

Chess and its Ancestors: A Historical Journey from Ancient Chaturanga to Modern Play

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Abstract

In an era where technology and gaming culture have captivated people of all ages, chess has emerged as a highly popular game, widely studied and enjoyed across the globe. Despite its new found digital popularity, chess boasts a history spanning nearly five thousand years, having endured the rise and fall of civilizations and regimes. Its generational appeal raises several intriguing questions: how has chess managed to survive and flourish over millennia? What were the pivotal developments that were vital to its resilience? What were the socio-political and cultural contexts that shaped chess and were in turn influenced by it? This paper seeks to address these questions. While existing literature offers insights into chess's gameplay, strategies, theories, puzzles, and problems, it often falls short of comprehensively addressing the factors that have shaped its resilience, particularly over the last 1,500 years when its history has been more systematically documented. To address this knowledge gap, this paper adopts a secondary literature-based method, drawing from a wide range of sources including history books, ancient texts, scholarly articles, credible and registered blogs, and discussions with experts of the game to examine critical developments in the evolution of chess since the 6th century, when it was referred to as Chaturanga. This paper identifies five pivotal developments that have shaped the game's resilience namely, the spread of Islam facilitating the spread of Shatranj; chess's resilience in the face of religious opposition from both Islamic and Christian institutions; the role of the Gutenberg Printing Press in enabling wider dissemination of chess knowledge; changes in its rules during the Renaissance that reflected dynamic social and political shifts; and the use of the game as a tool of soft power during the Cold War. Together, these developments illuminate how chess has not merely survived but thrived and evolved as a dynamic and culturally embedded game with strong historical relevance.

Keywords: Chess, Chaturanga, Shatranj, Xiang Qi

1. Introduction

With 64 squares and infinite possibilities, chess is often referred to as the 'Game of Life', where every decision and action one takes has a consequence. The romance and mysticism surrounding chess has captured the imagination of the human mind for over 5000 years. Once known as the game of the elites, it has now become a game of the masses with an expansive reach both as a physical game and in the online sphere.

Given its historical context, this paper traces the critical points in the evolution of chess, tracing its origins from Chaturanga in the Indus Valley civilization, to its transformation into a competitive sport worldwide in the 21st century, both in physical and virtual formats. This paper also sheds light on the ways in which chess influenced, and in turn, was shaped by socio-political, religious, and cultural contexts.

Chess can be traced back over 5000 years to the ancient Indus Valley Civilization (Bagwan, 2022), and is documented to have traveled from India to China in the east (Murray, 1913), Persia, West Asia, and Europe in the west. This paper specifically traces the evolution of the game from the 6th century, when Chaturanga flourished in

northwestern India and its history had been more systematically documented. Prior to the 6th century, Chaturanga spread eastward as Xiang Qi in China. In ancient times, chess was perceived as a game reserved for the intelligentsia, especially because it required significant prowess over war strategies. The players were mostly men who served in the council of the empires, but at present it is a widely popular game with players from varied socioeconomic backgrounds.

Chess, in its current form, is a 2-player board game that simulates a war between two kingdoms. The army of each kingdom, represented as chess pieces, is composed of eight ‘pawns’ (foot soldiers), two ‘Knights’, two ‘Bishops’, two ‘Rooks’, a ‘Queen’ and a ‘King’. The checkered board is a grid with alternating light and dark squares, with each army representing one color - black or white. As a turns-based strategy game with no hidden information and a minimal role of luck, the goal of each player is to checkmate the opponent’s King, leaving the defender unable to protect the King.

While much of the existing knowledge on chess focusses on gameplay and strategy, this paper brings a new lens by analyzing how chess has adapted to different historical contexts, sociopolitical systems and cultural ideologies across time. The central contribution of this paper lies in the synthesis it offers in the developments from diverse geographies and time periods to illustrate how the game has reflected, and shaped, social hierarchies, political movements, and cultural values. This paper aims to position chess not merely as a game, but as a dynamic cultural artifact that has served as a medium for diplomacy, pedagogy and intellectual expression.

2. Methods

Given the extensive period (~5000 years) over which the evolution of chess is traced in this paper, the study is divided into five key phases based on its geographical expansion from its origins in India, and across several periods of critical development. This is a secondary study that relies on a critical analysis and synthesis of secondary sources; since the history of chess has received relatively less academic scholarship, the sources used for this study include diverse resources, such as history books, ancient texts, scholarly articles, credible and registered blogs, and discussions with experts of the game. Some of the primary books that were used to outline the historical evolution and periodization of the game include HJR Murray’s *A History of Chess*, Yuri Averbakh’s *A History of Chess: From Chaturanga to Present Day*, and Sunil Weeramantry’s *Great Moves: Learning Chess Through History*. The chronological and thematic foundation provided in these works were instrumental in identifying critical developments in the game’s evolution.

The relevant sources were selected through a combination of targeted keyword searches and expert recommendations. Key search terms included “Confucius and Go”, “Islam and Chess”, “Warring States Period,” “Xiang Qi,” “Tang Dynasty,” “Shatranj”, “Chess in the Cold War,” and “Soft Power and Chess.” Search results were filtered for credibility, recency, academic reliability, and number of citations, prioritizing peer-reviewed publications, historical texts, and institutional databases. Preference was given to sources that offered historical specificity, cultural context, and detailed analysis.

The study also incorporated insights from in-depth qualitative interviews with chess experts who provided a deeper historical context, along with contemporary perspectives and thematic coherence. Each source was critically evaluated for relevance, depth, and scholarly contribution.

3. Structure of the Study

The historical evolution of chess is divided into five key thematic and chronological sections that reflect the game’s historical expansion and its socio-political transformation. The first section explores the origins of Chess in Ancient India (2000-3000 BC), with a focus on Chaturanga and its initial conceptualization as a war simulation, reflecting Indian social and military organization. The second section covers the eastward expansion as Xiang Qi in China (475-221 BC); this section reflects the broader philosophical and political influences from Confucianism and military strategy during the Warring States Period. The third section investigates its transformation into Shatranj in Persia and its further popularity across the Islamic world (6th-10th century CE). The fourth section addresses the European Renaissance and Enlightenment (10th-16th century CE), a period marked by major rule changes, mass

publication and dissemination of the game. The final section examines the evolution and modification of chess as a modern intellectual and diplomatic tool in contemporary history (17th-21st century CE). This chronological structure allows for nuanced understanding of the relation between cultural and political factors that have collectively shaped the game in each period and context.

4. The Origins of Chess: India (2000-3000 BC)

The earliest reference to Chaturanga in India can be found in the Hindu epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata, which constitute an integral part of Indian and Hindu cultural heritage where mythology, philosophy, and history are deeply intertwined. According to legend, in the Ramayana, the evil Lord Ravana created the game of chess to amuse his wife, Mandodari, who ended up defeating Ravana in the game (Anand, 2008). An alternative legend is that Mandodari came up with the game to distract and prevent Ravana from waging wars. Similarly, in the Mahabharata, which has existed for over 2000 years, but is primarily believed to have been compiled between the 3rd century BC and 4th century CE (Fitzgerald, 2009), Chaturanga was used to symbolize rank and power (Kishore, 2008). Marked by animosity and war among the *Pandavas* and the *Kauravas*, the game is used as the principal medium for key maneuvers in the story. Yudhisthira, the eldest of the Pandavas and the most respected of all characters, loses his treasure, kingdom, and wife Draupadi in the game of Chaturanga to the Kauravas, who are assisted by their conniving uncle and advisor, Shakuni. The Pandavas' loss in Chaturanga ultimately leads to the epic battle in the Mahabharata (Kishore, 2008).

An early reference to Chaturanga is also found in the *Arthashastra*, written in the 3rd century BC by the Indian teacher and philosopher Chanakya. As one of the world's oldest books on politics, it describes Chaturanga as a war strategy game played on an 8x8 board. (Weeramantry et al., 2017). The foundational concepts in chess like calculated sacrifices and balance of power have the unmistakable imprint of the strategic views expressed by Chanakya in *Arthashastra* such as the importance of foresight and judicious use of force (Menon, 2024).

While archeological excavations at Lothal, an Indus Valley civilization site dating 2000-3000 BC, included pieces of a board bearing resemblance to Chaturanga (Bhagwan, 2022), the game is reported to have flourished during the Gupta Empire in the 6th century (c. 320–647 CE) when there were significant advancements in literature, mathematics, astronomy, and the arts. In Sanskrit, the word “Chaturanga” means “four limbs” (“chatur” for “four” and “anga” for “limbs”) and refers to the four divisions of a traditional army: elephantry, infantry, chariotry, and cavalry, which were used to simulate military strategies corresponding to bishops, pawns, rooks, and knights, respectively. The game's pieces symbolized valuable members of the kingdom, highlighting the significance of every individual, regardless of their size or rank. Scholars from Vassar College note, “The king needs the queen, rooks, bishops, knights, and pawns to survive in the game like he needs them to survive in life” (Vassar College, 2023; Kale, 2021).

As a precursor to modern chess, Chaturanga has been subject to debate regarding its original rules, while its foundational elements like distinct powers assigned to different pieces, and a king-centric victory remain widely acknowledged (Soltis, 2024). While modern chess retains many similarities to Chaturanga, it differs on concepts like checkmate, where the opponent's king is trapped and the game is won, and stalemate, where the king is trapped without an attack, resulting in a draw (Vassar College, 2023).

As a strategic location with abundant natural resources, the Indian subcontinent has historically been viewed as a hub for traders, scholars, and travelers from across the world, who engaged with India's rich cultural heritage, often adopting and disseminating aspects of it to their own regions. Chaturanga is a significant example of this cultural exchange, spreading eastward as Xiang Qi in China between 475-221 BC, and eventually into other strategy-game variants in East Asia, such as Shogi (Japanese), Changgi (Korean), Sittuyin (Burmese), Makruk (Thai and Cambodian) (*The Chess Family - History and Useful Information*, n.d).

5. The First Wave of Expansion: The Emergence of Xiang Qi in China (475 - 221 BC)

The growth of Xiang Qi occurred during the Warring States Period (476-221 BC), which was characterized by warfare, military reform, political consolidation, where military strategy and tactics held paramount importance

(Cartwright, 2017). A prime example of this can be found in General Sun Tzu's book "The Art of War," written sometime between 475-275 BC, which emphasized military preparations and embraced the ideals of patience, calculated risks, and precision as foundational strategies (Huxley, 2023).

The board for Xiang Qi was designed to include a river in the middle that separated the two players, reflecting Asian warrior kingdoms who used to establish "strongholds" at rivers and river fords, mirroring the region's topography and political history (Sou, 2018). The design also included elements like fortresses, cannon pieces, and artillery to simulate real-life military strategies, transforming it from a mere pastime into a serious tool for strategic training and analysis for Chinese military leaders (*Chinese Chess*, n.d.). In the erstwhile Warring States Period, cannon warfare was both common and effective, and the inclusion of the *Pao* or cannon in Xiang Qi reflects this historical military tactic (*Chinese Chess*, n.d.).

Xiang Qi is recorded to have evolved the most during the Tang and Song dynasties (*Chinese Chess*, n.d.). The period of the Tang dynasty (618-901 CE) is popularly referred to as the "Golden Age" of Chinese arts - a period marked by free thought, creative expression, and intellectual exploration (*Tang Dynasty*, 2017). During this era, Daoism and Confucianism flourished, promoting philosophical introspection, innovation, and the creation of a new way of life. Reflecting the dynamic and innovative spirit of the period, Xiang Qi evolved and quickly transitioned from being a game patronized by the aristocracy to one embraced by the middle class and masses. This transition was largely facilitated by the rise of an alternative board game, 'Go', which differed in rules and was endorsed by intellectuals for its complexity and demand for strategic depth. In 500 BC, Confucius stated, "Gentlemen should not waste their time on trivial games -- they should study Go" (Confucius, 500 BC; Shotwell & Simmons, n.d.). Given the wide popularity of Confucianism during the Tang and Song Dynasties, such an endorsement ensured that the aristocracy devoted themselves to playing Go, making Xiang Qi more accessible for the masses.

6. The Second Wave of Expansion: The Emergence of Shatranj in Persia and the Middle East (6th -10th CE)

Spreading beyond the Indian subcontinent, the second major expansion of Chaturanga took place in Persia and the Middle East, where it evolved into Shatranj. This transition marked a crucial chapter in the game's development - including its rules, terminology, and strategic essence - as it was embraced and refined by Persian and Arab cultures. Early references in Persian manuscripts of 600 CE evidenced the transformation of Chaturanga to Chatrang and eventually Shatranj (Arabic), after the Arabs conquered Persia and struggled to pronounce the "ch" and replaced it with "sh". Soon it transitioned from being a game dominated by aristocrats to one that fostered "a means of communication and diplomacy among diverse cultures" (Tasdelen, 2023: p.1). In Persia, the game was not only a pastime for royalty, but a symbol of intellectual prowess, and was perceived to reflect the morals and ethics of the Persian Empire ("Chinese Chess", n.d.).

Given its evolution from India to Persia, Shatranj incorporated elements that reflected various aspects of Indian and Persian culture, including its hierarchical, political, social, cultural and economic structure, such as the depiction of the *Rukh*, as the commander-in-chief, second in power to the *Shah* or king, supported by the *Faras* (Knight) symbolizing the importance of strategic counsel in kingdom operations (Cazaux, 2024). The term 'checkmate', which signifies victory in chess even today, originates from the Persian phrase "Shah Maat," meaning "the king is dead" (Weeramantry et al., 2017: p.14). Additionally, in consonance with the patriarchal norms of the time, the Queen was depicted as the least powerful major piece and was restricted to move only one square at a time, diagonally ("How to Play Shatranj", n.d.). Similarly, echoing the feudal patterns of social and economic life where peasants performed arduous and menial tasks with minimal compensation and were viewed as being dispensable for the benefit of the aristocracy (Mark et al., 2019), the numerous foot soldiers or *Baidaq* in the game were perceived to be weaker than all the other pieces and often the first ones to be sacrificed in the game. Such strategic elements in the game embodied the societal hierarchy and ideology of exploiting the lower or weaker sections for the success of the elites.

When the Arabs conquered the Persians in the middle of the 7th century, they acquired knowledge of the game and spread it alongside Islam across the Middle East. As Shatranj spread across the wider Islamic world, it continued to evolve, ultimately setting the groundwork for the modern game of chess (*History of Chess*, n.d.). In particular, after Caliphate Omar Al-Khattab completed his conquest of Persia between 638 and 651 CE (Murray, 1913), the game

grew in popularity as it was enjoyed by both Islamic kings and Caliphs and widely used for battle strategy and tactics. Scholars like Murray (1913) argue that it soon got to a point where the caliphs often focused too much on the game and less on the war at hand. Soon, the game experienced pushback from Islamic conservatives who claimed that the game was *haram* or forbidden. Religious conservatives argued that Shatranj was supporting gambling and betting, which were forbidden in Islam. In defense, scholar and Shatranj player Abu Hanifa argued that although playing Shatranj for amusement was not one of the three forms of recreation allowed in the Qu’ran, it did not make sense to consider the game *haram* (Murray, 1913). Along with Hanifa, several other Islamic leaders, writers, and poets publicly supported the game.

In one of his famous poems, poet Ibn-Al-Mut’azz referred to the game as a science and illustrated its impact on the people of the Abbasid Dynasty - he argued that the game often became a “companion [for] loneliness” (Murray, 1913; p.185); he wrote,

"O thou whose cynic sneers express
The censure of our favorite chess,
Know that its skill is Science' self,
Its play distraction from distress.
It soothes the anxious lover's care;
It weans the drunkard from excess;
It counsels warriors in their art,
When dangers threat and perils press;
And yields us, when we need them most,
Companions in our loneliness." (Hutchinson, 2005)

This depiction of the game as a “companion” reflected the adoration it received from the intellectuals of that era. Scholar and jurist Ash Shafi’i added that when played properly, it created an “image of war” that was vital in planning for battles (Murray, 1913: p.190).

As Shatranj gained widespread popularity across Persia it evolved to include specific rules and moves reflecting intricate war strategies. For example, since foot soldiers (or *Baidaq* in Shatranj) were vital for military formations and strategies, the rules of the game were modified. The present-day pawn structure, formations, and rules in chess can be traced back to such modifications, with mastery of the game remaining closely tied to the understanding of these rules. Over time, Shatranj became deeply integrated into the political, economic, and cultural frameworks of various Muslim and Middle Eastern empires, including the Abbasid, Ottoman, Umayyad, and Mughal dynasties, and it transcended mere gameplay and became a tool for critical thinking.

7. Metamorphosis: Shatranj to Modern Chess in Europe (10th - 16th century)

As a network of trade routes connecting the East and West, the Silk Roads facilitated the exchange of goods, ideas, and cultures across vast regions. Shatranj was one of the many cultural elements that spread to Europe through interactions in Muslim Al-Andalus (modern Spain) and Sicily during the 10th century, following the Arab conquests of territories like Egypt and Syria. In Europe, chess flourished, particularly in Spain where its rich cultural diversity of Christian, Islamic, and Jewish communities played a significant role in its development (Weeramantry et al., 2017). In Spain, the game found popularity among ordinary citizens.

The earliest mention of chess in Europe can be found in the 10th century Latin poem *Einsiedeln Manuscript*. Preserved in a Benedictine monastery in Switzerland, this manuscript is one of the oldest Christian writings on chess which describes the game as a form of mental relaxation - a perspective later used to defend chess when, similar to its journey in the Arab world, the Church condemned the game as a potential distraction and a form of gambling (Averbakh, 2012). The earliest records argue that King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain “patronized the game” while the clergy believed it to be a “wasteful distraction” (Bird, 2009: p.29). Like their Arabic counterparts, Christian scholars and patrons of the game argued in its favor and depicted it as a tool for education and enlightenment. A notable example was 13th century Italian author, chess writer, and priest Jacobus de Cessolis’ political treatise, *The Book of the Morals of Men and the Duties of Nobles and Commoners, on the Game of Chess* which used chess pieces

to describe the system of feudalism, social hierarchy, and peasantry (Bartel & Harmon, 2023). He used the concept of ‘pawn promotion’ - where a pawn, after a long journey across the board, can transform into a more powerful piece - as a metaphor to convey the ideals of dedication, discipline, and hard work (Weeramantry et al., 2017). By the 13th century, chess came to symbolize societal structure, with the arrangement of individual pieces reflecting citizen rights and duties. According to Averbakh (2012), Jacobus’ views became so popular that to this day, his book “can be compared, perhaps, only to the Bible by the number of extant manuscripts!” (p.64).

A significant evolution in the transition from Shatranj to chess in Europe was the transformation of the ‘Alfil’ (elephant) into the bishop, which was introduced sometime between the 12th-13th centuries. Since elephants were not prevalent in the European military, its substitution by the bishop reflected the tenets of Western feudalism prevalent across European societies. As key members of the Church, bishops were powerful religious officials and part of the aristocracy; their incorporation on the chess board was symbolic to the prevalent system of political governance in Europe (McCrary, 2021).

The Renaissance in 15th-century Western Europe marked another pivotal phase in chess’s evolution as rule modifications made the game “much more dynamic, tactically richer, and therefore more interesting, which ensured its viability” (Averbakh, 2012: p.69). A watershed moment in the development of chess in Europe was the invention of the Gutenberg Printing Press in 1440 which enabled mass production of newspapers, books, and all types of reading material. The second book printed in English in the Press was William Caxton’s 1474 translation of Jacobus de Cessolis’ *The Book of Chess* (Weeramantry et al., 2017). The growth of chess literature facilitated the preservation and dissemination of chess knowledge across future generations; the affordability of these books made chess more accessible for the common man (Weeramantry et al., 2017).

The oldest surviving book on chess, written by Luis Ramirez de Lucena in 1497, narrates stories of Prince John of Spain, whose parents King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella were patrons of the game (Weeramantry et al., 2017). Queen Isabella of Castile, renowned for unifying Spain and sponsoring Christopher Columbus’s voyage to the New World, was also an avid player and is credited for modifying and transforming the status of the ‘Queen’ on the chessboard by granting her the ability to move multiple squares across all directions, making it the most powerful piece (Nash, 2004). Subsequently, several other royal women and chess enthusiasts such as Queen Elizabeth I of England in the 16th century, Catherine the Great of Russia and Queen Maria Theresia of Bohemia in the 18th century were symbolic of the Queen’s position on the chessboard.

During chess’s journey from Spain to Italy in the 16th-17th century, the Italian School of Chess blossomed and elevated the game to an art form, keeping with the spirit of Renaissance. This school emphasized tactics, innovative combinations, and aggressive modern concepts, notably the idea of sacrifice to gain tactical advantage particularly involving pawns (Averbakh, 2012). Consequently, pawns came to be viewed as expendable, a perspective that persisted until the French Revolution.

8. Chess in the ‘Modern World’ (17th - 21st century)

The 17th and 18th centuries marked a period of significant political and economic transformation, as kingdoms transitioned towards structured colonial governance. Political developments, such as the independence movements in North America and Europe that reshaped geopolitical boundaries, caused a cultural transformation that affected all forms of intellectual pursuits including games like chess. Adapting to such changes, the game served as a reference point during critical moments in American history.

One such historical anecdote dates back to the 1700s, during the American war of independence, when espionage played a critical role and both American and British camps employed spies. A British spy infiltrated the Revolutionary Army and learned of George Washington’s plan to cross the Delaware river for a surprise attack on the British. He is believed to have sent a folded letter to General Johann Rall of the British army alerting him about the plan, but Rall, a well-known chess player and enthusiast is argued to have never opened the letter because he was “so immersed in a game of chess” (Weeramantry et al., 2017: p.139). Historians argue that if Rall was not so caught up in the game, the outcome of the War might have been very different. While such seemingly trivial footnotes in history may be open for interpretation, they nevertheless highlight the relevance of the game across time.

Many of the Founding Fathers of the United States such as Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, and several other prominent figures have been described as chess enthusiasts. While Washington was believed to have owned an ivory chess set passed down across generations in his family, Jefferson was described as using chess to discuss important topics relating to political, business and international affairs (Weeramantry et al., 2017). Official records state that Jefferson owned several books on chess and often invited Madison to his Virginia home to play chess while discussing politics; he is also believed to have sold one of his chess books to Monroe before leaving for France in 1784 (Weeramantry et al., 2017). Similarly, Benjamin Franklin is said to have used chess as means of diplomacy. Prior to the revolution, when Franklin traveled to England as an American Envoy, he often used chess as his topic for discussion (Weeramantry et al., 2017). While discussing the embargo placed upon the Colonies with Lord Richard Howe, Franklin is recorded to have played chess against his sister, Lady Caroline Howe (Weeramantry et al., 2017). Historians argue that it was after this conversation that Franklin realized that the tensions between Britain and the Colonies would only increase in future and as a response, he traveled back to Philadelphia to help draft the Declaration of Independence (Weeramantry et al., 2017).

Franklin is considered the founding father of modern chess ethics and etiquette. Similar to the ancient scholars of Islam and the kings of ancient Eastern Asia and the Indian subcontinent, to him, the game was not just a source of recreation, but also a lens for critical thinking. In his essay *The Morals of Chess* published in *The Columbian Magazine* in 1786, Franklin enumerated several character-building lessons one can gain from the game of chess, specifically the values of restraint, foresight, circumspection, and resilience in the face of a bleak outlook. He stated,

“We learn foresight by having to plan ahead, asking, ‘If I move this piece, what will be my advantage in my new situation?’” (Weeramantry et al., 2017: p.137)

In his essay, Franklin proposed rules for chess players such as not speaking during a match, restrictions on distracting the opponent, and appropriate disposition during victory (Weeramantry et al., 2017). These rules are considered the gold standard for chess etiquette and continue to hold value as unwritten rules at competitive tournaments (Weeramantry et al., 2017).

A significant moment in the evolution of chess occurred in Europe during the French Revolution (1789-99) when the lower classes revolted against the feudal hierarchy; this transformation was also visible on the chessboard. In the pre-revolutionary period, pawns were viewed as expendable and easily sacrificed, however during the Age of Enlightenment (1730), scholars like François-André Danican Philidor used a scientific approach to argue that the pawn is the soul of the chessboard and foundational for chess strategy and hence deserved more respect and value (Averbakh, 2012). Philidor’s recognition of the pawn’s importance reflected broader societal changes, and by the time of the Revolution, the pawn had become central to strategic play in chess.

During the late 19th century and early 20th century, chess became a significant tool for soft power, especially during the Cold War between the United States of America (USA) and the erstwhile Soviet Union (USSR). Emerging from the devastation of World War II, these two superpowers competed for global dominance without risking direct military conflict. The shared history of intense bloodshed and genocide during two World Wars made both nations and the world reluctant to engage in another large-scale war. Consequently, they sought alternative avenues to assert their influence and chess emerged as a prominent platform for demonstrating intellectual prowess and ideological supremacy.

The USSR used chess as a strategic tool to foster a more intellectual and industrialized society. Historically, card games were popular among the Soviet populace, but recognizing the potential of chess as means for promoting rationality and discipline, the Communist Party discouraged the playing of cards and used propaganda to describe it as “illogical behavior” (*Chess: Liberating the Mind*, n.d); instead, it encouraged the playing of chess and promoted it as a symbol of a thriving and progressive society (*Chess: Liberating the Mind*, n.d.). The Party started mass producing posters that linked chess to societal advancements (Giordano, 2023), which not only resulted in many USSR citizens engaging in chess, but also aided the broader goal of transforming the USSR into a more educated and reform-oriented state. To this day, Russia ranks as the country with the highest number of chess grandmasters (*Communism and Chess*, 2011). Meanwhile, despite the wide popularity and emphasis placed by its founding fathers, the USA did not pursue chess seriously and viewed it only as a means to prevent the USSR from becoming an established soft power in the game.

With growing popularity of the game, a young chess prodigy named Bobby Fischer from New York rose in prominence and defeated USSR's best player, Boris Spassky to become World Champion and give the U.S a significant advantage in the Cold War (Herrak, 2024). With this victory, the USSR's dominance over chess became a matter of dispute and the USA were able to reinstate their dominance in soft power diplomacy and showcased their 'lone wolf mentality' and 'American pride' (Herrak, 2024). Moreover, with the pioneering live broadcast of the Fischer-Spassky showdown by PBS, chess viewership expanded by millions as it permeated American households (Linville, 2022). This 'chess boom' marked a turning point in the Cold War as it symbolized a broader ideological victory of American Capitalism over Soviet Communism, particularly following the disintegration of the Soviet Bloc.

This period also witnessed the popularity of positional chess, a scientific approach introduced by the then reigning world champion, Austrian-American Wilhelm Steinitz, which emphasized breaking down chess positions into their fundamental components to gradually gain advantage through steady maneuvering. Scholars suggest that this style was reflective of the prevailing neoclassical economic theories of that period that incorporated quantitative analysis in economics (Averbakh, 2012). The unintended consequence of this approach was reduced risk taking and a significant increase in the percentage of "unremarkable draws" (Averbakh, 2012: p.81).

In an attempt to bring dynamism back into chess, a group of grandmasters, most notably Aaron Nimzowitsch, came together to create the idea of 'hypermodernism' which called for the resurgence of creativity by adding tactical elements and combinations similar to the ones used by the Italian school prior to the popularity of positional play. Expanding the idea of chess as an art, they argued that "strategy, like tactics, feeds on inspiration, creativity, and intuition" (Averbakh, 2012: p.81). Notably, hypermodernism in chess coincided with the emergence of modernism in literature and art as a protest against prevailing dogmas.

With advancements in technology, particularly increased computing power, the advent of the internet, developments in Artificial Intelligence (or AI), growth of online streaming platforms, and widespread adoption of social media and mobile devices, the 1990s marked yet another transformation in the game. Thanks to such advancements, chess players around the world and across different time zones can now play the game live throughout the day. The enormous success of chess sites like *Chess.com* have facilitated this transition ushering the game into the digital era. This period has witnessed the growth of several new chess formats like Blitz, Rapid, Bullet, Bughouse, and more recently, Fischer Random, which offer alternatives to classical chess play, broadening the appeal of the game. The decisive victory of IBM's Deep Blue chess computer over the then reigning world champion Garry Kasparov in 1997 marked a paradigmatic shift in the way chess was perceived and played (Yao, 2022). Consequently, today players around the world, especially the most advanced players, use the 'chess engine' or chess computers to analyze, train, and improve their game. The most powerful chess computer today, *Stockfish*, is estimated to have a rating 500 points above the best human player in the world, Magnus Carlsen. While chess has been transformed by technology, the interest in physical chess play and classical chess continues to prevail. In fact, interest in physical chess tournaments, along with prize money, has significantly increased due to increased viewership, timely analysis, more tournaments, and enhanced participation (Lahood, 2021). There is no doubt that with technological changes, chess is presently experiencing another watershed moment in its evolutionary history.

9. Conclusion

The remarkable journey, longevity and enduring popularity of chess underscores its unique position as both a cultural product and a medium of intellectual, political and philosophical expression. Throughout history, chess has adapted to shifting contexts and ideologies, offering valuable insights into societal values and belief systems that shaped it. From symbolizing intellectual prowess, to serving as an informal tool for military strategy, and from mirroring feudal social hierarchies to becoming a diplomatic tool during the Cold War, the evolution of the game reflects the complexities of the societies in which it has thrived. Elements such as the changing power of the Queen, the symbolic value of the pawn, and the representation of a stratified order on the chessboard exemplify this dynamic interplay between the game and its cultural context. While this paper has identified various important developments across the five chronological phases of chess's evolution, five pivotal developments were critical to the game's ability to survive and thrive, namely, the spread of Islam facilitating the spread of Shatranj; chess's resilience in the face of

religious opposition from both Islamic and Christian institutions; the role of the Gutenberg Printing Press in enabling wider dissemination of chess knowledge; changes in its rules during the Renaissance that reflected dynamic social and political shifts; and the use of the game as a tool of soft power during the Cold War.

While this paper has examined key historical developments that have shaped the game, there remains scope for further inquiry. Future research could investigate the material culture of chess, focusing on design, symbolism, and patronage of chess across regions and periods, to understand how aesthetics and craftsmanship influenced the game's prestige and accessibility. Comparative studies with other popular and strategic board games such as Go, or indigenous South Asian games could enrich our understanding of chess's distinctiveness and adaptability. There is also room to investigate specific areas in greater depth, including the role of communism and the institutional support for chess in Eastern Europe, the gender dynamics among players, and the impact of figures like Bobby Fisher in popularizing the game in the West. Moreover, the role of technological advancements discussed briefly in this paper could warrant further exploration.

Presently, chess stands at yet another transformative moment. With the rise of digital platforms, new formats, and online accessibility, the game has reached a broader and diverse audience than ever before. The recently concluded 2024 World Chess Championships is a testament to this resurgence, with 18-year-old Indian grandmaster Gukesh Dommaraju becoming the youngest world champion; this historic victory has reignited enthusiasm for chess, particularly in India, the birthplace of Chaturanga. The findings of this study highlight the need for continuous scholarly engagement with the cultural histories of strategic games like chess.

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