

Chinese Export Chess Sets

Chess, as a game of pure logic, has always held a special fascination for players and historians alike, ever since its mysterious beginnings in India, sometime before the sixth century AD. The exact origins of chess are unknown, though academics think that the game reached Persia in the same century and had spread to Europe as late as the Middle Ages.

The game, as played in China, however, is rather different from the European, Muslim or Indian game—it can truly be called chess at all. The Chinese claim to have invented chess some 2,000 years ago, although students of the game think that the Chinese game *Xiang Qi*, is instead a variation of the medieval Indian game, *Sbanranj*. In China, the board is divided by a gap between the two opposing sides, known as 'the river boundary' or *He Jing*, and the pieces themselves are placed on the intersections and not within the rectangles on the board. The

chessmen are circular discs with their names written on them—red for one side, blue for the other, representing king or general (*Jiang*), Mandarin (*Sbi*), minister or elephant (*Xiang*), horse (*Ma*), chariot (*Cbe*), cannon (*Pao*) and foot soldier (*Bing*).

Chinese games tables, *Qizhuo*, similar to the one illustrated, are extremely rare and only a few examples are known in public collections. A *zitan* wood table can be seen in the Tsui Museum of Art, Hong Kong, and the Philadelphia and Cleveland Museums of Art both have examples in *huangbuali*.

Shogi in Japan

In Japan, the sophisticated game of *Shogi* has been played since the sixteenth century and in recent times has become popular with players in the United States. The game is similar to European chess, but has several significant variations. *Shogi* chess pieces are flat tablets of a tapering sarcophagus

shape, with characters engraved on both sides. Upon promotion, the piece is flipped over to reveal its new value.

Chess has now been an established international collector's market for several years, with a particular tendency towards American and German collectors, many of whom, surprisingly, are unable to play the game. Phillips have held regular specialist chess sales in both London and New York. At the last Phillips's chess sale held at the New York sale-room in October, sales in Indian sets appeared strong with a not uncommon nineteenth-century Anglo-Indian ivory set from Vizagapatam selling above estimate for over US\$2,000.

At the same time, East India (John Company) chess sets have seen a significant rise in value within the last decade. Academic debate still continues about the precise date of these carved ivory sets, though they are likely to have been made between the beginning and middle of the nineteenth century in Berhampore. What is fairly clear is that one side represents native Indian troops, while the other side represents Indian sepoy's under the command of the British East India Company before the Indian Mutiny of 1857. The sepoy's uniform is very similar to the uniform worn by the 21st Bengal Native Infantry in 1819.

The Confusion over Ivory

In reality, although highly decorative, these sets are not perhaps quite as rare as some chess collectors have been led to believe. Similar nineteenth-century ivory figural carvings from Berhampore, though admittedly of a non-chess subject and sometimes of a lesser quality, make regular appearances at auctioneer's valuation counters, and the British Museum has numerous examples of similar work.

There has also been some confusion amongst collectors about the difference between African and Indian elephant ivory. The African elephant's tusks are the largest and can reach over eight feet in length and weigh as much as 150 to 200 pounds. It has been suggested that ivory from the Indian elephant (*Elephas*) turns white with age, while ivory from the African elephant (*Loxodonta*), on



Eighteenth/nineteenth-century Chinese games table, private collection USA

the other hand, turns a creamy yellow colour from age. Specialists at the Mammal Department of the Natural History Museum in London, however, deny that there is any distinguishing feature between the two ivories. It is more likely that ivory sets carved in India were bleached, as was the fashion during the nineteenth century, resulting in a characteristically whiter coloured ivory.

Import and Export of Ivory

United Nations and European Union legislation has rightly restricted the import and export of ivory items across international borders, though recent European Union directives have relaxed certain movements within the European Union itself. Although this has had a negative effect on the sale of post-war ivories, it seems to have had a lesser impact upon the sale of antique ivory chess sets, with most dedicated collectors becoming adept at braving bureaucratic government offices for the necessary paperwork.

The Chinese ivory set, illustrated, is typical of thousands of similar chess sets that were made in Canton for export to Europe throughout the nineteenth century, and that were probably shipped with cargoes of tea. The sets are intricately carved from

ivory, with one usually stained red with cochineal dye: a brilliant scarlet dye made from the crushed dried bodies of the female *Dactylopius coccus* beetle from South America and Java. However, Chinese sets with one set dyed green are known. Some sets are mounted on typically Cantonese 'puzzleball' bases.

In some sets, the white king and queen are represented by the figures of King George III and Queen Charlotte. These sets were intended for export to Britain, the idea being that the white side has the first move in chess, the European 'white devils' would have a small advantage. Similar sets with Napoleon as king were presumably made for export to France, though are likely to have been made, as with the George III sets, until the middle of the nineteenth century. The Napoleon sets appear infrequently on the British market.

Prices at Auction

The quality of these sets vary enormously, and this is reflected in the range seen in the prices achieved at auction. As a general rule, better quality sets have well-carved pawns and knights; the quality of carving found in lesser sets can leave much to be desired.

A poor quality set might fetch around £100 at a specialist chess auction, while a superb example might fetch upwards of £2-3,000.

Prices can also be higher at provincial auctions, where non-specialist dealers can over-estimate quality and fail to appreciate the quantity in circulation. Prices might also be higher in the United States, where presumably less sets were exported in the first place.

The Future

Recent trends in the European chess market seem to reflect the state of the post-recession art market in general; it is in a sense, a connoisseur's market where the best prices are paid for antique sets of the highest quality, freshly released onto the market. In the United States, age is of less concern to chess collectors and unusually decorative and highly visual sets command a premium.

For would-be collectors, chess sets offer a fascinating insight into a game that has intrigued both the Western and Eastern worlds for centuries.

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Early nineteenth-century Chinese export ivory set, sold for £920, Phillips 1997



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