we propose that the notion of role relations in role theory should include this imagined intersubjectivity between a rival and those external to the rivalry. Rivalry is only direct in instances where both rivals take a confrontational approach, and they can still opt for disengagement. Their ultimate rivalry exists in roles that achieve stronger relations in the rest of the world.

Winning the Game of Weiqi

Winning is of utmost importance. As mentioned, to win, the player needs to encircle more space than the opponent. Engagement is usually inevitable, both because they

encroach upon each other's territory sooner or later, and because the disadvantaged party has no alternative than to engage in an invasion. Engagement may cause the loss of an entire troop, or alternatively it may end up with the encountered troops of both sides staying alive. Though a significant step to take more space, capturing the troops of the other side does not guarantee victory, nor is it the goal of engagement. Nevertheless, if technically one's opponent is known for their strength in encircling space, or their weakness in their engagement technique, one may want to begin engagement as early as possible, even if this can be an annoying strategy ethically for the audience and future learners.

The tactics of taking space and engagement call for different abilities [3]. Successful engagement, for example, relies on reasoning and logic. A player usually has to anticipate how a different move may lead to a different range of options for their opponent, and must therefore compare the pros and cons of alternative moves accordingly. In how many steps one can maximally pre-empt the opponent determines one's strength of engagement. Obviously, mapping as many options as possible, of both sides, to determine the best move is so physically demanding that a human player is surely disadvantaged when competing with artificial intelligence. This could also involve an ethical issue, as younger players seek engagement to capture their opponent's stones, to offset the advantage in experience of an older rival. The intense and comprehensive engagement tactics of *weiqi* thus resemble chess. Consequently, little room will be left for players to show their benevolence to the rest of the world. An immediate example of relying on physical strength to force comprehensive engagement is the all-society rivaling tactics used by Donald Trump's Administration against China.

In contrast to engagement, taking space, which is the purpose of the game, is not entirely concerned with logical reasoning. There is a good deal of uncertainty, because it takes a troop of many stones to encircle a piece of space, and thus the impacts of placing one stone in an open space are usually unclear (this is especially true during the beginning of the game). At this initial stage, both players arrange stones in somewhat disconnected arrays. In the first few moves, almost all of the stones on the board appear to be disconnected. The strategic planning is heuristic, and engagement is not usually part of the game plan at this stage. Instead, the aim is to develop one's holds after clearer strategic opportunities appear. Disconnected stones can come into danger at any time as the game evolves. At the same time, they can alternatively be key to encircling space in the future. Experienced players try to arrange these initially disconnected stones in a way as to avoid the disadvantages of them being isolated when needed later in the game. However, it is impossible to be certain of which stones will actually connect when they are first placed in the open spaces [42].

As the game proceeds, a few aspects of playing converge into one real-world lesson about taking space. Consider the open spaces as being analogous to unallied third parties. Taking space is like strategically investing in networking for: 1) keeping third parties from supporting the rival; 2) preparing them for defection at the time of need; and 3) mobilizing their minor supports. These strategies toward third parties are not about regulating their policies, synchronizing their governance, or converting their values.

Rule number one for winning pertains to survival. Losing space is a definitive threat. Players can ensure a space is definitively taken, i.e. with no more danger of invasion, by using a minimum of seven stones; this is called one eye. Claiming ownership of

space requires two separate eyes, which requires at least 11 stones. Once it has two eyes, a space is considered to be “living” on its own.⁵ The alternative analogy of the notion of living is to parallel two breathing nozzles. The lesson for real-world strategy here is that the best way to capture a goal is not to directly attack rivals, but instead to take away space that could be used by your rival later.

The second strategy for winning is based around invasion. In principle, the larger a piece of space is, the better the chance of winning will be (a space can become too large to defend, however, if it almost resembles an open space that will allow invaders to make two separate eyes inside; in this case, the encircled space is not really owned). Invasion is necessary when the rival’s large space can be anticipated, if not invaded. Invasion is a drastic but common resort to keep the rival from reinforcing a large space. There are two invading strategies. One is to encircle two separate eyes inside the rival’s space. The other, more likely option is to establish connections between the invading stones and those in one’s own space. It is at this moment that the previously disconnected stones can become vital by providing links. The strategic wisdom of weiqi suggests, accordingly, that any relationship can be useful in a way that cannot be anticipated in advance.

The third strategy for winning concerns squeezing. The final stage can be critical to determining who can win if the two rivals are almost equivalent in the amount of space they have each taken. At this very last moment, squeezing is the only resort; the term refers to moves that generate a relatively large gain from only a little room. Squeezing is the act of forcing one’s rival to squander some space, in order to protect the space they have already taken. Squeezing is not unlike harassment, in that it forces the other side to respond inside their own space. If one’s intended harassment is a miscalculation, the rival has the opportunity to take the initiative and apply counter-harassment. Nevertheless, the aim of harassment or squeezing is not to harm the opponent in any significant way. It is unlikely to harm in the stage of endgame. The entire space is divided harmoniously at the end, with a good number of both the winner’s and the loser’s stones remaining alive on the board.

Moreover, there is the occasional strategy of abduction. A player can push an invasion that has no chance to succeed if the opponent defends immediately. Though seemingly a waste of time, this tactic can help to persevere the player’s stones in another separate engagement, which is the real stake. This can therefore push the opponent to choose between a smaller loss or a bigger loss. The opponent can similarly resort to a fake invasion in response. The abduction of the ostensible stake, in exchange for a smaller gain, reveals the negotiable characteristic of weiqi, and also indicates its calculative characteristic. The strategic lesson to be learnt is that even a small gain or loss can be crucial to the result of the game. The strategy of abduction can drag on without an immediate solution and can become a point of harassment, especially when another abduction case also emerges.

The stones on the board reflect a familiar cosmological belief embedded in various schools of thoughts. Specifically, all the stones and eyes on the board are of equal value. There is no distinction, as there is in chess between the King, Queen, Bishop, Rook, Knight, and Pawn. The value of a particular piece of stone depends on how it contributes to a guarding or an invading troop, and can change as the game goes on. In

⁵ The exception is in the four corners of the board, where one can make two separate eyes with only 6 stones.

short, a stone has to be in association with a troop in order to be useful, and yet a small troop can be sacrificed for larger gains elsewhere. Since all stones are the same in quality, it does not make too much difference which one particular stone is lost during engagement with the opponent. Removing a rival's stone is valuable only if it enables a stronger hold for one's own space. The result of the game therefore does not depend on which stone, or even how many stones, one can remove.

Last but not least, weiqi allows a player to accept defeat and resign at any time, without having to count the amount of space each player has taken. Practically, players save time this way, so they can start another game. More importantly, the rivalry ends without further battle, which would be unavoidable if the obviously losing side insisted that the game continued. Players primarily care about their relative place on the board. The early end of rivalry avoids further battles, squeezing, or simply the scene of winning and losing. Given the ultimate purpose of the game is to take space, rather than to destroy the opponent, an early ending makes sense if one side has already claimed enough space. Equally important is the social gesture of the loser – conceding is considered to be more graceful and civilized, rather than the unnecessary process of wasting more effort of both sides.

China and the US in their Rival Roles

Weiqi had not been straightforwardly applicable to the Sino-US rivalry since the end of WWII. [47] Its setting was nonetheless analogous to the beginning of weiqi, in which engagement is not apparently relevant. From the Chinese perspective, there was no proper role for the US during the Cold War period. No prior norms, such as human rights, peace, or capitalism constituted their role relations. The US was either an imperialist, or an exploitive force, or a hegemonic actor. Each of these roles had a different meaning according to what constituted the major contradiction of the world, as interpreted by China's interpretations of Marxism and Maoism. These roles all represented a kind of rival, albeit with different degrees of threat and urgency. However, China was not the major target of the US, nor was China entangled in a two-player game with the US. This scenario first changed after rapprochement in the early 1970s, because at this time it was possible to place the US in the role of a friend. In the twenty-first century, the role of the US as a partner emerged, indicating that the two could cooperate on certain world agendas [43].

In actuality, neither the roles of friend nor partner would ever successfully enable China and the US to oblige each other to do anything significant. The role of rival still remains a more appropriate concept therefore, at least from a unilateral perspective. However, this role has no substance that are agreeable to both sides, as a typical social role might. Weiqi is therefore a useful metaphor; one could surmise what it could mean for China to perceive the US in the role of rival, a role that is discursively inexpressible in the Chinese culture, and how the chess style of rivalry in the US strategic thinking is unlikely to revert correspondingly.

The rise of China has sensitized the possibility of China enlarging its sphere of influence in areas where its major rival would not consider critical. From the point of weiqi's stress on peripheral and open spaces of equal potential value [5], Chinese investments in Africa, South Asia, Central Asia, and Latin America are classic

examples. Though these investments may appear to be insignificant at the global level, the US became alarmed at the emerging connections of these investments regarding China's global influence. The idiosyncratic arrangements of these investments could potentially harm US' global leadership, and the liberal order that constitutes the American identity [20, 21, 41, 54]. However, the US rebalance to Asia does not transform the regional power configuration, as the regional allies have not readjusted their siding preferences. From the perspective of the US, China is harassing its neighbors, requiring the US's presence. Such an eye-to-eye response may curb China from further aggression, but it represents a significant misunderstanding of a weiqi player's rationale [56, 59].

A weiqi player would not engage in such escalation, as it contributes little to overall role relations in the world. The US could mistakenly think that its military presence works well, but China's intentions in the South China Sea, for example, may never be one of forced settlement. China is also culturally well prepared to simply move its rivalry elsewhere. This is how China's early investments have become points for connection.

The contribution of weiqi in this metaphor is its exemplification of a strategic perspective unknown to the US, in which coexistence and rivalry are symbiotic for China. The pivot to Asia is the US's way of balancing China, and Beijing has replied neither through counter-balancing nor through appeasement. Boorman [5], Kissinger [24], and Pan [36] would all point to the much larger picture, where China will explore in the hope that some of those points where it establishes relationships separately will connect into a comprehensive sphere of influence. The long-term hope is that eventually this network will win for China a stronger influence. The romantic view of weiqi nevertheless errs in China's view of its rival as being relational, or even harmonious. China may be endowed with a culture of harmony, but this depends primarily on the world at large agreeing to China's role making. For the US, which denies China's role, harmony with this rival becomes at best a minor concern.

As the US boycotts China's quest for role relations, China could either avoid engagement or embrace those who accept China. China spent what the US would believe to be useless, if not meaningless, efforts to recruit oral support from all over the world. The image of having good role relations is especially crucial to a China that competes, but fails, to receive recognition [49]. China's rival, who has no role to play in China's pursuit of role relations in the world, cannot be China's direct target unless the country takes offence in its face. A sensible strategy for China is to outperform its rival elsewhere, on local terms. This would mean actively showing good will to the rest of the world, and coming close to the strategy of role diversification [16]. Regarding Sino-US relations, China contrarily envisions no specific role for the US. A prior attempt at a "new type of great power relations" was ambivalent and lukewarm [58]. Subsequent intersubjective role making processes have been unable to reach a consensus. The US will have a role to play, and bilateral role relations will emerge, only after the competition for stronger relations in the world has been settled with a clear result.

It is difficult for the US to appreciate the weiqi strategy, in which China finds no necessity to harm the US. Nor is this about harmony. China's engagement with the US can be intense, calculative, and long-term. Where there are no clear role relations, such as in Africa, a weiqi player would be non-confrontational. Where there are advantageous (yet not stable) role relations to the US, such as in central Europe, the weiqi

player would plan an invasion. Where there have been established and stable role relations that undergird the US leadership, such as Japan, the weiqi player would only attempt instrumental harassment. Where there are role relations for both parties, such as in Central Asia, a weiqi player would be squeezing. The strategic lesson from weiqi is to improve role relations anywhere possible so that “you cannot use them to oppose me.” In the eyes of the US, though, China’s rationale has to be that “I can use them to oppose you.” This is analogous to a chess player who cannot help but see an existential threat [23].

Weiqi thus composes at least half of Sino-US rival relations. For China, the other role is probably that of a friend. Nevertheless, the metaphor of weiqi suggests that the double roles China and the US have for each other are: 1) the friend role and 2) the rival role. The friend role symbolizes that they each hope to invite the other to play, and yet the rival role symbolizes that they are playing under the circumstance of China’s emerging power. The friend role requires role making; but for over almost half a century, since the signing of the Shanghai Communiqué, the two have not succeeded in deciding how willing each is to reciprocate to the satisfaction of the other.

The Sino-US rivalry therefore carries thin role relations. Neither is there a kind of prior/thick relation embedded in the state of nature or natural law, nor is there any solid mutual expectation that has been improvised through prior intersubjective role making. Without clear role expectations, rivalry is half-rivalry at best. Half-rivalry is necessarily incomplete, discretionary, and intermittent. It is incomplete because moves comprise more than just engagement, squeezing, or abducting. In fact, taking space can be a unilateral and disengaged strategy. It is discretionary because disengagement, strategically arranging investment, and networking in an isolated sphere are all meaningful alternatives to engagement. It is intermittent wherever no winner appears certain to discourage the strategies of abducting or squeezing. These role relations, imagined as well as practiced, that exist between actors and the world at large explain China’s pattern of rivalry better than sheer role contents. The latter depend on some intersubjective understanding, or on consciously-reciprocal interactions. On the other hand, the notion of role relations cannot accurately describe the US policy rationale, which conceives China as the main target.

The Weiqi Vs. the Chess Players

We do not argue here that all Chinese policy makers adopt the same style of thinking. After all, no two weiqi players are the same, in terms of their characteristics and capabilities. In fact, even the same player will not maintain the same style over their career. In similar vein, no two US policy makers or chess players are the same. The binary of these two strategic orientations does not exist between China and the US, as it does between the weiqi and the chess considerations of the rival role. Although people cannot play both games in the same moment, they can learn both games well. Most US policy makers intuitively tilt toward the chess perspective, nonetheless⁶; few appreciate Kissinger’s attempt at a weiqi-based interpretation of Chinese intent. In the following

⁶ Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi told reporters at the State Department that Beijing’s military moves have been justified by provocative military actions by others in the region [45].

pages, from the chess players' perspective, we will speculate primarily on the US' responses to China's overall orientation for competing in the realm of role relations. We will use three examples for this illustrative purpose—the South China Sea, Africa & Latin America, and the BRI.

A chess rival has a clear opponent, with the specific purpose of checkmate, and with the belief that their opponent thinks and acts in the same way. The only sensible method is to capture as many of the rival's troops as possible. With all the resources already displayed on the chessboard at the start of the game, the uncertainty is almost under total control. The strategic skill required to capture the opposing King's troops is crucial to victory, and the target is the physical opponent. An imagined physical fight is the ultimate spirit. Such an undifferentiated understanding of the rival-role would conceive of all the moves to establish better role relations as steps to build a grand alliance for the final showdown [38]. However, the construction of a potential role relation by China is never clear and could even be considered backward at the beginning, if it is relevant at all. This is because the area that receives China's investment could be a failing state and could therefore be incapable of competing along with China at the same systemic level. This leads to the perception of a surprise attack, where a link emerges later between these seemingly irrelevant areas and those already under contest.

For example, China's BRI easily makes use of earlier investments in South Asia, Africa, and Central Asia. From hindsight, these initially unlinked areas are now being combined into a grand strategy to undermine the rules of global governance. On the other hand, China is now descaling after this ostensibly intense pushing and squeezing, particularly in areas where confrontation risks escalation. This gives the impression of China's vulnerability. Reasonable rivals in a chess context would not concede. Donald Trump's China policy represents the best example of how a chess player would react to a rival. In the words of Chas Freeman, the Trump Administration:

seeks to use tariffs, quotas, visa restrictions, and aggressive oversight of business transactions to punish China for past intellectual property theft, to cripple its industrial policies, and to prevent its rise as a technological power and military competitor. In its National Security and Defense Strategies, the administration reoriented military planning toward combat with the ... PLA and bracketed China with Russia as a threat to the global primacy of liberal democratic values [12].

A chess player would easily conceive of playing weiqi as a geo-political competition, since both conduct politics in a metaphorical space. Given that the board in weiqi is a metaphor for all-under-heaven (that no one owns), however, the act of taking space on the board is not geo-political in nature. Instead, the process revolves around making connections between stones, hence a struggle for wider role relations in the world. Contrary to the controls and influences in geo-political thinking, role relations as explained through weiqi are aimed at acceptance. Once accepted, a stone is safe. On the board, a stone can be considered safe in three different degrees. First, it is safe if it is one of the encircling stones that guard a space that has already been taken. One example of this could be the Chinese practice of constructing reefs and shoals on the South China Sea. The second scenario is as one of squeezing stones that crowd space that will not be taken by either rival. This is exemplified by the relatively distant lands

of Africa and Latin America. The third scenario reflects the connecting stones that explore new role relations in spaces where the rival is unprepared, such as the BRI.

The differentiation and sophistication of these role relations make little sense if the ultimate goal is monotonous geo-political control, however; role relations have to vary by conditions. For example, an encircling stone may pursue a right of veto; a squeezing stone, parallel presence; and a connecting stone, hospitality. Furthermore, whether an act constitutes one of invasion, squeezing, or abduction is contingent upon the perceived balance of relations, and is therefore practically undecidable.

In the first example of the South China Sea, China perceives a risk of US invasion, which may reduce space already taken by China to a state of being unowned. However, the US could be intending merely to squeeze in this area, to make sure that China will not monopolize the still-disputed waters simultaneously claimed by other regional players. In practice, China is the only claimant that is capable of closing in a timely way, as China has already established many connecting bases in the area. Even the US, with its base in the Philippines, can only pass through, usually with Chinese destroyers monitoring the passage of its ships. Note a key strategy of *weiqi* is to deny the rival sufficient space to build two eyes. Being able to “breathe” longer than anyone else, China has no need to engage, other than by waiting for the US ships to leave each time. In fact, each encounter would only allow China to reiterate its claim.⁷ Nevertheless, there has been no attempt to compel others to renounce their claims, or harass their passage. Rather, the aim is to have other claimants recognize China’s *de facto* rights of veto. Nevertheless, this is already sufficient for a chess player to perceive China as being monopolistic.

For the chess rival, who sees all moves made by the other side to ultimately be aimed at capturing the opponent, China cannot have any innocent alternatives to balancing the US presence. The evidence of China’s balancing could include Asia for Asians, the reinstalled tribute system, or simply military expansion and domination [13]. In fact, domination and capture are the goals of the chess player. Accordingly, China is “not engaged in ‘peaceful rise’ activities right now as you look at what they’re doing with their military budget and their belligerent conduct in the South China Sea and elsewhere” [29]. China’s emerging power has thus given rise to the perceived inevitability of the country undermining the rules of international order in Asia, which undergird the world leadership of the US [23]. Given the militarization of the South China Sea shoals, the only solution to the danger of checkmate has to be counter-military moves—“If the US does not keep pace, PACOM will struggle to compete with the People’s Liberation Army on future battlefields” [14]. There is likewise the war-prone suggestion to reinstate a military base in Taiwan, as a counter to China’s presence in these international waters [44].

If the shoals on the South China Sea can be viewed as bases specifically built to outlast the rival, China’s actions in Africa and Latin America may not reflect such a clear purpose. Given that role relations are the point of competition, a grand strategy can be too rigid to adapt, especially for a vast space that is full of relational uncertainties. For a *weiqi* strategist, in light that both continents are postcolonial societies with intensive European legacies, the tasks are mainly to win hearts and accrue relations for future benefits. The other rivals and their legacies make no target.

⁷ Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi told reporters at the State Department that Beijing’s military moves have been justified by provocative military actions by others in the region [45].

Therefore, China squeezes instead of encircling space. However, with investments and migrants gradually growing on both continents, this could constitute a potentially lethal threat in the eyes of a chess rival. Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton [1] was the first statesperson to raise the charge of new colonialism relating to China's presence in Africa. She contrasted the US style with China's and blasted the latter's rule-breaking irresponsibility [25].

The same perspective emerges in the criticism of China's presence in Latin America, which, according to former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, "does not need new imperial powers that seek only to benefit their own people" [50]. The media immediately note the lingering Monroe Doctrine in his remark. A subsequent comment, based on a think tank report [33], raised alarm at "the Chinese regime's ulterior motives" that appear to unmistakably be targeting the US. The motives of Chinese investments are said to be "thinly veiled and evident both in the structure and locational choices of such enterprises. The ventures reward ideological, anti-U.S. friends, strengthen geopolitical alliances, and serve as a platform for espionage" [17].

The real global challenge to the US appears to be the BRI. The BRI is almost a perfect metaphor for the middle stages of Weiqi, in which the rivals are prepared to connect their earlier stones, which have already been spread separately across the board. In the eyes of the chess player, the rival's focus cannot be the BRI in itself, but rather the US. This understanding perceives an offensive. Indeed, the BRI does not square with the extant rules of global governance that undergird the US leadership. For example, the bilateral sensibilities of each project lauded by China undermine the multilateral spirit required for global governance. Consequently, Washington perceives that the "Xi administration is engaged in a concerted imperialist policy towards its developing neighbor states" in order to break through the US encirclement [40]. Accordingly, the US needs to protect its primacy, together with India [46].

Granted that the BRI may have emerged out of a few prior unconnected projects, a chess player could still contend that the weiqi player can learn chess and aim towards checkmate. For example, China can secure a treaty port from local authorities if they fail to exercise their repayment schedule and, as a result, strengthen China's position vis-à-vis the US. In short, the desire for control comes naturally with the capacity to control. However, a chess player, new or old, can conversely (re)learn weiqi, too. In fact, the US has attempted something of a "balance of corridors," primarily with the cooperation of India, Japan, and Australia, to compete or offset China's rising influences through the BRI. None of these rivaling policies are aimed toward direct confrontation. Instead, they mimic the weiqi players' anxiety towards the recognition of their good will in the open space, either as a security provider or as a benign investor depending on the perceived need of the local actors. This metaphor can explain the quest for role relations to balance China's image. In other words, a chess player can learn not to view a rivalry as necessarily being an eye-to-eye battle to checkmate.

Conclusion

In fact, the chess player has role relations in mind at all times, despite the fact that their immediate responses are always confrontational, containing, and even militarily prepared for escalation. Consider, for example, the delight of the US to see smaller South

China Sea claimants looking to the US for security support. This attests a pursuit of good role relations. Equally noticeable has been the warning that China's foot in Africa and Latin America is exploitative and neo-colonialist. This warning is designed to sabotage China's role relations.

The metaphor of *weiqi* is a particularly useful heuristic device because simultaneous engagements and mutual invasion are typical characteristics of the second stage of *weiqi*. The second stage begins roughly at a point when the alternative ways in which the board will be divided begin to surface, after the earlier arranged stones show their potentials for further connection. The players at this stage will begin to plan where and how to defend and invade in more detail. During such an invasion, it is more challenging to decide where else and how to start another event, such that subsequent events can later merge into a macro-force that either consolidates one's initial advantage or reverses a disadvantage. In the process, some events can turn into a burden, and the player faces the difficult decision as to whether to rescue their stones or cut their losses.

The twenty-first century almost exactly resembles the second stage of *weiqi* in the following sense. China's early engagement in Africa, South Asia, Central Asia, and Latin America shows a macro-force that may establish China as the most welcome (read: least threatening) player on the world stage. The US' rebalance to Asia is an invasion in the *weiqi* perspectives. Vietnam, India, Australia, Taiwan, and Japan all line up. Two *weiqi* strategies ensue. First, in typical *weiqi* fashion, when neither side aims towards confrontation, China cycles through phases of defense, squeezing, and disengagement on the South China Sea. The timing of each strategy is contingent on how China evaluates the space it already considers taken, however. Specifically, it is dictated by how secure China perceives its hold on that space to be. Secondly, disengagement becomes China's main theme once the country perceives that rivalry will prevail over friendship. Disengagement allows China to focus on competing for acceptance elsewhere, instead of satisfying the expectations of a friend. An increasingly popular quote by Mao — “you fight in your way and I fight in mine” — reflects this lack of mutual expectations, or what we might call a “thin” role relation between China and the US. The same applies to the US presence in Taiwan. The principle is to squeeze the opponent and crowd the space just enough to leave no room for them to build two eyes.

China's behavior in its role as a rival contradicts the assumptions of mainstream IR, namely that rivals will oppose each other. Instead, China will focus on its own bidding for an enhanced role relation on the world stage. After all, acceptance elsewhere is the way to enact rivalry in the long run. Instead of confronting US power directly, *weiqi* advises that China move into areas where the US does not have any investment. For a *weiqi* player, these seemingly marginal spaces on the board can become valuable in the future, even though IR analysts would not recognize such spaces as having any natural appeal. However, one also needs to make sense of China's alternation between disengagement and engagement, and the strategic cycles of assertiveness and harmonious behavior in tensor regions, such as East Asia and Southeast Asia, where the US pivots. As the role of the rival is discursively inaccessible in a culture of harmony, China's strategic wisdom remains hidden. That wisdom suggests that this strategy involves striving for acceptance and harmony elsewhere through gift-giving, while allowing the opponent to enjoy perceived victories in local battles through disengagement.

The expectation that the US has of a rival is that this rival will come to square with its rules, and will try to reduce the rivalry through shared commitment to global governance. If this does not happen with China, then the US will immediately frame China as a typical chess rival. The cliché of the China threat is so intuitively plausible because China reluctantly cooperates in, and even sabotages, many global governance issues through its bilateral efforts. These include collaborations with different failing states, but also China's uncompromising military expansion, which allegedly bullies its neighbors. In the eyes of the US, China's squeezing on the sea against the US is too cyclical and inconsistent to engender the image of a weak power. This is why the US will continue to stress the ultimate importance of military strength, even though this is only part of the truth: a weiqi player does not try to force a solution where none is apparent. Defense of the status quo is already sufficient for the purpose of preserving energy for exploration elsewhere. In faraway lands, China enhances its connections by showing good will. On the one hand, and somewhat ironically, China does not aim to replace the US, even as the latter expects an upcoming, vehement competition. On the other hand, China is not militarily unready, even though it avoids escalation, but the US may mistake this reluctance for weakness.

A final note on the notion of space is in order. Space in the current literature is exclusively territorial. In practice, though, space is open for influence and can be constructed and reconstructed. Therefore, in the same territory, there can be multiple orders, such that politics and security do not dominate the agenda of a seemingly fixed population. Schools, families, and companies thus provide access points that allow actors to make nuanced future connections in academia, society, and finance, allowing them to sporadically influence governmentality in those spheres. The same dynamic can be said to take place in other fields, like culture, religion, transportation, migration, technology, law, etc. Stylistically, the quest for influence can be achieved through either sophisticated maneuvering or annoying interference. Consequently, all actors have direct and indirect stakes in all matters that concern China, making up for China's initial disadvantages with regard to a few noticeable agendas. The liberal order, which is based upon individualized rationality, revealed preference, and multiple parallel modes of governmentality, was once considered to need no further management. In practice, China may continue participating in this liberal order, except that China's encircling of previously safe areas has already reconstituted this rationality, and the preferences of the population everywhere.

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Chih-yu Shih teaches anthropology of knowledge, international theory, and China Studies at National Taiwan University. The global project on the intellectual history of China studies, which he coordinates, is accessible at <http://www.china-studies.taipei/>. His recent publications include *Colonial Legacies and Contemporary Studies of China and Chineseness*, *China and International Theory*, *Post-Western International Relations Reconsidered*, and *Sinicizing International Relations*.

Chiung-chiu Huang is Associate Professor of East Asian Studies at National Chengchi University. She works on Chinese international relations and asymmetric relations from the perspectives of the weak. Her current research, which methodologically adopts anthropology of international relations, is about Vietnam's and Mongolia's China policy. She has published *Harmonious Intervention: China's Quest for Relational Security*.