

Enquete Definition SCHACH / CHESS  
Förderkreis Schach-Geschichtsforschung e. V.

Zur Frage

Was meinen wir, wenn wir SCHACH sagen oder schreiben?

As to the Question

What do we actually mean, when we use the term CHESS in speaking or writing?

## **Meine Definition und Interpretation**

### **My Definition and Interpretation**

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The question what we actually mean when using the term “chess” may be somewhat misleading for other languages; in my Italian mother-tongue the first thing that comes to my mind when I think of “scacchi” is the flag shaken at the end of a car race.

Before achieving a definition of chess which can be proposed even to people who are unaware of the game, an agreement should be found among experts. In this case the hard task is not in finding the correct words for defining the concept, but rather in establishing the actual boundary within the board games for what can be considered as belonging to the chess family.

Obviously, the starting point now is FIDE international chess. It should be not too difficult to compile a paragraph in order to define it. However, this game is the result of a long historical evolution which must be taken into account. This fact leads to an enlargement of the definition above to include, to begin with, Chinese and Japanese chess, as well as other national variants. In addition, many “artificial” or heterodox chess variants have been suggested and played in the course of the time. The borderline between chess variants and other board games is not easy to trace.

We can begin with the condition that chessmen represent two opposite armies. This requirement is fundamental even where it may have been forgotten owing to changes in the meaning of several chessmen. Each army is formed by a king or a general in a central position between two symmetrical wings of pieces. They represent different parts of an ancient army, usually placed one on the left and one on the right of the

king-general. The infantry is instead represented by a number of identical pieces which are usually placed on the second row, before the major ones.

Which are now the modifications which one can allow to this scheme in order to reach an extended definition of chess? I see some main possibilities for obtaining a chess variant: we can change the meaning of the pieces, their traditional moves, and as special case we can either increase or reduce the board and the number of the chessmen.

As for changes, we might update meaning and shape of the chessmen in order better to recognise their military role, for instance by introducing models taken from modern warfare. Or instead we might change all chessmen into different animals. It remains chess. However, if we pass, for example, to the Chinese game of *Shou-dou-qi* – where all the nine different animals have the same move of one orthogonal step – I would not consider it as a form of chess.

A common modification is toward enlarged chess, to begin with the variants played on the 10x10 board. The giant example that comes to my mind is the Japanese *Tai-shogi*, with its 354 chessmen moving on 625 squares. This is still chess, but with the same set and some changes in the rules it would be feasible to design a war game which nobody could consider chess. The border line is not easy to trace.

In my opinion, it is easier to search an agreement among experts if instead we reduce the available material. In particular, I would propose four examples to the judgement of the experts. At the same time, I am including my personal opinion too, but I obviously consider it as open to debate.

1) *Remove all chessmen except kings and pawns.* I think that this cannot be considered chess, nor protochess. Games with identical men with at most a major piece are present among other families of ancient board games. This might correspond to a variant of Turkish draughts. To be considered chess, different additional men are required as a symbol of the special parts of an ancient army.

2) *Remove knights.* If you do not like the four empty squares, you may add there pawns, or remove four pawns too and play on a 6x8 board. Actually the knights and their typical moves are among the most characteristic features in the whole set of chess variants. A “new” game without them would thus be felt as a much spoiled variant, but in my opinion it continues to belong to the chess family nevertheless.

3) *Remove kings*. Removing both kings, one removes much of the essence of chess, where the aim is to checkmate the enemy king. However, even after reducing the game to a variant in which the object simply becomes to destroy the enemy, I see it as still belonging to the chess family.

4) *Remove all queen's pawns and major pieces*. Near the king – or the general – only remain single specimens of bishop, knight and rook and four pawns only. Again, even if strongly reduced, I still see here a chess or protochess variant, as long as traditional moves of the different chessmen are kept. The same I would conclude for a similar variant among four players, even if played with the help of dice (a variant which actually has been played in the past). Indeed, on the basis of logic the last variant would be the only one I can consider compatible with a form of *chaturanga-protochess*. I do not see any other form of the game which might require to be called protochess, instead of plain chess. Today some historical research has shown that the variant among four players probably derived from an earlier form of chess between two players, and I give priority to historical documents in comparison with any logical reconstruction.

Until now, the discussion has mainly dealt with quality and quantity of the chessmen. However, a further analysis can be performed on the actual rules of chess, moving and castling, capturing, checkmating, and so on. Here again the experts should possibly agree where to set the boundary!

I see for the definition of chess a kind of target formed by concentric circles. The smallest central circle would now correspond to international chess. We can choose to take also the second circle into account for similar variants, then the third for more distant ones, and so on, gradually accepting less and less strict requirements in obeying the “original” rules.

In the outer circles we should add games for more than two players and/or played with the help of dice; it might be agreed upon that any such variant is to be excluded from a strict definition of chess. However, every target has an external boundary out of which possible additional circles are not considered. This external boundary is what the experts should define for chess; defining the central circle, or international chess, clearly is not enough.

When the experts achieve the goal of tracing the external boundary of the chess variants, the main task has been solved, but several internal boundaries remain to be set. Here other problems arise, even beginning with the central circle mentioned above. I have considered it to correspond to international chess but in particular a Chinese would have good grounds for identifying it with *Xiangqi*, or a Japanese with *Shogi*.