Games are an easy to overlook part of any society. For scholars it is easy to dismiss them as insignificant compared to the real stuff of politics, religion, gender, class, and economics. Yet as any visitor to a Chinese park, teahouse, or mahjong parlor can testify, games occupy a significant space in Chinese social life. And as Marc Moskowitz demonstrates in *Go Nation*, the Chinese game of *weiqi* (围棋), commonly known as *go* in the West (derived from the Japanese *igo*), offers a unique window into a range of ideologies and practices in contemporary China, from childrearing strategies to gender stereotypes. While studies of Chinese masculinities in the post-Mao period, once rare, are slowly growing, most have focused on more visible transformations in masculinity, such as the culture of business networking and entertaining that has emerged around China’s market economy and the rise of a cosmopolitan white-collar masculine ideal. Moskowitz, however, traces the reinvention of a tradition of gentlemanly cultivation that surrounds the teaching of *weiqi*. Once dismissed by Confucius as a waste of time, by the Tang Dynasty *weiqi* had become canonized as one of the four arts (sìyì) associated with being a gentleman. Moskowitz’s informants view *weiqi* as a tool for instilling discipline along with logical and strategic thinking into young players, many of whom study on weekends and during summer vacations at *weiqi* schools.

Moskowitz demonstrates how *weiqi* reveals implicit assumptions about gender in China: boys are widely presumed to be inherently better at logical thinking and therefore to possess a greater aptitude for *weiqi*, and *weiqi* is thought to “harness their natural aggression for productive ends” (p. 145). Not only do gender stereotypes manifest in *weiqi* but national and racial ones as well: Japanese and Korean playing styles are widely believed to be reflective of their respective “national characters”: overly reserved and overly aggressive, respectively. (The Chinese playing style is believed to strike the perfect balance between the two.) China’s recent success in international *weiqi* competitions is also interpreted as indexical of China’s rising global stature as a nation-state.
Go Nation is quite sensitive to the importance of social class in post-Mao China and links the growth in weiqi schools to the national obsession with suzhi (personal quality) cultivation in China. In addition to fostering logical thinking, weiqi is also credited with disciplining children, who learn to sit still and concentrate for extended periods of time, and instilling in them virtues such as perseverance and good sportsmanship. Chinese parents who are concerned with ensuring the success of their child in a hyper-competitive society view weiqi training as a means by which their children might gain a leg up over their peers. In fact, a record of achievement in weiqi can earn one bonus points on the university entrance exam (gaokao).

Moskowitz possesses a keen ethnographic eye. He conducts fieldwork at three different weiqi schools in Beijing and enrolls as a student at one of the schools, often playing with students more than thirty years his junior. In addition to his participant observation in schools, Moskowitz conducts interviews with professional players, ranked amateur players (including those who aspire or aspired to become professional), and members of prestigious university weiqi teams. The state-controlled competitions that allow one to attain professional status are governed by strict age limits and gender quotas (three spots are reserved for women) that make entering the professional ranks a truly arduous road. Attentive to the ways that class differences inform different meanings surrounding weiqi, he devotes a chapter to analyzing the outdoor weiqi games played by retirees at parks and on street corners in Beijing. There he uncovers a more aggressive playing style that he reads as indicative of a more working-class version of masculinity. In contrast to the gentlemanly reserve that is taught in the weiqi schools, the outdoor games are accompanied by boasts and frequent kibitzing. For these older players, many of whom suffered deprivations during the Mao years, playing daily afternoon games of weiqi is emblematic of the relative luxury and security of the present.

A large part of weiqi’s appeal for suzhi-conscious parents and young players derives from weiqi’s rich history. By using a traditional Chinese medium to foster skills essential to success in the contemporary capitalist economy, weiqi offers a symbolic reconciliation between traditional Chinese culture and modernity. While Moskowitz does an excellent job teasing out all the cultural meanings that are projected upon weiqi, his
analysis would benefit from further discussion of Weiqi’s relationship to other forms of “traditional” cultural revival that have become increasingly prevalent in recent years, such as the ongoing state-sponsored Confucian revival and the grassroots Hanfu (traditional Han clothing) movement. To underscore the significance of Moskowitz’s study, a propaganda poster near my apartment in China that is devoted to promoting traditional cultural virtues depicts two children playing Weiqi. It appears that even the CCP hopes to harness the symbolic richness of Weiqi towards its goal of creating “civilized” Chinese subjects.

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