

CHAPTER TEN

CHINA AND THE FAR EAST

Chinese ivory sets

In 1792 Lord George Macartney set out for Peking to take up his post as the first British diplomatic representative there. His period of office saw trade with China, and Canton in particular, grow to vast proportions; this trade was conducted through the good offices of the British East India Company.

The vast majority of this trade concerned Canton only and the British attempt to increase trade with China by creating an impressive embassy did little to impress the Chinese Emperor. Nevertheless, in spite of a natural aversion on the part of the Chinese, trade between the two countries flourished and in England the chinoiserie fashion quickly became established. When the Prince Regent built the Brighton Pavilion as a seaside retreat the Chinese taste was clearly obvious, showing the growing interest in all things Chinese and, indeed, in all branches of Eastern art. To meet the growing demand in England for this newly discovered art, the East India Company imported vast quantities of Oriental goods such as porcelain, lacquered furniture and ivories, not the least important of which proved to be chess sets made in Cantonese workshops to many different types. All were carved from Indian ivory; the quality varied from supreme works of art to cheap little thin figures carved from inferior ivory. Almost every set depicted Chinese figures carved to represent opposing Oriental armies, mostly from the Manchu dynasty (Figure 198).

As the British market for these desirable sets increased, with a view to furthering their business and making the pieces more desirable to the West, different European monarchs were featured on the white side. (The white side for the Europeans was a mere touch of flattery since the white pieces have the first move and with it, the power to dictate play and the slightly higher probability of winning.) Several of the Georges of England with their queens, Napoleon with Josephine, and some European monarchs which were the product of Oriental imagination, were featured in addition to fine representations of Chinese and Manchu emperors and empresses (see Figure 201).

Of these ornately carved chess sets, some were mounted

upon plain oval bases, some on carved rosette mounts rising from circular carved discs; others, and certainly the most impressive, were on the well-known concentric balls. In most of these sets, with the exception of the kings and queens and bishops, the same shapes feature on both sides.

The very best of all sets of Chinese origin are those where the bases have figures carved from the solid (Figure 199). Apart from the greater stability imparted by the large carved bases, the figures are always perfect in every detail. So much so, that the patterns adorning the robes of all the pieces except the pawns were learned and repeated many times over. The patterns themselves are identical, but in some of the very best sets the robes are left plain and polished. Perhaps because so many Chinese sets are completely covered with carvings, these highly superior 'plain' sets have an added appeal. The illustrations show the detailed carving much better than the written word. Sufficient to say, the balls and various other mounts associated with Chinese chess sets have created and always will create wonder and amazement.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the opposing forces were no longer exclusively Oriental with opposing Oriental monarchs. Sets had appeared which showed the Chinese against the armies of George II, George III (Figure 201) and George IV followed by Queen Victoria. There is an even later set of this type showing Edward VII against the Chinese.

In order to attract the French market, the Chinese produced further chessmen showing the Chinese Emperor against the Emperor Napoleon (Figure 200). They are the same in every detail as the sets with Georges except that the European kings and queens differ. These pieces are much rarer since trade with France was not so great.

An improved method of mounting chessmen was to set them on varying sizes of puzzleball bases. This could make even simple chessmen look impressive; and when large spectacular chessmen were so mounted, the effect was quite magnificent. The manner in which the concentric balls are carved so that there is one ball within another is interesting. There are no joints, but all the pieces are cut from a solid piece of ivory. First of all the ball is turned on



198 Polychromed Chinese carved ivory chess set depicting Chinese figures dressed in theatrical costume: the king holds the sceptre of a high official, the queen carries a basket of flowers, the bishop is clothed as a high official, the knight with a Manchu helmet, a caparisoned elephant rook, and foot soldier pawns. The fine colouring in this set, with one side predominantly green and the opposing side red, is unusual and highlights the already superb carving, nineteenth century

a drill to the correct shape; then it is drilled with a hollow ended taper drill down to the centre; a shaped knife is used to cut and free the various balls working from the centre upwards. Special tools, much skill and a great deal of patience are needed. A fine concentric ball-mounted set is on show in the Reading Room of the House of Commons

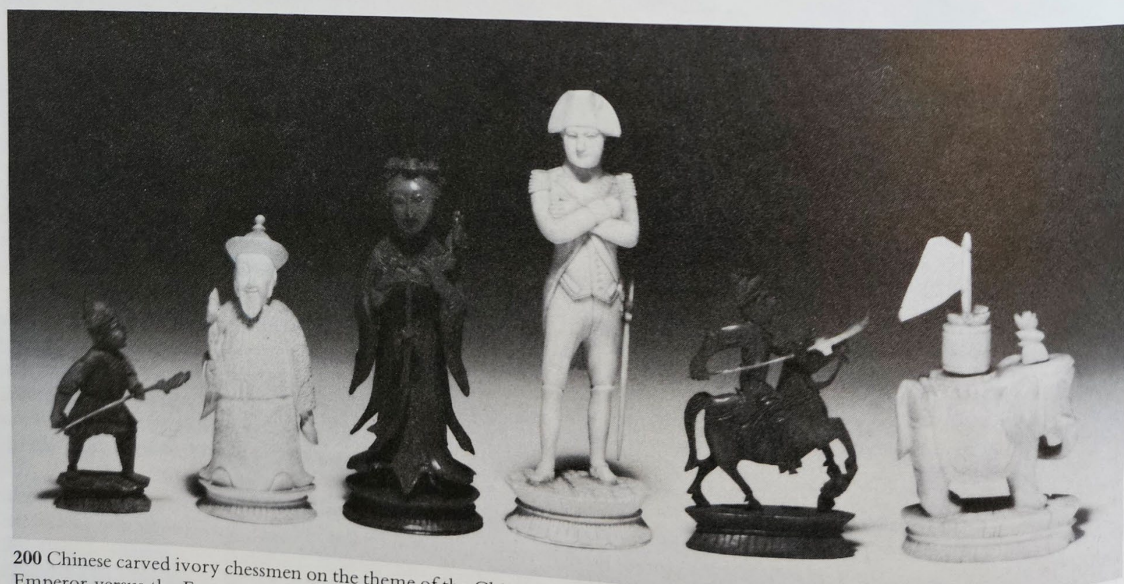
and a large set of this type on puzzleball bases depicting Edward VII against the Chinese is in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Delicate ivory-carved chessmen were sometimes covered with glass domes or specially made frames made of wood and glass. The pieces stood in prepared grooves or upon brass pins set into a wood base to help them remain in place.

Sometimes, softwood black lacquered cabinets with twin doors will be found housing a Chinese chess set, a set of carved and pierced backgammon pieces, a pair of carved dice shakers and a set of ivory dice. The black lacquer work is overall decorated in gilt as is the folding chessboard which is slotted into a recess beneath the space



199 Chinese carved ivory chessmen, the base and figure carved from a single piece of ivory, with a puzzle ball mounting and detailed intricately carved figures: queen, rook, king, nineteenth century



200 Chinese carved ivory chessmen on the theme of the Chinese Emperor versus the Emperor Napoleon (thus appealing to the French market), nineteenth century. Sizes vary.
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occupied by the rest of the games pieces, making a very acceptable presentation gift.

Occasionally a fine wood cabinet fitted with doors was specially made; when the doors were opened a sliding tray containing the chessmen could be pulled out. Beneath the tray was a drawer containing draughts and backgammon counters, together with a black and gold lacquered board, laid out for chess or chequers on one side and for backgammon on the other. The counters were for use in both chequers and backgammon. Usually these chequers had patterns incorporating birds, flowers and pagodas carved into the ivory. In other examples the ivory is in the form of fine tracery. In such cabinets, most of these chessmen were of the highest quality with carvings depicting the familiar scene of oriental emperors opposing Europeans. In the set illustrated in Figure 201, George III is featured as the white king (the cabinet is not illustrated).

Old sets must not be confused with the modern products which flood the markets of Hong Kong and Singapore. These are badly carved from inferior material and are usually stained brown on one side and left natural on the other. The natural ivory may be aged using a colouring agent, a common practice designed to deceive

the unwary. It is possible to buy some fine modern chess sets in both Hong Kong and Singapore, although these are produced on the Chinese mainland in large quantities. Such sets can be exceptional in quality and costly. Therefore, if ever the precept *caveat emptor* (let the buyer beware) is to be applied, it is in the purchase of chessmen in the Far East. Nevertheless, some of the most perfectly carved and intricately designed sets emanate from China via Hong Kong; Figure 202 illustrates one of the finest. Figures 203 and 204 are further examples of fine Chinese sets.

Each piece represents a character in Chinese mythology, and the sides portray opposing dynasties:

dark colour: king & queen: (Ching dynasty dress)
bishops: Lee Tai Pai or drunken poet
knights: Chinese warriors
pawns: eight philosophers

light colour: king & queen: (Ming dynasty dress)
bishops: Lee Tai Pai or drunken poet
knights: Chinese warriors
pawns: eight philosophers



201 Delicately carved Chinese ivory chess set: English King George III versus Chinese Emperor king in operatic (exaggerated) military costume with tiger apron, queen in a traditional wedding gown, bishops in scholar costumes, end of nineteenth century. The set illustrated is one of the finest examples of such sets extant. Sizes vary



202 Intricately carved Chinese ivory chessmen: each piece represents a character in Chinese mythology and opposing Dynasties and philosophers as pawns

203 Carved p
ropean colonia
dynastic figure
red and the op

204 Exceptiona
one side stained
natural white iv



203 Carved polychromed Chinese chessmen representing European colonial figures, Manchu dynastic figures, and Manchu dynastic figures mixed with Europeans; one side predominantly red and the opposing side green, early twentieth century



204 Exceptionally well-carved Chinese chessmen: unusually, one side stained green and the opposing side similarly carved in natural white ivory



203 Carved polychromed Chinese chessmen representing European colonial figures, Manchu dynastic figures, and Manchu dynastic figures mixed with Europeans; one side predominantly red and the opposing side green, early twentieth century



204 Exceptionally well-carved Chinese chessmen: unusually, one side stained green and the opposing side similarly carved in natural white ivory

A smaller set illustrates another dynasty:

- dark colour: king & queen: (Sung dynasty dress)
 bishops: Chinese minister
 knights: Chinese warriors
 pawns: eight philosophers
- light colour: king & queen: (Ming dynasty dress)
 bishops: Chinese minister
 knights: Chinese warriors
 pawns: eight philosophers

In some Chinese sets the kings and queens are shown as mandarins seated upon thrones with curved backs (Figure 205). The bishops are seated counsellors, clad in richly decorated robes; the knights are figures on horseback; the rooks are trumpeting elephants bearing castles on their backs; the pawns are foot soldiers. This kind of set is usually in natural ivory with one side stained green or brown and with all the main pieces etched to elaborate oriental patterns highlighted in black.

It is unusual to find carved coral used in Chinese sets, but when found, the colours are mostly opaque (almost white) and several shades of rose or pink, the most common being salmon. The kings and queens are deities, the bishops are priests and the rooks are turreted elephants.

In the West a few early ivory sets are to be found in which all the pieces represent rats with human expressions (Plate 48). In these few sets the rat's hair is stained deep brown with individual hairs highlighted by the removal of a little of the stain and by rubbing. They were probably all made by the same craftsman who engraved his mark on the base of each piece.

Chinese chess

It is interesting to study the ways in which the rules of Chinese chess differ from those of the game we know. The board is strikingly different in Chinese chess. There are two opposing rectangles, each made up of eight by four squares, and separated by a blank strip which is known as 'the river' and represents the great Yellow River of China. On the two outer edges of the board, parallel with the river, two centred blocks of four squares are marked out with diagonals. These are the fortresses, within which the emperors and mandarins must stay.

The pieces are simple disc-shaped counters, sixteen to each side, marked with Chinese characters in either red or black. The pieces are set up and the game proceeds, not on the squares, but on the intersections. Red plays first.

The emperor and the two mandarins are both confined to the fortress and can move only one point at a time. The emperor's moves are either vertical or horizontal, while the mandarins can move only diagonally. The emperor is further restricted by not being allowed to 'see' his opponent; that is to say, the two emperors may not stand on the same vertical line. The aim in Chinese chess is the same as in standard chess, that is, to checkmate or stalemate the emperor; he is very vulnerable, as are the two ineffectual mandarins. It is tempting to see a parallel with Chinese court life, in which a rigid hierarchy placed the Son of Heaven beyond contact with his people.

The elephant is restricted to moves of only two points at a time, diagonally. It is further limited by not being able

to cross the river, the only piece apart from the emperor and mandarins which may not do so. The knight moves one point along a line and then one point diagonally, rather like the standard chess knight. The rook moves just like the rook in standard chess, and because of its sweeping power of attack is often known as the chariot. The pawns move only one point forward at a time until they cross the river, when they may also move one point sideways. The cannon moves like the rook, but must always have another piece, whether red or black, to jump over.

The battle in Chinese chess thus has a very distinct character, due to the limitations of some pieces and the powerful movements of others.

The Chinese dispute the Indian origin of chess and wrongly claim that it is of Chinese origin. Chinese chess (chong-ki or royal game) is derived from the Indian game of *Chaturanga*. It bears a very remote resemblance to its Indian ancestor, both in the names of the pieces and their moves. For example, the two vizirs of *Chaturanga* became the two mandarins of Chinese chess, with the same limited movement in both forms of the game. The Chinese elephant, like the elephant of *Chaturanga*, moves only two positions at a time, unlike the chess bishop, which very much later replaced the elephant.

Burmese chess sets

Under the name *Chit-tha-reen*, a game has been played in Burma for a considerable period, but the pieces used had much in common with early Siamese. Burma, which was a Province of British India, is on the east side of the Bay of Bengal extending from Manipur in the north to Siam in the south, and is bounded on the east by China, Annam and Siam; its area is about 240,000 square miles with a population of over 30 million.

The Burmese are an Indo-Chinese race, highly intelligent, and, among the Hindu and Chinese immigrants, there are many trading and business classes. The chief exports were rice, minerals, silk and ivory in its raw and carved state. Skilled workers in ivory were among the immigrants and, being excellent businessmen, they built up a large trade with the West. Among the items exported since the beginning of the nineteenth century were highly ornate chessmen with special emphasis on decorative playing pieces. A type was developed, made and exported in such quantities that it soon became known as Traditional Burmese. These were, in fact, made expressly for export.

By the second half of the nineteenth century the newly patented Staunton chess design (Figures 206-9) was becoming popular and a decorative set with recognizable pieces was wanted. Long before this, ivory sets resembling English designs but carved to intricate detail were brought to England, and although the country of origin was Burma, the style of carving clearly indicates that they are of Indo-Chinese workmanship. The colours are nearly always natural and red, though a few are natural and green but the different colour does not enhance their worth. The kings and queens are carved and pierced with interweaving patterns of foliage with birds and insects. The towers representing the rooks may have little houses, weeping willows and other trees or bamboos carved upon their



205 Magnificent Chinese carved ivory chess set: kings and queens as mandarins on thrones, twentieth century



206, 207 and 208 Burmese 'Anglo-Chinese'-style ornately carved ivory chessmen: the kings and queens are carved and pierced with interweaving patterns, the knights are horses' heads with elaborate bases, the bishops are mitres with intricate carvings, second half of nineteenth century. Note the superior carving in Figure 206. The quality of carving varies enormously from set to set. Figure 207 is a European copy of the Burmese set. Figure 208 is a medium quality carving. Heights vary



surfaces with sometimes an additional small house on the top. The knights, which are horses' heads, often stand on elaborately turned and carved bases. The bishop has a mitre with intricate carvings surmounted by a cross.

These 'Burmese' pieces vary in size and quality of carving, but they are usually extremely good and some are quite excellent. Because of this variation, it is impossible to judge the chess pieces simply by looking at a photograph, which can make an ordinary set look impressive and can equally belie the true worth of an exceptional set: there is no substitute for seeing and handling the pieces.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century roughly carved bone chessmen depicting foliage were made for everyday use. Although these have been described as English, the carving is obviously Chinese. These chessmen were sometimes sold complete with accompanying shakers, dice and draughts counters which could also be used for backgammon.

Far Eastern chess sets

In 1557, the Portuguese established themselves on the islands of Macao, Taipa and Coloane in the vast Canton River. These islands together cover an area of approximately ten square miles. Although all transit trade was in the hands of Chinese merchants, over a great number of years, the Portuguese traders carefully built up a large export trade to the West. Ivory goods featured among exported items, which included, in response to Western demands, large numbers of distinctive chess sets. Some were made in Burma, some in Canton and others by Chinese craftsmen who settled in Macao. Because of competition the sets were made to a very high standard; they are well carved, well finished and all are made from Indian ivory.

The Portuguese had established themselves in Far Eastern trade by the seventeenth century, and one result of this contact was the way traditional Portuguese interest in portraying the human face and figure was combined with Chinese art forms. This influence can be seen in the chess sets known as Macao, primarily because that was the port from which they were normally shipped, presumably by the merchants who had traded direct with the carvers. The same Portuguese influence can be seen in some sets known as Burmese, probably because they were made in Burma by migrant Chinese craftsmen.

Macao sets are, on the whole, of extremely good quality and are very finely balanced but they vary considerably in size. The bases are flat with serrated and patterned edges, from which rise delicately carved balusters. The balusters are surmounted by carved faces which betray Portuguese influence. The kings and queens are oriental and European monarchs; the bishops are oriental dignitaries or European bishops in mitres; the knights are horses' heads; the rooks are crenellated towers set in carved landscapes; and the pawns are warriors. One type of variation shows the European figures wearing top hats or crowns.

An especially distinctive example of Portuguese Macao sets includes, on one side, portrait busts probably representing Carlos I of Portugal and his queen Maria Amelia: in such sets the opposing Chinese king is usually

carved with an elegantly fretted head-dress. The colours are most commonly natural and red, though in some cases green is used instead of red.

Nineteenth-century Chinese carved wooden sets representing two armies each with different uniforms and hand carved, showing different expressions on the faces of each character, are extant (Figures 209–213 and 214). The kings in Figure 214 are $3\frac{3}{4}$ in. (9.5 cm.) and the pawns $1\frac{3}{4}$ in. (4.5 cm.) high. The pawns on one side, each in a different stance, carry spears and their opponents carry shields decorated with dragons. The sets are small and the quality of the carving is best appreciated when the facial expressions are examined under a magnifying glass. The castles are pagodas and the knights are horses' heads. Compare this design with the use of different materials by Far Eastern carvers in Figures 215 (Japanese softstone) and 216 (Singapore – carved and turned giraffe horn).

The game of chess as played by people dwelling in the Malay Peninsula is, as would be expected, the same as that of their close neighbours and co-religionists of Sumatra and Java. Malayan names for the pieces are derived from Persian and although much chess is played throughout the Peninsula, no chessmen of any great merit have originated there. There is no recognized traditional type of chess piece associated with Malaya, but simple playing pieces based on Muslim sets were made from the nineteenth century onwards. These simple sets were turned to similar Muslim design but with straight-sided diabolos surmounted by oviform finials. One side was stained or dyed either red or green and the material used was either Malayan ivory or softwood. They were in use before the nineteenth century and are still played with today using the same design. The bishops are $1\frac{3}{4}$ in. (4.5 cm.) high and the pawns $\frac{7}{8}$ in. (2.2 cm.) high.¹

Easter Island in the Pacific Ocean has an area of only 50 square miles and belongs to Chile from which it is only 2,300 miles distant. It was discovered by a Dutchman on Easter Day, 1722, and is noted mainly for its collection of stone monuments on which human faces were carved. These carvings without doubt are the work of prehistoric man. Considering all aspects of the island's history, it is surprising that it has no tradition of chess in any form; nevertheless, at least one wooden set hails from the island. The kings are portrayed as Spike River valley figures, the queens as demonic mythical beasts, the bishops as toucans, the rooks as Janus-headed New Guinea spindles, and the pawns as Easter Island monoliths; one side is stained dark, the other left natural. Although this set is of interest to the historian and collector, it is in no way traditional.

The Macao chess set shown in Figure 217 is an excellent example of a very distinctive type which, over many years, has become accepted among collectors as traditional. It was carved from Indian ivory early in the nineteenth century with the pieces of one side stained red. Throughout the set, carved representations of human heads are fitted to turned and carved stems rising from flat circular carved bases. It is quite possible that the European king and queen represent Carlos I of Portugal (1862–1908) and his wife, Maria Amelia. The bishops wear episcopal head-

¹ Murray's *A History of Chess*, p. 106, fig. 1 and Denis MMA no. 23 refer to these chessmen as nineteenth-century





209 to 213 Details of an unusual nineteenth-century wood-carved set depicting court personages, the pawns on one side with spears and on the other with frightener masks upon their shields

dress and orientalized mitres. Their opponents are oriental, with the king in an elaborately styled and fretted helmet. The bishops have much in common with those seen in Chinese sets of the same period, but the knights



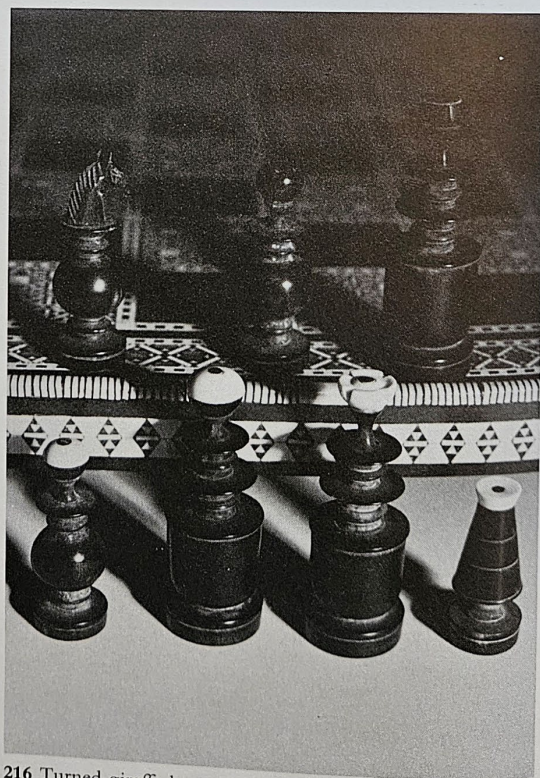
214 Opposing Dynasties in theatrical costume in a wood-carved set, nineteenth century



215 Japanese softstone carved set copied from a Chinese theme, nineteenth century

throughout are finely carved horses' heads similar to many found in Indian sets made in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; these have much in common with European sets of about the same period. The rooks are very fine turnings, deeply carved to represent bridges, archways, flowers, foliage and birds. There is usually a little pagoda fitted to the stepped castle top in addition to the flag (these rooks are different from the type of castles found in Burmese sets made for the Western market). Two distinctly different types of pawn appear in this Macao chess set. One side has representations of orientals wearing typical head-dress; their opponents represent Portuguese troops in leather helmets.

Many variations of this set are found; some are of excellent quality with large, well-carved and finished pieces, some are found with kings and queens wearing top hats and in very exceptional cases, the normal 'heads' are busts carved to waist level. All sets of this type, large or small, have one feature in common. The heads or busts are mounted upon knopped, carved stems rising from flat turned and carved bases. Depending on size, the balusters can be single- or double-knopped, nevertheless, they all incorporate the same characteristics. It is important when examining this kind of set to be sure that the carved details — flowers, weeping willows, etc. — all match. It may be added that these carvings are not so commonly available that the collector can pick and choose, although any difference between the pieces in any set, however small, will probably lower its value. This does not mean that an



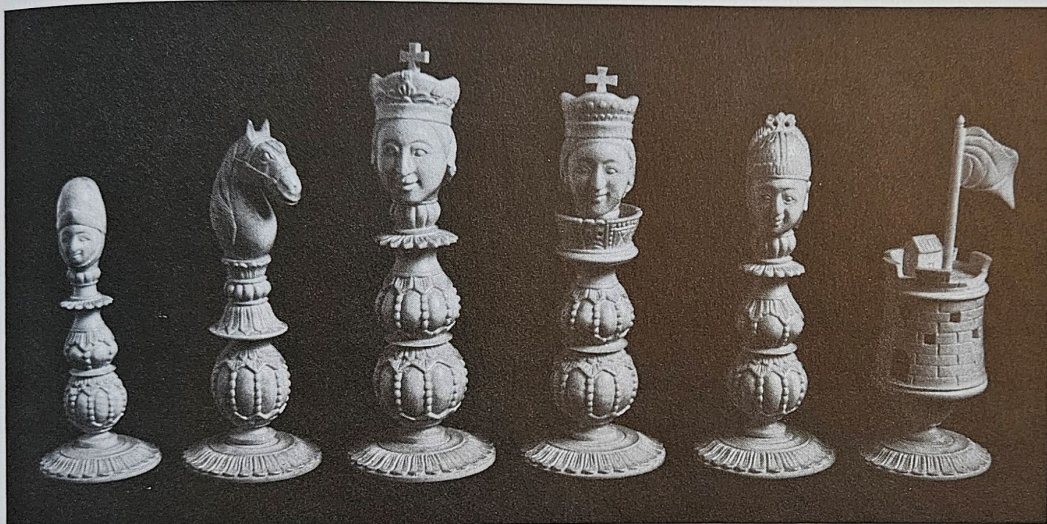
216 Turned giraffe horn chessmen from Singapore, twentieth century

over-critical collector should go looking for differences which do not exist, but some caution is necessary.

Finely carved and finished Burmese sets incorporate rooks carrying flags engraved with the Union Jack on one side and three wavy lines on the other. The flags are always carved so that they appear to be fluttering. In the nineteenth century attempts were made to copy some of these sets in England and possibly also in France. These copies are simpler than the better Burmese carvings and can be recognized by the fact that the face which is usually, though not always, carved into one side of the bishop's

mitre has European features.

Occasionally some extra embellishment will be found in these pieces: for example a larger, more prominent scroll on the collar around the base finial, or a simple cross as a finial to the king. The finials vary from delicately carved little dragons to a different type of cross including a Burmese version of the Maltese cross used as a finial to the head of either the king, queen, or both. The finials are usually found on less intricate pieces and may indicate European manufacture. The true origin of these English or French pieces can be detected in the plain turned stems



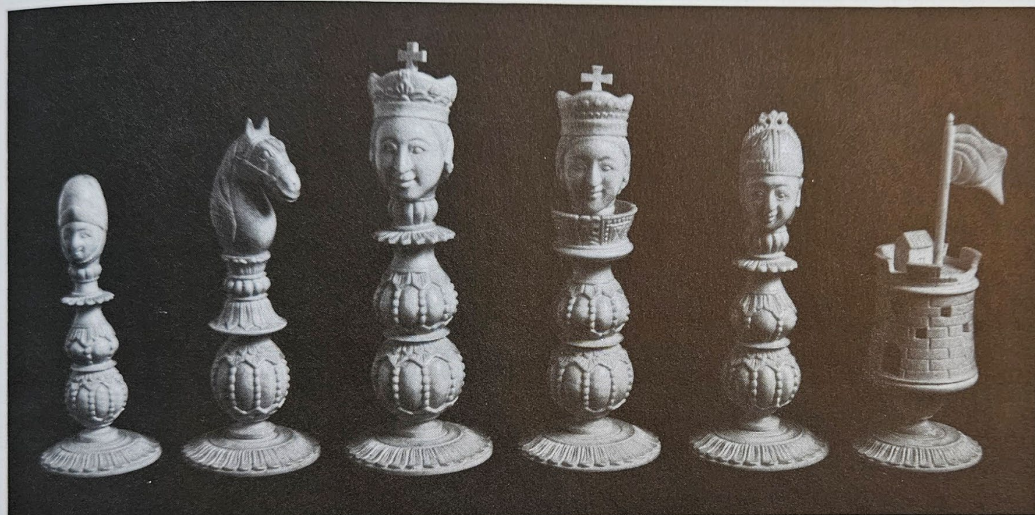
217 Traditional Macao carved ivory chessmen: the king and queen are Carlos I of Portugal and Marie Amelia versus Orientals, nineteenth century (MMNY, Marbé, William, Harbeson, Paul Hanna Collection etc.). Heights: K. 4in. (10.5cm.), P. 3in. (7.5cm.)

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and plain turreted castles, the same as are found in English and French playing sets with baluster stems. The head and crown of the king, queen and bishop are similar in style to those of the Burmese pieces, but they are less intricately carved.

Sets of this general type incorporate finials of various styles: *fleur-de-lis*, plain or decorative crosses, Maltese-style crosses or ribbed tapering stubs. Bishops in the same sets may have crosses, plain or patterned on their mitres; others may wear mitres with simple lipped finish. It should be noted that all such terminals, whatever the shape, are easily made, without carving, on an ornamental turning lathe.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century a very few, obviously specially commissioned, chess sets were carved to the 'Anna and the King of Siam' style. The king is a deity seated cross-legged on a chair, the queen squats on her feet in a chair; both king and queen appear to sit uncomfortably upon their thrones, which are carved to resemble European-style chairs with legs terminating in animal paws. The bishop is a juggernaut (though a very simple one compared with Indian pieces) and the knight is a rider wearing a Siamese or Burmese hat, but wearing no shirt. One side incorporates the figure of an attendant holding the reins of the horse. The rooks are finely carved elephants driven by mahouts, and the pawns are crouching figures holding small spears. All the pieces except the king and queen are set upon plain thin ivory bases. Heights, K. $3\frac{3}{4}$ in. (9.5 cm.), P. $1\frac{1}{4}$ in. (2.9 cm.).

It should be explained why only very small quantities of chess sets have come out of Thailand (Siam). This country enjoys the distinction of never having been colonized by Europeans. Thailand extends southwards into the Malay Peninsula, bounded on the west and north by Burma and by what was French Indo-China on the north-east and east, with its capital Bangkok situated at the mouth of the Menam river. It is a mountainous country, difficult to traverse and hostile geographically to tourists.

Mainly due to foreign advisers Siam became a highly progressive country with its king as executive; it is advised by a cabinet comprising the heads of state departments, and has a legislative council. At one time, rice and teak were the principal exports with tin, rubies and sapphires very important but lesser exports. Because commercial undertakings were unable to set up trading posts, the country never became a centre of the ivory trade either in bulk or as works of art.

In spite of all this, there do survive some fine distinctive chess pieces (Plate 49). These possibly have a Burmese origin dating back to the seventeenth century, were made for local play and could not have been made for commercial reasons. Culture in both Siam and Burma were closely linked and it is impossible to state with absolute certainty if any particular set has a Burmese or a Siamese origin. But whatever the country of origin, the actual game was played in the same way in both countries. For the most part, the pieces are worn down with age and the ivory is cracked. The seated 'great king' wears the classical head-dress which echoes the shape of the Buddhist *stupa*, and this early set has a 'lieutenant' instead of a queen. The bishop is a Burmese temple, replaced in later

carvings by a juggernaut cart. The knight is a horse with monkey rider and the rook an elephant ridden by a monkey. The pawns are squatting soldiers.

Of similar style to the set described above and of about the same age are carved wooden sets (Plate 50), one side in red, the other dark green. The red side has the king wearing a Buddhist *stupa*-style headgear and is in the Oriental squatting position holding a sword. The queen, likewise seated, has an ivory decoration in her head-dress. The kings and queens of both sides are depicted as formidable-looking demons. The bishops represent temples, the knights are horses ridden by monkeys, and the rooks are elephants ridden by monkeys. The pawns of one side are squatting monkeys, those on the other are squatting demons. The brown undercoat highlights the green, and the effect of continuous handling adds charm to this old chess set. The theme associated with the pieces is reminiscent of Burmese and Siamese mythology. Latter-day Burmese chessmen were usually carved from hardwood whereas earlier sets were made from softwood. It should be remembered that hardwood, which was a natural product of Burma and Siam, did not take kindly to dyes which, in the early days, were always used for distinguishing sides; softwood was easier to carve and much easier to colour.

Other late nineteenth-century Burmese chessmen made from agate (one side brown and the other smoky agate) resemble small and simpler types of Indian pieces with camels as bishops, which are not otherwise seen in Burmese sets. The king and queen are standing figures, the bishops are camels, the knights are horses, the rooks are elephants, and the pawns are of baluster form.

Many Burmese chess sets both in wood and ivory are extant. Throughout one set Hindu influence is obvious; the kings and queens are symbolized by kneeling figures taken from Siamese and Burmese mythology, the bishops by crudely carved temples (and in some cases juggernauts), the knights by horses with riders, and the rooks by elephants with a mahout driver of different size and in a different posture for each piece. Pawns are depicted either as Siamese, with one leg crossed to show the sole of the foot (a typical Siamese posture) or as squatting figures in devil masks. Usually sets of this type are finished with the pieces of one side stained red or green. The natural ivory side almost always shows signs of cracking and wear.

Japanese chess sets

The Japanese empire dates from 660 BC, and since then Japan has made enormous progress in every sphere of culture, art and commerce. Ever since the beginning of the sixteenth century a complex game called shogi has been played, unchanged to this day. This game, which is universally referred to as Japanese chess, is a variation of the medieval game of chess known as shatranj. In all probability it reached Japan by way of Korea in the thirteenth century. Although the game differs in many respects from shatranj, there is a distinct relationship between the two. The board and pieces of both are totally different from Western or oriental conception. The ivory or wooden chess pieces are often shaped quite roughly, like miniature tombstones, with the name of the character

engraved onto them. Sometimes, however, shogi pieces are finely engraved with ornamental carving.

In the early sixteenth century the shogi master Ohashi-Sokei established his reputation and was appointed chief chess player to the emperor. The books on chess written by Ohashi-Sokei are still standard reference works, and Japan has a long-standing tradition of government-run schools and tournaments in chess which continues today.¹

Shogi is undoubtedly a form of chess since the aim is to checkmate the king. The king, rook and bishop all move as they do in chess. The board is divided into nine by nine rectangles, not squares, since the pieces are themselves rectangular with pointed tops. The third and the sixth vertical lines are both marked with two dots placed at the third and sixth intersections, thus dividing the board into three vertical strips of three by nine rectangles.

The pieces of each side are all the same colour, and quite unlike those used in any other kind of chess. They are wedge-shaped, and flat with slightly tapered sides, with the smaller end pointed. It is the direction to which the pointed end faces that indicates to which side the piece belongs. The pieces occupy the squares, as in chess. On the first row the emperor occupies the middle square. He is flanked on each side by a gold general, a silver general, a knight and a spear. On the second row, the bishop occupies the second square and the rook occupies the eighth square; on the opposing side these positions are reversed. Each side has only one bishop and one rook. The nine pawns occupy squares of the third row.

The king moves as in chess, one square in any direction. The gold general can move one square in any direction, except diagonally backwards; while the silver general can move one square in any direction with two exceptions – sideways and straight backwards. Both generals therefore have a limited ability to retreat. The knight's move is the same as in chess, but only to left or right in a forward direction. The spear moves forward only, any number of squares. The rook and the bishop move just as they do in chess. The pawn moves one square straight forward only, with no variation.

With the exception of the king and gold general, any piece which reaches rows seven or eight on the opposite side of the board may be promoted as the player decides; if a piece reaches row nine, it must be promoted or be declared dead, that is, immobilized. A piece is promoted by turning its red underside uppermost. The silver general, knight, spear and pawn all promote to gold generals. The rook promotes to a crowned castle and the bishop to a crowned bishop; both may now move as kings. If a promoted piece is captured and brought back into play, it is demoted to its original rank.

Shogi is unique among chess games in the way so many pieces can be promoted, also in the way that a captured piece can be brought back into the game to fight against its original side, with its pointed end now facing in the opposite direction. The result may be, for example, that one side has neither a bishop nor castle while the other side has two of each. There are, of course, restrictions on where a player may place a captured piece. The rules of

promotion and using captured pieces ensure that the battle between the two armies is aggressive and fluid, full of sudden threats and unexpected escapes.

Since the beginning of this century, in addition to wood and ivory, a variety of hardstones including rose quartz, African jade and crystal have been used as mediums from which to produce shogi pieces. Needless to say, hardstones of different colours greatly enhance these rare pieces.

In some ivory sets carved in recent years, the figures represent members of Japanese royalty standing with hands clasped before them. Their features are engraved and painted, and they stand on oval bases with pebbled engraving. Usually one set of pieces is stained brown and the other left natural. Heights, K. 3½ in. (9.5 cm.), P. 2½ in. (5.4 cm.).

A similar type engraved to show better detail represents a mixture of military and priestly figures. The king holds a sword with the matching figure of a queen at his side. The horsemen are Samurai warriors and the rooks are towers with reticulated carving on the base with a pagoda-style castle above.

A variation on the last set described, also in natural and lightly stained ivory, has a bearded king holding a scroll standing beside a queen holding a fan. The bishops are holding staffs and wreaths, the knights are horses, and the castles pagodas.

Most late nineteenth-century Japanese carved ivory chess sets bear a striking resemblance to those produced in China. In one Japanese set, one side is stained black and the other predominantly red, with a gilded finish to both sides. The kings and queens wear ceremonial dress, the bishops are priests and the knights (unlike those in Chinese sets) are wearing bowler hats. The rook is a tall four-roofed pagoda, with a small ball finial. The pawns are shown as Japanese soldiers holding rifles. All the pieces stand upon thick, almost elliptical bases. They are finely graded in size and are well balanced. Height, K. 5¼ in. (13.3 cm.).

Late nineteenth-century or early twentieth-century finely carved ivory Japanese sets were made with one side of natural ivory and the opposing side highlighted in yellow. The king is a standing figure with a painted beard and long, elaborate head-dress. He is dressed in a kimono and holds a long sheathed sword under one arm and a seal of office under the other. The queen with flowing hair is also dressed in a kimono; she kneels, holding a fan with both hands. The bishop, a bald standing figure, holds a staff in one hand and large beads in the other. The knights are thinly carved horses, standing on hind legs with front legs resting upon rocky outcrops. The rooks are temples and the pawns are kneeling figures holding swords. All the figures wear kimonos of various designs and stand upon plain edged square bases. The hair on the figures' heads is etched in black. Heights, K. 2½ in. (6.4 cm.), P. 1½ in. (4.1 cm.).

Other ivory sets have standing figures representing royalty with hands clasped before them; they have linked features etched in colour on both sides. The bishops are priests in distinctive head-dress and the rooks are pagodas. The knights are Samurai horsemen on prancing horses and the pawns are female figures. All are mounted upon

¹ The two volumes written by Tamotsu Kamiya, one published in 1977, and one in 1978, are also standard reference books on chess



218 Japanese hardstone chessmen: the king and queen portray royal figures in sitting position, priestly bishops, knights as horses' heads, rooks as temples, and pawns as seated figures (Melsen Collection). Heights: K. $3\frac{1}{8}$ in. (8cm.), P. $1\frac{5}{8}$ in. (4.1cm.)

round bases with pebbled sides. Heights, K. $3\frac{3}{4}$ in. (9.5cm.), P. $2\frac{1}{8}$ in. (5.4cm.).

In the second half of the twentieth century, larger ivory sets were made with military and priestly figures, one side natural ivory and the other stained brown. The knights represent Samurai horsemen.

In recent years small travelling chess sets incorporating figures carved to represent Oriental figures have been made. The figures are carved from either green and grey hardstone or rose quartz and green fluorite. Each set is complete with an inlaid peg-in type chessboard and is housed in a mahogany case. Heights, K. $2\frac{7}{8}$ in. (7.3cm.), P. $1\frac{1}{2}$ in. (3.8cm.). Others are made of bloodstone and new quartz. Heights, K. $2\frac{1}{4}$ in. (5.7cm.), P. $1\frac{3}{4}$ in. (4.5cm.).

The structure of some hardstones renders them quite unsuitable for use where detailed or very fine carving is desired, nevertheless, using great skill and patience, highly attractive chess sets have been carved from these difficult materials. In one particular Japanese set, the kings are Samurai warriors in full armour, the queens wear kimonos and hold fans. The bishops are priests and the knights are heavy horses with exaggerated large tails. The rooks are square temples. One side is brown hardstone showing light brown and streaks, and the other is predominantly of white opaque stone with brown streaks. The pawns are three-quarter length busts of bearded priestly figures.



219 Japanese polychrome bamboo chessmen, elaborately carved and painted: king and queen, bishop wearing startling head-dress, knight, elephant rook, pawn with a similar face to the queen, late nineteenth/early twentieth century (Hafler Collection and MMNY).

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Similar-style sets were made in clear and smoky hardstone. The rooks are pagodas and the knights are horses, but the king is depicted as a royal personage and the queen wears a kimono of a different type from that of the last set. Heights, K. $3\frac{1}{8}$ in. (8 cm.), P. $1\frac{3}{8}$ in. (4.1 cm.).

Figure 218 shows one side in white stone with slightly mottled green markings, the other carved from dark green fluorite. The king and queen portray royal figures. The king is in a sitting position, with distinctive hairstyle; the queen is a three-quarter length figure holding a fan. The bishops are priestly figures. The knights are horses' heads and the rooks are temples. The pawns are three-quarter length seated figures. All the carvings are simple and are not detailed.

Japanese sets which have been wrongly described as shogi are obviously made for the Western market. They are set on fine raised shogi boards with twenty metal pieces to each side. Each gilt tablet is surmounted by a representative military figure in hand-painted composite material. Each piece is complete with weapons in modernistic style. Board $14\frac{5}{8}$ in. (37.2 cm.), K. $2\frac{3}{8}$ in. (6.6 cm.), P. 2 in. (5.1 cm.).

Java, Bali and Cambodia

Java, the third largest island in that group of islands which was once the Dutch East Indies, lies between Borneo and Sumatra; it covers some 50,000 square miles of mountainous and volcanic country and has fertile soil, especially in the north-west area. Its capital is Batavia, with Surabaya the next town in importance. Both places are seaports from which coffee, rubber, rice, tea, sugar and spices were traded. Among its minerals are tin, coal, oil and salt.

The people are chiefly Mohammedans and Buddhists. It has never been known for its art and the small amount coming from the country appears somewhat odd to Western eyes. Much of the information in our possession became known to us through Sir T. Stamford Raffles, who was Governor prior to Java's restoration to the Dutch on the general pacification of Europe in 1815. Javanese chess, like that of the Sumatrans, is obviously of Indian origin. The pieces are on each side a Ratu (king), a Pateh (queen), two Prahū (rooks), two Mantri (bishops), two Jaran (knights), eight Bidak (pawns). The pieces are arranged upon the board as for the Western game except that each Ratu (king) faces the opposing Pateh (queen). The play resembles Western chess except that the king, if he has not been checked, is allowed to move two squares on his first move, and pawns may move two squares on their first moves even though they pass check of an opposing pawn. If a pawn reaches his adversary's first line, it must retrograde three moves diagonally before it can become a queen except if it has reached the rook's square in which case it at once becomes queen. Any number of queens may be on the board at the same time. The king cannot castle after having been checked; castling is performed by two moves – the castle must first be brought up to the king, after which the king may pass over the castle at any future move provided that he has not been checked or that no piece has occupied the square to which he would move. A piece or a pawn must remain on the board until the end; if the king is left alone the game is

stalemate, but the lone king wins. It should be noted that the two Prahū are Javanese vessels; this factor is considered proof of the Hindu (Indian) origin of the Javanese game.

Javanese carvers have been producing chess sets intended for tourists or settlers since about the middle of the nineteenth century. To the Western eye the figures look so weird that it is hard to imagine that they are intended for serious play. Chess has been played for hundreds of years in Java, where it is called *chature*, a name clearly of Indian origin.

The better known Javanese polychrome bamboo chessmen (Figure 219) were made from about the end of the nineteenth century. All the figures are most elaborately carved, then painted in red, black, flesh and white and are constructed in single profile (like figures in Ancient Egyptian paintings). The king and queen wear highly elaborate head-dresses and masks. The knights are primitive horses' heads. The rooks resemble miniature elephant heads with protruding snouts and receding chins. The pawns are miniatures of the queen.

An unusual Javanese nineteenth-century polychrome set represents East versus West. All the pieces are busts, the king with Javanese headgear and the queen with headgear that closely resembles that of the Siamese. The bishop appears in a bowler hat while the knight is represented as a clown figure in Oriental dress, again wearing a tiny bowler. The bowler hats worn by some of the pieces may have acquired a special significance in Java but it is difficult to understand just why. The rook is an elephant's head and shoulders with trunk reaching upward and the pawns are miniatures of the knights. The heights of the pieces vary between $2\frac{3}{8}$ in. and $3\frac{1}{4}$ in. (6.6 cm. and 9.8 cm.).

Wooden sets which depict forms of national art appear as dancing figures of gods and goddesses with articulated arms; all are wearing batik cotton skirts. Although these sets are obviously made for tourists, they are full of charm. Heights, K. 4 in. (10.2 cm.), P. 2 in. (5.1 cm.).

There are further unusual sets portraying missionaries and Javanese kings. The queens are painted gesso on wood. The remaining pieces are antelopes, monkeys or birds. Each piece of the whole set stands upon a wooden base. The heights of the pieces vary between 2 in. and $4\frac{1}{4}$ in. (5.1 cm. and 10.8 cm.).

Bali, an island of the East Indies once belonging to the Netherlands, lies to the east of Java having an area of over 4,000 square miles with Bulsheng as its capital. The inhabitants are Brahmins (Hindu) who grow cotton, sugar, rice and coffee and are expert metal workers. The whole island is subject to earthquakes; these in the past caused a great eruption leaving a giant volcano over 10,000 feet high.

An unusual set, carved in light and dark horn some time during this century, comes from Bali, or from one of its outlying islands. The figures in this set are shown walking. The kings and queens are tribal chieftains and their consorts. The knights are horses' heads, and the rooks are the head and shoulders of elephants squatting on their hind legs. Heights, $2\frac{3}{8}$ to $3\frac{1}{4}$ in. (6 to 9.5 cm.).

Some of the finest and best hardwood carved Eastern chessmen are made in Bali. Here the Hindu religion thrives in what the Balinese believe to be its purest form. The people are among the most industrious in the world:

almost everybody, from children to adults, appears to be busy over a piece of carving. The purpose of their art is to produce effigies of the Hindu gods for their temples and homes, and nowadays also for tourists. This includes chessmen carved from local ebony. These pieces represent the good and evil gods of the Hindu pantheon.

Carvers usually squat at work, holding the block being carved firmly with one foot. They use some 30 fine steel chisels, together with a wooden mallet. The carvings are almost always highly detailed, necessitating extremely light strokes of the mallet. No models are used but usually the carver specializes in two or three particular subjects, such as Rama and Garuda, which are repeated over and over again by the same carver. There are several centres of wood carving, among which the village of Mas is perhaps the most distinguished. In addition to the figures inspired by the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, there are carvings of men and women in formal costume, dancers and drummers. The wood used is called sawo: dark red, close-grained and very beautiful when polished.

Tourism has brought to the Balinese a ready market. Now that jumbo jets can land on their little island, this market can only expand. Unfortunately, this expansion has already led to a deterioration in the woods used and the quality of carving. However, there still exists a nucleus of fine artists, and it is to be hoped that they will be able to preserve the integrity of their art for posterity.

When Islam spread throughout Indonesia prior to the eighteenth century, Bali became a refuge for thousands of Hindus among whom were priests, scholars, artists, nobility and commoners. A rather special form of religion

based on their own, but peculiar to the island, emerged. This created the inspiration which is so obvious in all Balinese works of art – in their creative drama, dances and epics, and this is seen in many Balinese chessmen. To understand the portrayal of Balinese dance, drama and carving, as in the extraordinary chess set in Figure 220, one must understand the stories of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, the two ancient Hindu epics.

In the *Ramayana*, Sita accompanies her husband, Prince Rama, to his exile in the forest. There Rama is pursued by a golden deer while Sita is kidnapped by the King of the Demons, Ravana. With the help of Hanuman, the King of the Monkeys, she is able to tell Rama of her plight and he comes to her rescue. But the son of Ravana, Meganada, shoots Rama with a magic arrow which turns into a snake and entwines itself around Rama. Rama saves himself by calling upon his ally, Garuda, a giant eagle, which kills the snake.

Hanuman now brings his army of monkeys to fight for Rama against Meganada and his army of demons. These are the two armies represented in this Balinese chess set. The pawns are monkeys and demons. The eagle Garuda and the evil snake take their places in the battle beside kings with their accompanying divinities. The pieces are all magnificently carved in hardwood and make up a set which can have few equals.

Some chess pieces are made from ivory or hardwood and are of abstract design with the exception of the horses' heads used as knights. The pawns are cowrie shells on one side and crimped stone discs on the other. The boards are of hardwood, sometimes inlaid with mother-of-pearl.



220 Balinese carved hardwood chessmen interpreting Balinese dance and drama and the stories of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. A monkey army of pawns fights for Rama against Megandra and his army of demon pawns, eighteenth century. Heights: K, $4\frac{1}{2}$ in. (11.3 cm.), P, 2 in. (5 cm.)

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The opposite sides of the board have extensions, usually with scroll-shaped ends, and have carrying handles.

Generally, pieces from these countries are made by local players and are all of similar shapes. Thus, pieces apparently of Siamese make may turn out to be of Cambodian origin. The pieces in Figure 221 consist of small turned wood-shaped seashells. The horse's head which represents

the knight is the only easily recognized piece to the Western eye.¹

There is a variation of the above set in which the bishops are of elongated, ovoid form bearing concentric circles and simple finials. The pawns are dome-shaped

¹ A set similar to this is in the *MMNY* and is also mentioned in *Wichmann's Chess*



221 Cambodian wood chessmen, shaped in seashells, late nineteenth/twentieth century. Heights: varying



222 Siamese carved ivory chessmen portraying human and mythological figures, animals and juggernauts, early nineteenth century. © Sotheby Parke-Bernet (Editorial Photocolor Archives)

with incised intersecting cross-hatching on one side. It would indeed be difficult to visualize simpler designs for chessmen which were clearly made for everyday use. They are interesting only by virtue of the fact that they show a very early variation from what are internationally considered to be Muslim pieces.

The names of the Cambodian pieces in translation are lord, master, nobleman, horse and boat. In the game the king faces the opposing queen and the pawns occupy the first and the third rows in front of the major pieces, leaving the second row empty. Like pieces are used in Siam (Thailand) for a similar game.

An excellent example of an early eighteenth-century Siamese chess set in traditional shape has the pieces of one side coloured red and green, and those of the other left natural. This ivory set has much in common with a Cambodian set and although of the same general style, its

finish is infinitely superior throughout. As is normal in all genuine Cambodian chess sets, identical pebble-shaped pieces are used as pawns, but in many superior sets, including those made in Siam, the pieces are elaborately carved from ivory. Heights, $\frac{1}{4}$ to $2\frac{3}{8}$ in. (0.4 to 6 cm.).

Hindu (Indian) influence is clearly seen in the set in Figure 222 and in similar sets common to both Siam and Burma where the players of both countries have, from very early times, preferred to use pieces portraying human and mythological figures, animals and juggernauts, to simple playing sets incorporating plain symbols. These pieces are carved from Burmese ivory with the pieces of one side stained black. Simple, plainly carved juggernauts such as those shown are often mistaken for either temples or pagodas whilst highly important sets sometimes use elaborately carved juggernauts or ships, similar to those found in the better class Delhi (John) sets.