

Matching Wits

Martin Putera and Lim Jing Wei are both from Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School and share a passion for weiqi or Go, an ancient board game rich in strategy. Martin is a second year student and was Indonesia's weiqi representative at the 24th Southeast Asian Games in Thailand. Jing Wei is a fourth year student, President of the 4th Duke-NUS Student Council, and recipient of the Goh Foundation Scholarship. They tell us more about their fascination with black and white stones.



Martin (left) and Jing Wei playing a game of weiqi

SMA: How did your passion for weiqi come about?

Martin Putera – MP: It all began with a manga, *Hikaru no Go*, that I read almost eight years ago. The story revolves around a boy and his efforts to become the best weiqi player. Inspired, I learnt the rules from the Internet, and started to play with my younger brother using an Othello board. However, since there were only two of us, we lost interest quickly. My interest was only reignited a few months later when I found out that a childhood friend of mine was one of the best weiqi players around! That was when I became active in the weiqi community. I played with my friends and online, joined classes taught by a professional player from Japan, and participated in many competitions to hone my skills.

Lim Jing Wei – LJW: I started playing weiqi when I was 12 years old, as a pastime before secondary school started. Upon the advice of my father's friend, who was a weiqi enthusiast, I started classes at the Singapore Weiqi

Association. My passion for this game stems from my teacher, Yang Jinhua, a professional 6-dan player, originally from Tianjin. He always treated children as mature adults, and regaled us with tales of past and present masters of the game, further romanticising an already romantic game in our malleable young minds. What fascinated me was the game's deep history and the legends and myths that have persisted to present day. It is a testament to the complexity of the universe, that a single game has kept humanity enthralled for thousands of years. I continue in this endeavour to play a small part in unravelling its mysteries.

SMA: Weiqi has been said to develop thinking skills and a sense of judgement. What has weiqi taught you, especially in relation to your medical studies?

MP: Weiqi is a very complex game. The standard board has 19 x 19 lines, that is 361 points/intersections, and the player is free to play at any point they want. That allows for 361! different games to be played. Given the size of

the board, the players have to pay attention to every single part of the board. Even if you make a mistake and suffer a loss in one part of the game, it is possible to turn the game around. Conversely, even though a particular strategy is acceptable on one part of the board, it could be disastrous on the whole game.

I think Medicine is similar to weiqi in this aspect. It is very complex and challenging, and it is critical to pay attention to the whole picture: treating the patient as a whole, not only to a specific system or anatomical site. With specialisation in Medicine, it is crucial for doctors to be aware of other disciplines. Ultimately, it is the person we are treating, not the organs or the disease. Medicine requires the company of good companions, just like weiqi. I am very fortunate to have met inspiring friends, mentors and faculty in my medical journey so far! In my two months of clerkship rotations, I learnt that the patients are our great teachers. I am grateful for the patients who have graciously agreed to talk to us, let us examine them, and even taught us about their illnesses. I learnt to appreciate that be it

in weiqi or Medicine, the people factor is most important.

LJW: Weiqi has taught me that things are never quite as they seem. To get around a complex task, we rely on an inordinate number of heuristics and mnemonics. However, overreliance on pattern recognition disables our game, as it prevents us from thinking outside of the box. When faced with a medical diagnostic challenge, we often fall back on past experiences and the knowledge we have previously acquired. This can sometimes be detrimental, causing us to miss the obscure, or sometimes even the obvious. Weiqi, like Medicine, can be described as both a science and an art. There is a tangible, deducible side to both ventures. Yet, a very large part is intangible, only limited only by the imagination.

SMA: If you could select one opponent to play against, who would it be?

MP: I would love to play against Lee Changho. He was arguably the world's strongest player for more than ten years. According to his opponents, he is a master in positional judgement, very patient and astute. Even when his rivals managed to achieve their strategy, they would realise only in the end that he turned their strategy to his advantage. Of course, I wouldn't stand a chance against him, but I would love to learn from him personally.

LJW: If I could pick one of the masters long deceased, it would be Huang Longshi who lived in the 17th century and probably the greatest player in Chinese history. Seeing the game records he has left behind makes me feel like I know him, and his legacy gives me a sense of his spirit and deep understanding. It would truly be wonderful to be able to reach across the centuries to learn from past wisdom.

SMA: What is your winning formula, and how would you advise aspiring players?

MP: Winning is not my main purpose in playing weiqi. What's important for me is to play well, to try out interesting strategies, and just enjoy the game! Being too fixated on winning often leads to frustration and I would end up playing badly instead. I would advise aspiring players to think thoroughly in a game, review and learn from mistakes, but most importantly, enjoy the game with friends!

SMA: Have you passed on your love of weiqi to others?

MP: I appreciate the fact that weiqi is not for everyone. Looking at my weiqi-playing friends, I notice that people who love weiqi are usually those who also love playing strategy or board games, are interested in Japanese culture, or are simply interested because of the manga/anime *Hikaru no Go*. So if I meet a friend with any of those interests, I would try to introduce weiqi to them. I also set up a weiqi club in my high school. Surprisingly quite a number of my friends joined, also because of the same manga/anime that got me interested.

Rather than trying to "recruit" new players, I would say nurturing and helping them along is more important. Players who are sincere, respectful and genuinely interested in the game would make anyone want to help them along. I gave free weekly online lessons for beginners when I was in the Nanyang Technological University. I enjoyed teaching them, and it made me happy to see them progress.

SMA: How obsessed are you with weiqi, and what are your most memorable moments?

LJW: Weiqi has been a big part of my life. There were periods in my life where I spent eight hours a day studying the game. Any competitive game or sport has its moments of glory and moments of mortification. Everyone is afraid of losing, but we can never improve if we never lose. If one is always winning, obviously that would mean that one is just playing against

people weaker than themselves. I remember tournaments where I have exulted in victory, as well as languished in defeat. After a really tough game, I would have tears in my eyes from the strain of the loss or the satisfaction of the win.

However, the most memorable moments are not of those on the "battlefield". A Chinese name for weiqi is *shou tan*, meaning "hand conversation". Weiqi is an excellent way to reach across cultural barriers to make friends. My most memorable moments are the simple ones, where I am sitting with some close friends studying a game, while enjoying some good tea.

SMA: What was your experience teaching weiqi like?

LJW: I have been teaching the game both online and in person for many years. The Internet has revolutionised weiqi, and has allowed this previously predominantly Asian game to take root in almost every corner of the globe. Several weiqi servers have sprung up in the past decade, allowing you to play a game with just about anyone anywhere in the world. It has also allowed us to teach each other and share ideas with regards to weiqi in online forums rather easily. Although not particularly qualified, I do enjoy teaching the game to beginners. In the Western world, English-speaking weiqi teachers are hard to come by, and hence when I was pursuing my undergraduate education in the US, I often found myself as an instructor or coach when playing at weiqi clubs there, in addition to when playing weiqi over the Internet.

I have always had a hard time teaching young children as weiqi is a game of discipline, and children do not always have the necessary attention span to sit down and play a full game. Nevertheless, knowing that they will ultimately inherit the game and all its virtues in time to come has always given me the most joy in teaching weiqi. **SMA**