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**Book review: Go Nation: Chinese Masculinities and the Game of Weiqi in China**

**MARC L . MOSKOW I T Z**

**Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013**

**xxii + 184 pp. \$29.95, £19.95**

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## Book Reviews

*Go Nation: Chinese Masculinities and the Game of Weiqi in China*

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The almost religious dedication of many chess and scrabble players is already well documented in scholarly writing; Marc Moskowitz adds to these works a compelling and accessible anthropological study of players of the ancient Chinese board game of *weiqi* (more commonly known as “go” in English), which is enjoying a surge of popularity in China. The rules of the game, its gendered dimensions, history, associations with the Confucian gentleman (*junzi*), and role in constructing notions of cultural difference between East Asian countries while simultaneously mediating inter-regional tensions make up the first half of the book; ethnographic studies of young, mostly male students in Weiqi schools, male and female Peking University team players and teachers, and retired, male, working-class park players constitute the second half. Sources include many popular and academic works on *weiqi* and interviews and participant observation from the ethnographic studies.

Perhaps inevitably himself a keen *weiqi* player, Moskowitz shows how *weiqi*'s historical position as one of the four arts of the Confucian gentleman is being reworked in contemporary formulations of moral, cultured, middle-class manhood. The reform-era discourse of raising people's personal “quality” (*suzhi*) is central to the government's aim to create a more “civilized” (*wenming*) populace, and Moskowitz's textual and interview data show how deeply interwoven this discourse is with commonly perceived notions of the benefits of intensive training in *weiqi*, such as better memory, concentration, logic, maths, judgement, maturity, control of greed, leadership, perseverance, sportsmanship, wisdom, rational thinking, ability to face challenges, problem-solving, observation, creativity and ability to sit still for hours. Males are seen as “naturally” more gifted in these attributes than females, and in the context of today's ultra-competitive economy, a mastery of these skills is deemed to enable career success through giving boys and men an edge in controlling environments and other men.

As one might expect from *weiqi*'s association with enhancement of “masculine” attributes, the great majority of *weiqi* players (as with chess) are male, and Moskowitz is sensitive to the construction of masculinities in *weiqi* discursive practices. Drawing from Kam Louie's seminal *Theorizing Chinese Masculinity* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), he effectively deploys the historical concepts of *wen* (“refined”) and *wu* (“martial”) masculinities to gain insights into the playing styles and behaviours of the reserved, etiquette-conscious Peking University team members and the gruff, relatively aggressive working-class retirees. The different male characteristics that are evident in the three informant groupings in the different fieldwork locations bring a spotlight to class, age and generation distinctions that debunk renderings of a monolithic Chinese masculinity. Yet commonalities also emerge across class and generation, principally in the ideas that *weiqi* confers a stronger sense of morality and an appreciation of balance between assertion and control, as well as the ability to avoid domination by other men.

The most significant contribution of this book lies precisely in this use of *weiqi* to tease out some of the contrasts and similarities in values, ideas, perspectives, attitudes and behaviours associated with masculinities in different social classes and settings. The university students depict the unattainability of a government-bestowed professional *weiqi* ranking – only 20 are awarded each year – as an emblem for the intense competitiveness of wider Chinese society (also a prime concern of the parents of young *weiqi* learners). Yet they also find some relief in their self-insertion into nostalgic, status-driven discourses of leisured and cultured Confucian gentlemen. Even female university players frame themselves in these masculine terms. In contrast, the male working-class retirees construe their daily engagement with *weiqi* as a symbol of carefree old age, China's current prosperity and the state's withdrawal from the micromanagement of everyday life. They also bond in egalitarian fashion through their good-natured kibbitzing (offering comments on others' games), an activity the university students deem uncouth. However, Moskowitz insightfully shows that these working-class men, many of them ex-construction workers, use their proficiency in *weiqi* to attest to their intellectual and moral capacities, and to reject the stigmatization of low "quality" affixed to them in the discriminatory *suzhi* discourse.

Despite the attention to class and generation in the ethnographic material, the prevalent focus of the book is on the cultural features of *weiqi*-associated masculinities, evidenced in its "cultural history" of *weiqi* in chapter two and its emphasis throughout on the reformulation of *junzi* masculinities in contemporary China. However, an examination of how these cultural associations play out in social relations in more varied settings between men and women and men of different classes could have contributed more insights into how *weiqi*-associated masculine attributes manifest in everyday life. In the book, interactions with *weiqi* players are confined to educational institutions and the park, and the interview material mostly focuses on the cultural aspects of *weiqi*; the reader rarely gets a glimpse of how the informants interact with women and other men in home, work, leisure and virtual environments (exceptions being the brief discussions of *weiqi*'s influence on "disciplining" parents, childrearing and parent-child interactions). More attention to everyday social relations could have provided the basis for an investigation into, for example, how *weiqi*-inflected masculinities insinuate themselves into homosocial and *guanxi* (relationship) practices, and vice versa.

The book's analysis of masculinities would also have benefited from a more nuanced characterization of China's postsocialist political economy, to show in more depth how shifting political, social and economic conditions intertwine with the cultural in the production of masculinities. Moskowitz is prone to dealing with the wider political economy in sound bites, such as describing his senior informants as having "witnessed China's transformation from a rabidly communist state to a nation that gave lip service to socialist ideals while pursuing free market capitalism" (p. 131). Plenty of scholarship has put paid to such hasty caricatures of China's changing political economy, and a discussion of relevant works would have better situated and substantiated the very real insights that this book offers.

These quibbles aside, this book's major contributions to the anthropologies of masculinities and of board games in China are especially welcome, since both areas are in need of astute and culturally attuned ethnographically based analyses. Besides China studies programmes, this book will be a useful teaching aid on anthropology and gender studies courses.

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