

China-India clash looms in S'pore – for title of world chess champion

Young Indian challenger takes on Chinese champion in a game famous for its association with geopolitical rivalry.

Hsu Li Yang

The game of chess conjures an image of a silent mental duel between two opponents hunched over a 64-square battlefield with black and white armies. Both strain to pierce the veil of the future, calculating moves of attack and defence to advance their strategies while foiling those of their opponents.

Chess was recognised by the International Olympic Committee as a sport in 1999, and a high-stakes game can burn nearly 500 calories over four hours, increasing the players' heart rates by 80 beats/minute above their resting baseline during critical junctures. Not bad at all for a "sitting" sport!

Come Nov 25, the face-off for the highest title in chess will commence at Resorts World Sentosa in Singapore. Despite a history dating back to 1886, the upcoming World Chess Championship match will still feature several firsts:

- It will be the first world open title match between two Asians – world champion Ding Liren from China and his challenger Gukesh Dommaraju from India.
- At just 18 years old, Gukesh is the youngest ever challenger in history. Should he emerge victorious, he will break Garry Kasparov's record for being the youngest world chess champion at age 22, which has stood for 28 years.
- And of course, this is the first World Chess Championship match to be held in Singapore.

COLD WAR PROXY FIGHT

Fittingly for a game that involves a metaphorical battlefield in which two armies manoeuvre to capture each other's king, the battle for the chess crown has often reflected global political tensions and functioned as a proxy fight.

The Soviet Union viewed chess dominance as being

representative of the ideological superiority of its communist system and invested heavily in it from the 1920s, producing an almost unbroken series of world champions from 1948 until the USSR's dissolution in 1991.

The one break – by American genius Robert James (Bobby) Fischer between 1972 and 1975 – was widely viewed as being a challenge by the West against Soviet hegemony. Notably, the 1972 Reykjavik, Iceland, match between the mercurial and temperamental Fischer and the much more gentlemanly Soviet opponent Boris Spassky came to be seen as a personification of the Cold War confrontation between the rival superpowers. If, as Fischer put it, "chess is war over the board. The object is to crush the opponent's mind", he had in his corner no less than then President Richard Nixon publicly rooting for him.

When Fischer refused to defend his title in 1975, it allowed for the restoration of the reign of Soviet grandmasters, but with a twist. The series of matches between Anatoly Karpov and Kasparov (1984-1990) took place during a period of political turbulence in the final years of the Soviet Union. Kasparov – (then) young, outspoken and critical of authoritarianism – was viewed as representing the reform-minded faction against the conservative forces represented by Karpov, 12 years his senior. Kasparov's victory in 1985 coincided with the launch of the "perestroika" political reform movement in the USSR by Mikhail Gorbachev.

CHINA VERSUS INDIA

The upcoming match between Ding and Gukesh has also been viewed through a geopolitical lens, symbolising not just Asia's ascendance on the global chess stage long dominated by Europe and America, but also taking place at a time of growing rivalry between the two Asian giants – China and India.

In this light, the choice of Singapore as the host city for the World Chess Championship



Gukesh Dommaraju from India will challenge China's reigning world champion at the upcoming World Chess Championship in Singapore. At 18, Gukesh is the youngest ever challenger in history. With his string of recent successes, he is the strong favourite for the world chess title. PHOTO: STEV BONHAGE



World champion Ding Liren from China has publicly spoken about his struggles with depression, with a chess form that has been on a slump. At his peak, however, the 32-year-old has played brilliant chess and it is too early to write him off, especially given his experience and resilience. PHOTO: FIDE

match reflects our growing role as a venue for major events, and not just in sports and music. In a way not dissimilar to the attention focused on the Trump-Kim summit (2018) and the Xi-Ma summit (2015), the Ding-Gukesh championship match will put Singapore in the spotlight as the platform where geopolitics will be in play, albeit with 32 chess pieces.

Like the Soviet Union of old, both China and India have also invested significantly in chess. This is particularly the case in India, where chess has received both government funding and private sector sponsorship. Many Indian parents also equate chess with academic excellence, and the game has been included in the school curriculum in states like Tamil Nadu and Gujarat. In a way, support for chess in India is to be expected, given that chess is said to have originated in India around the 6th century AD.

China's progress in chess is more chequered, in part because it has had competition from the likes of Chinese chess and Go (weiqi). During the Cultural Revolution, chess was condemned as decadent. Chinese players started playing in international events only in 1976, a year after the Chess Association of China officially joined FIDE. The country, however, has made huge strides since then and holds both the crowns in open and women's chess – a feat achieved only

previously by the Soviet Union.

Immensely talented, both Gukesh and Ding, 32, are also beneficiaries of their countries' systematic support of chess.

Gukesh's meteoric rise has been nothing short of astounding even for a sport where child prodigies are the norm. With a mature and patient but aggressive playing style, his string of recent successes, including a record-breaking performance while leading India to a historic gold medal at the recent World Chess Olympiads in September, has meant that he is the strong favourite for the world chess title.

In contrast, world champion Ding has publicly spoken about his struggles with depression, with a chess form that has been on a slump even before he won the World Chess Championship in April 2023. At his peak, however, he has played brilliant chess, and he came back from behind three times in the 2023 match to finally defeat his Russian opponent Ian Nepomniachtchi. It is too early to write him off, especially given his greater experience (he became the youngest Chinese national champion at 16) and resilience in high-stakes matches.

CHESS IN SINGAPORE

Singapore has yet to produce a world-class chess player, but this is not just because of our small population. Norway, with a similar population, is home to

Magnus Carlsen, who was recently honoured as the "greatest of all time" at the world chess federation's 100th anniversary celebration, and who – had he not abdicated the title of world champion in 2021 – might still be defending the title this year.

There is a dearth of high-level, well-sponsored chess events in our country and the region. Without substantial state or private sponsorship, pursuing a professional career in competitive chess is financially unviable, limiting opportunities for our players to excel on the world stage.

We Singaporeans are also generally a pragmatic people, prioritising good grades and stable jobs over the uncertainty of competitive sports. When I started participating in more international tournaments decades ago, my principal Lee Fong Seng noticed my ICJ results, pulled me aside and admonished me, advising me to refocus on my studies. The late Professor Lim Kok Ann, our local "father of chess" who founded the Singapore Chess Federation (SCF) in 1949, often advised the top local players with variations on: "Chess is for fun. You need a proper job to eat."

It is true that relatively few chess professionals can survive on tournament prizes alone. Only 20 professionals worldwide made six-figure sums from tournament

winnings in 2023. The Sinquefeld Cup – one of the most prestigious top-level invitational chess tournaments – has a first prize of \$133,000, whereas the Bangkok Chess Club Open – consistently one of the largest chess tournaments in South-east Asia – had 11 grandmasters and over 200 players competing for the top prize of \$39,000.

Outside of tournaments, many chess professionals coach either part- or full-time. Several chess masters in Singapore make a decent livelihood from coaching children. Chess streaming is another relatively recent phenomenon that a small number of charismatic chess players have managed to successfully monetise – grandmaster Hikaru Nakamura and the Botez sisters (Alexandra and Andrea) come to mind here, along with Levy Rozman (GothamChess).

Chess in Singapore has undergone something of a renaissance over the past four years. The Covid-19 pandemic and the very popular Netflix series *The Queen's Gambit* drove a boom in online chess that spilled over to in-person events when the pandemic abated. The annual National Schools Individuals Chess Championship, currently in its 75th edition, had over 1,600 competitors this year ranging from age seven to 20 years. This was over 20 per cent more than the pre-pandemic 2019 edition, which had over 1,300 sign-ups.

Since 2022, two of our young players, Mr Tin Jingyao, 24, and Mr Siddharth Jagadeesh, 17, achieved the grandmaster title, the highest title in chess apart from world champion. There are only five active grandmasters playing under the Singapore flag today, including SCF chief executive officer Kevin Goh.

This popularity of chess among children and youth despite the game not being eligible for Direct School Admission except at Anglo-Chinese School (Independent) suggests that many parents (and children) are of the opinion that the game helps develop cognitive abilities, character and perhaps their competitive spirit. Certainly, chess has taught my peers and I to accept that losing (and failure) is part of life, and we can learn from the hundreds of defeats to achieve better results.

In *The Queen's Gambit* Netflix series and source novel, Beth Harmon overcomes personal demons and male misogyny to defeat world champion Vasily Borgov and win the Moscow International in 1968. The series (and novel) ends without us knowing if she ever pursued the world chess crown.

Women remain under-represented in international chess tournaments and among the world's elite players today, but perhaps with concerted effort and support, there can be a future world chess champion who is a woman.

In the meantime, there is the upcoming title fight between Ding and Gukesh to look forward to. My hope is that it will be the opening move for further advances in the game of chess in Singapore.

• Professor Hsu Li Yang is president of the Singapore Chess Federation.