

The Basics of Chinese Chess

Chinese Chess is a cousin of International Chess. Like International Chess, Chinese Chess has two opposing armies with different kinds of pieces. Chinese Chess has rooks, knights and pawns, and all of these moves in the same or nearly the same way as their equivalents in International Chess. The object of Chinese Chess is to checkmate the enemy king.

However, Chinese Chess also has elephants, guards, and cannons. The elephant and the guard move the same as did the bishops and queen in Medieval Chess. However, the cannon of Chinese Chess is a unique creation, different from any piece which exists in International Chess.

Chinese Chess is played on a board which contains 64 squares. However, in the middle, there is a river. Also, the pieces are placed on the intersections of the lines, called points, and not in the squares, as in International Chess. Thus, Chinese Chess is played on effectively a board of 9 x 10 points, rather than on a board of 8 x 8 squares.

On each side of the board in Chinese Chess, there is a palace. Neither the king nor the guards of the kings are allowed to leave the palace. Also, the enemy kings are not allowed to "see" each other directly across the board.

Like International Chess, Chinese Chess is easy to learn, but difficult to play. The basic movements of the pieces are as follows:

The Rook: The rook moves exactly like the rook in International Chess. There is no difference at all between the two. It is the only piece which moves exactly the same in both games. The rook moves in a straight line, forward, backward, or sideways. The Rook is also called a "Chariot" or a "Car" in the Chinese language.

The Knight: The Knight moves the same way as in International Chess, but with one important restriction: The Knight cannot jump. The Knight's move is a combined move of one point in any direction horizontally or vertically, plus one diagonal move. However, if the first point of the horizontal or vertical move is blocked by a piece, then the Knight may not move in that direction. The knight is called a "Horse" or a "Ma" in Chinese.

The Bishop: For the sake of ease of memory, this piece is called the Bishop in English. It is called either the Elephant or the Minister in Chinese. It moves exactly two points diagonally, not more or less. It cannot cross the river. Thus, there are only seven points which the Bishop can ever occupy. The Bishop cannot jump. Thus, its movement is blocked if there is a piece on the intervening point. Since the Bishop cannot cross the river, its purpose is defensive in nature. Typically, one Bishop is moved so that it is two points in front of its own king, whereas the other remains on its original point. In this way, the bishops protect each other and defend their king.

The Guard : The Guard is the weakest piece. It moves only one point diagonally. This, incidentally, is exactly the way that the queen once moved in medieval chess, before it became much stronger in the fifteenth century. The Guard has one further restriction in that it cannot

leave the palace. This means that there are only five points which can ever be occupied by the Guard.

The King: The King only moves one point horizontally or vertically. Unlike the King in International Chess, the King in Chinese Chess cannot move diagonally. In addition, the King cannot leave the palace. Thus, there are only nine points which can ever be occupied by the King. Another important restriction is that the enemy kings can never oppose each other directly across an unobstructed board. Another way to say the same thing is that a King acts like a rook with respect to checking the enemy king. This becomes important in each game, where the kings try to checkmate each other. The King is called the "General" in Chinese.

The Pawn : The Pawn moves one point forward only. Unlike the Pawn in International Chess, the Pawn in Chinese Chess does not capture by moving diagonally. The Pawn in Chinese Chess captures and moves in the same way. In addition, once the Pawn crosses the river, it acquires the power to move sideways. However, the pawn can never move backwards. When it reaches the opposing back rank, the pawn cannot promote. Instead, it can only move sideways.

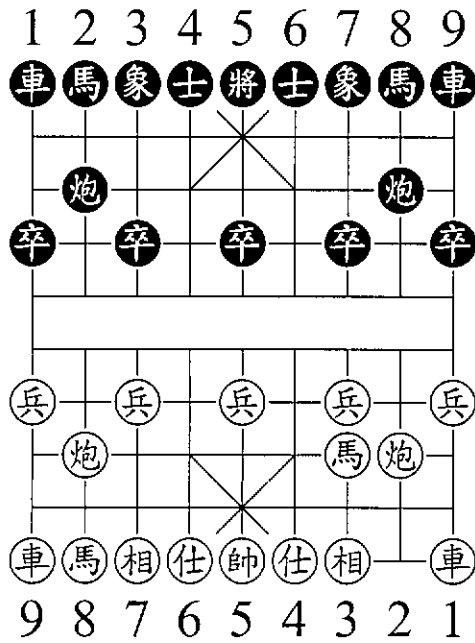
The Cannon: The Cannon is a unique piece and the most difficult to learn piece from the Western point of view. The Cannon moves like a rook, but it captures by jumping. In order to capture an enemy piece, the Cannon must jump over another piece in between. This intervening piece is known as the "Gun Mount" in Chinese.

All this might seem simple enough, but it becomes confusing and difficult in actual practice. Finally, unlike in International Chess, stalemate is not a draw in Chinese Chess. Rather, stalemate is a win for the side who has stalemated the other.

All of the above pieces have several alternate names in Chinese. For example, the Cannon is also called the Gun, the Gunner, or even the Catapult. Any Chinese teacher will provide you with different moves for all of these pieces. However, we feel that the names Rook, Knight, Bishop, Guard, King, Pawn, and Cannon are the easiest for an English speaker to learn, understand, and remember.

Writing Down the Moves: The Chinese have devised an interesting system for writing down the moves. One of the first things which almost every English speaker does upon learning Chinese Chess is to devise his or her own system for writing down the moves, usually based upon the algebraic moves, with moves such as Nh1-g3. This is a mistake. Not only is it cumbersome and difficult to write moves in this way, but it deprives other users of the vast literature in Chinese Chess, available at every Chinese book store (in Chinese, of course).

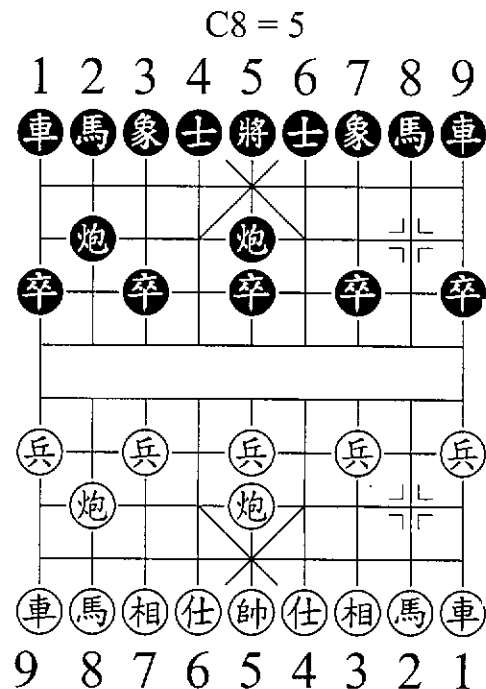
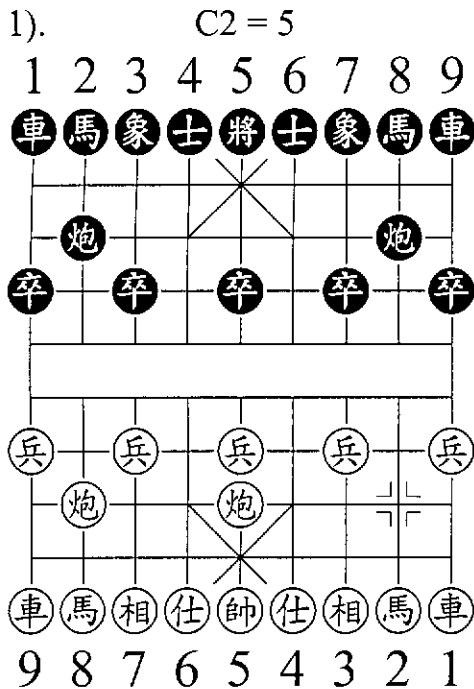
In the Chinese system, every move can be documented using exactly four Chinese characters. For example, a good first move would be N2 + 3.

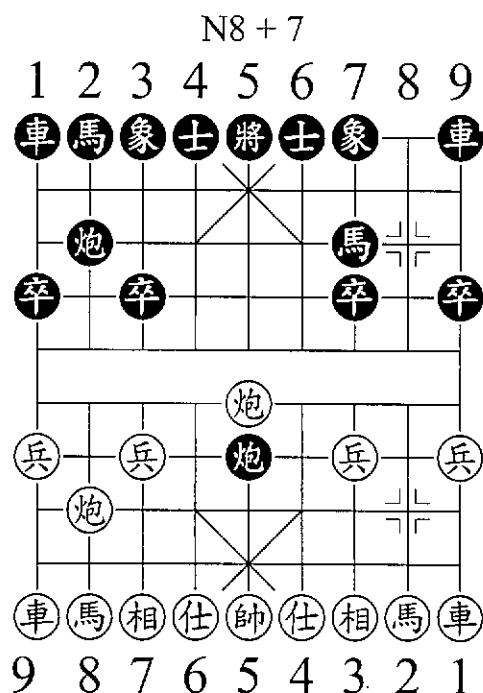
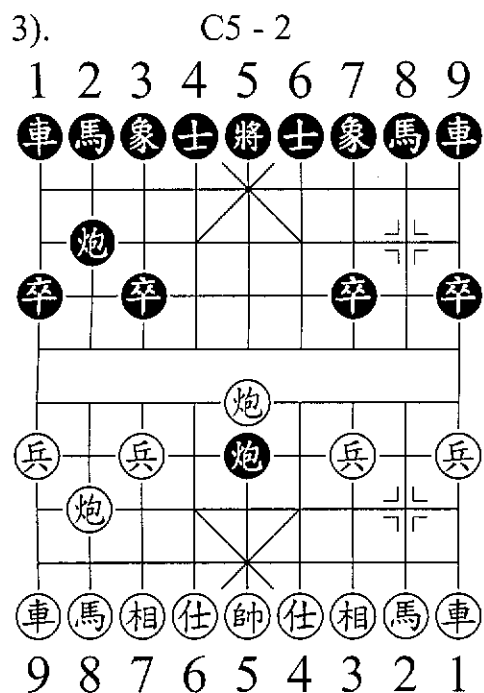
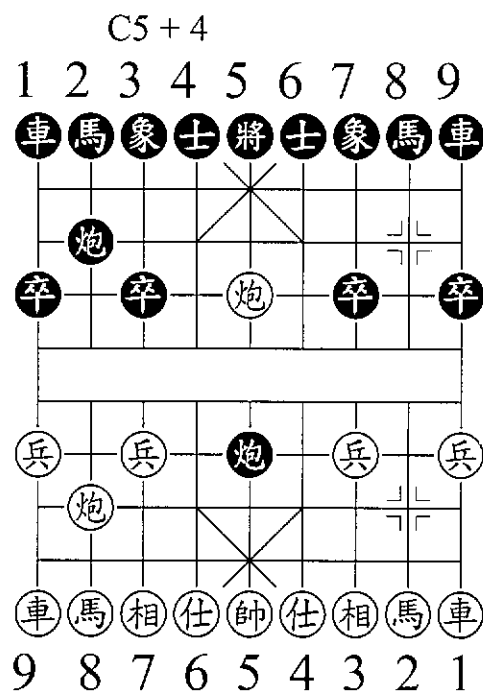
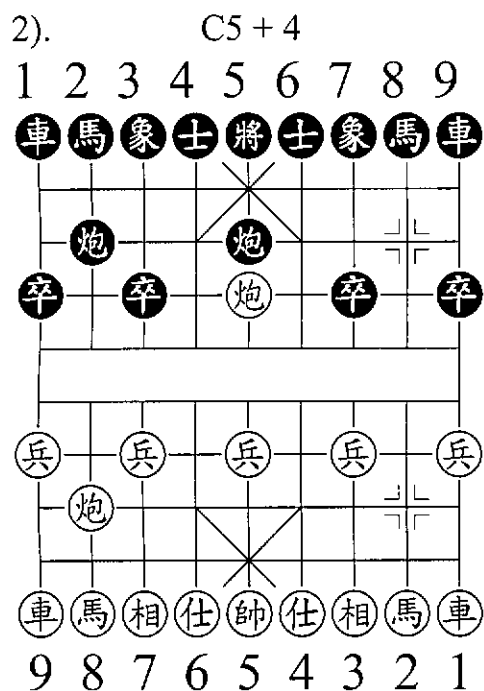


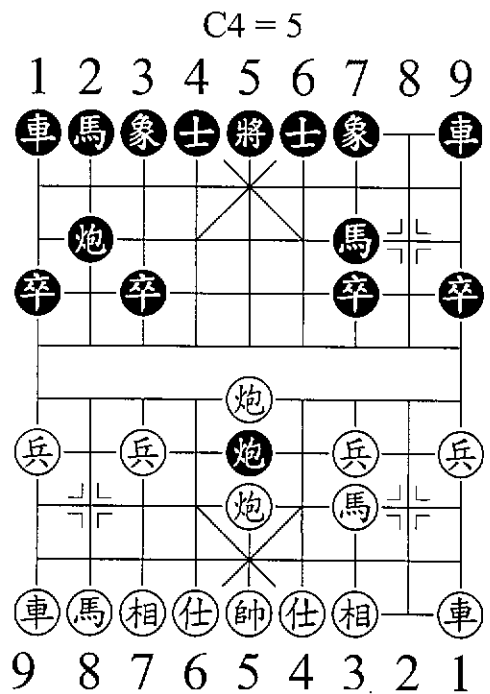
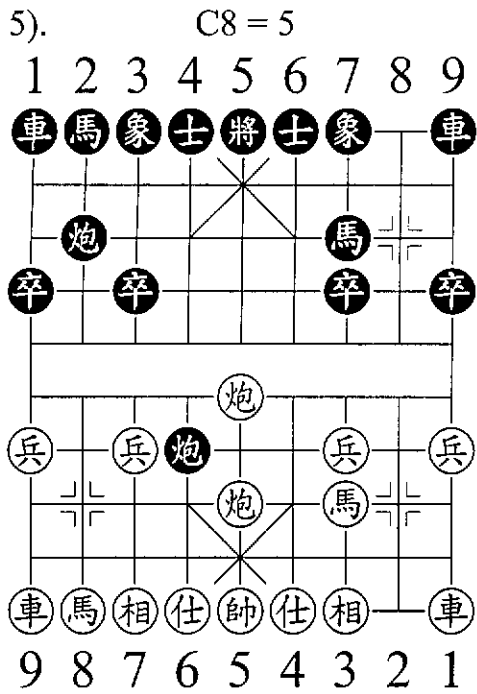
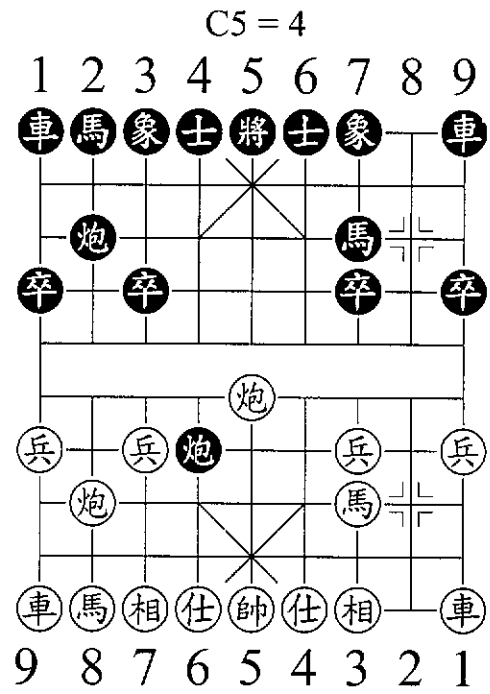
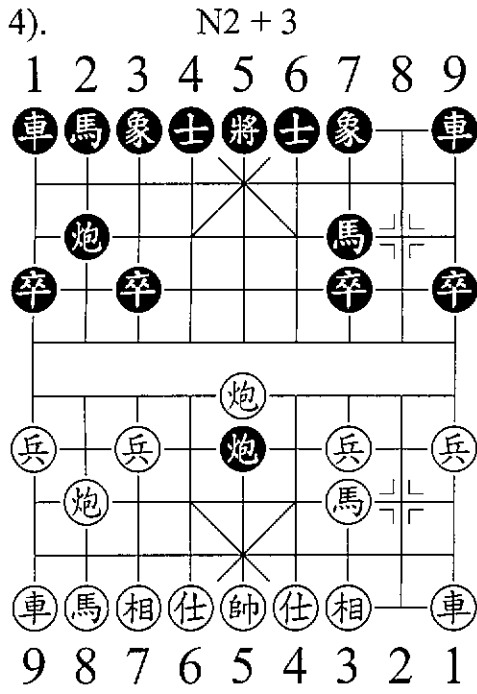
This means that the knight ("N" for short) on the second line from the right moves forward ("+") to the third line from the right.

A Sample Game : Moving forward quickly, we will show a sample game of Chinese Chess. It will be difficult for the new player of Chinese Chess to follow this game right away. However, patience will be rewarded.

Here is the complete sample game and the final position. This is not intended to be a sample of how strong players play. Rather, it is just intended to be a basic illustration of how the pieces move. First, we will show the game and, then, try to explain the reason for the moves.

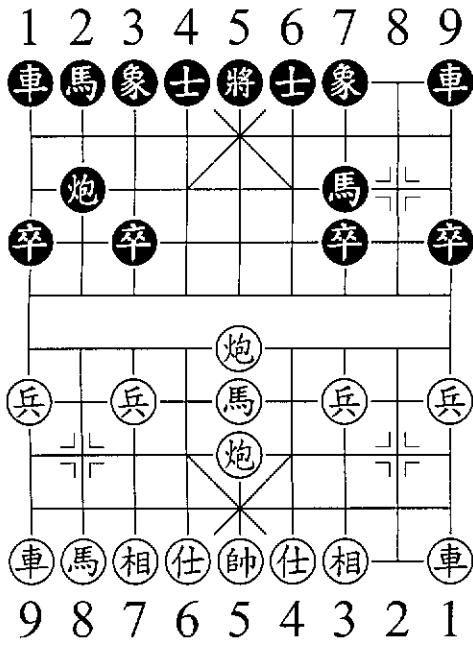




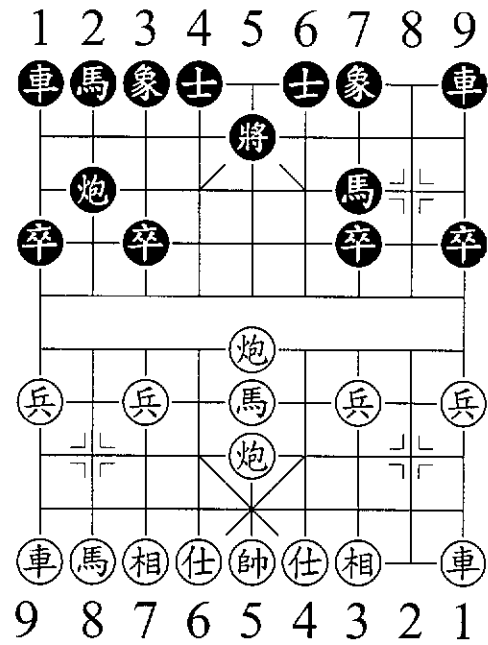


6).

N3 + 5

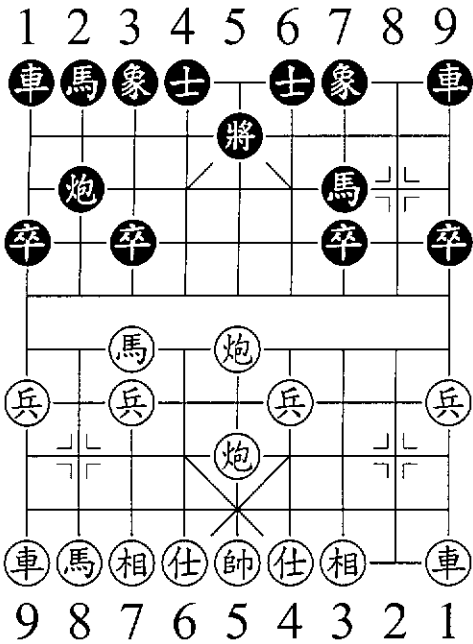


K5 + 1

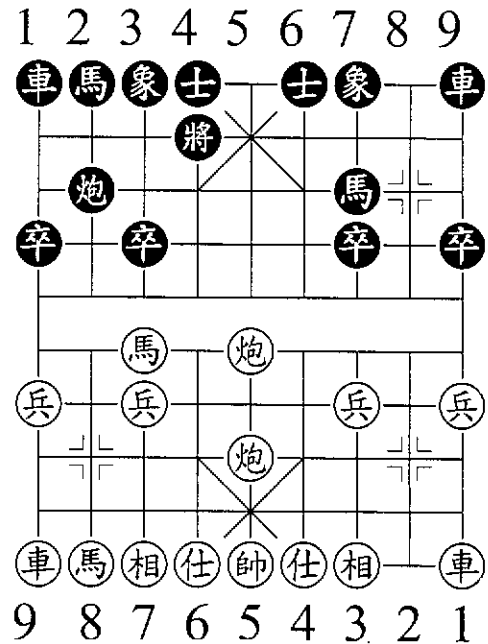


7).

N5 + 7

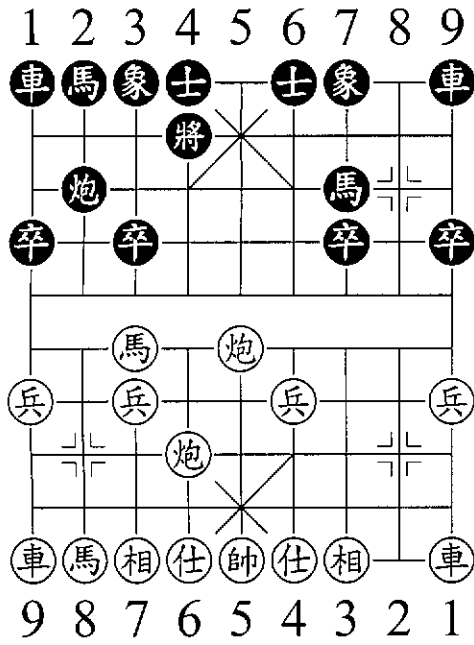


K5 = 4

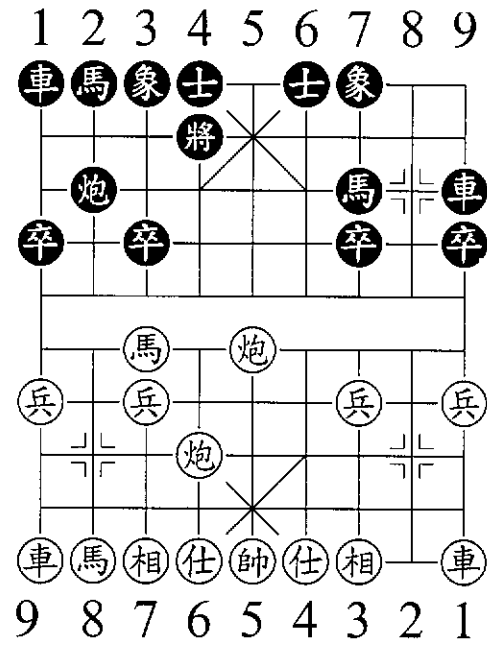


8).

C5 = 6

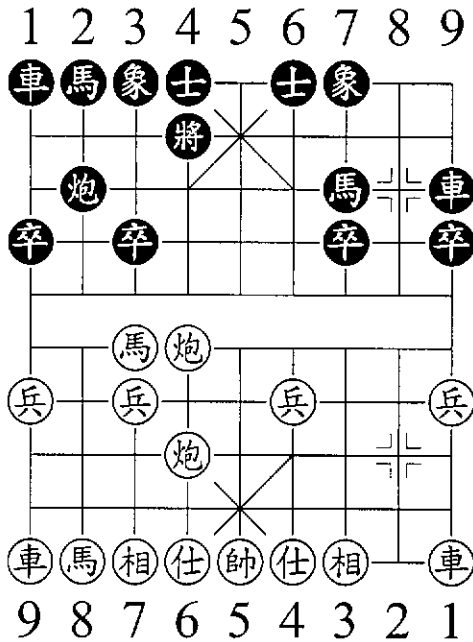


R9 + 2



9).

C5 = 6



CHECKMATE

FINAL POSITION - BLACK IS IN CHECKMATE-

It is important to try to understand why the final position is checkmate. It is checkmate because the two cannons are on the same line with the enemy king. The back cannon threatens to jump over the forward cannon, to capture the enemy king. However, the enemy cannot play C2 = 4, blocking the rear cannon, because the front cannon jumps and captures the king.

In addition, the king cannot move. It cannot move to the left, because then it would leave the palace, which is illegal. At the same time, it cannot move to the right, because then it would directly oppose the enemy king.

Even with the explanation, most new players will have a difficult time understanding why this position is checkmate. Therefore, you should ask any Chinese friend to help you. All Chinese people know how to play Chinese Chess and will understand this position.

Now, let us review the moves of this poorly played game. The official colors of the pieces in Chinese Chess are red and black. Red moves first.

C2 = 5 - So far, so good. This is universally considered to be the best first move, and is played in about 50% of all games.

2..... C8 = 5 -The opponent responds in kind. This is a good but double-edged move. Black must do something about Red's attack on this center pawn. For example, if Black simply ignores this attack and plays P3 + 1, then Red captures the pawn with C5 + 4 and Black has a lost position, because of the threat of C8 + 2, followed by C8 = 5 CHECKMATE! (It is very important to understand why this is checkmate.)

To stop this threat, Black must either defend his center pawn with a knight move, such as N2 + 3 or N8 + 7 (Either move is equally good, although some Chinese will give you an argument on the point.) or else offer a sacrifice of the pawn by putting a piece in between, such as the guard, bishop, or cannon, with the plan to drive the enemy cannon away, with a gain of time, after the capture.

Black can also defend his pawn with C8 + 1. This is regarded as a weak, but playable, move.

2. C5 + 4 CHECK - This is a weak move. Red captures the center pawn with check. However, Black can now block the check with 2... G 6 + 5, and then attack the cannon with N8 + 7. It will be illegal for Red to move the cannon off of the center line, because his king will be in check.

2.... C5 + 4 - An absolutely terrible move! However, the move illustrates the point that Black can get out of check by moving the intervening piece. Now, Black has a lost position, if Red plays correctly.

3. C5 - 2. The purpose of this move is to trap the cannon, by blocking its retreat. This sort of blocking move is much more common in Chinese Chess than in International Chess.

3.....N8 + 7 - Black is in bad s shape, but he makes a routine developing move.

4. N2 + 3. - Now, Red attacks the trapped cannon with his knight.

4...C5 = 4.- Black moves his cannon to what he believes will be safety.

5. C8 = 5 CHECK - It is important to understand why this is check. The rear cannon threatens to jump over the forward cannon and capture the king.

5...C4 = 5 CHECK - The only legal move! Black's king has no move and it is illegal for either one of the guards or one of the bishops to move in front of the black king, because then the forward cannon gives check.

6. N3 + 5 - Red finally captures the trapped Black cannon and threatens checkmate in the next move. (Can you see it?)

6...K5 + 1 Black's only hope of escaping checkmate is to try to move the king out. Otherwise, any one of four knight moves would be checkmate next.

7. N5 + 7 CHECK - It doesn't really matter where the knight moves. The rear cannon gives check..

7...K5 = 4 - The Black king tries to escape.

8. C5 = 6 - This move is ambiguous, as either cannon can make the move, but we will save that lesson for another time. Either cannon moving one to the left will be sufficient to win.

8...R9 + 2.- Black is tired of defending such a hopeless position, and effectively gives up. He could survive a little bit longer, with 8...B7 + 5. However, then Red has 9. N7 + 6.

9. C5 = 6 - CHECKMATE.

As noted previously, this is checkmate.

If the reader has been unable to understand and follow all of this, please do not be discouraged, as this has been a first lesson.

Please try again and again and ask a Chinese friend for help, if necessary, until you can play all of the above moves and understand the game.

When you finally do understand it, you are ready for your first game of Chinese chess.