



Let's Play! at ACM: A Journey Through Asian Game History

Description

Ever wondered what people did for fun before Netflix, smartphones, and video games? It turns out, they were just as obsessed with games as we are, and their game sets were often stunning works of art. I recently headed over to the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) to check out their latest exhibition, **Let's Play! The Art and Design of Asian Games** was a fascinating journey through millennia of human recreation. Running from 5 September 2025 all the way to 7 June 2026, this exhibition is a must-see for anyone curious about history, art, or just a good old-fashioned board game.

A Glimpse into Ancient Pastimes

Right from the start, the exhibition draws you in with ancient game pieces from across the globe. We're talking about artefacts that have travelled through time from places as far-flung as the Indus Valley and the Viking world. Because so many of these games lack written records, their exact rules are often a mystery. However, the pieces themselves tell a story. You can see finely crafted tokens made from precious materials that likely belonged to the elite, alongside simpler versions that suggest everyday use.



Seated liubo players with board and pieces (China, Han dynasty, early 3rd century Earthenware Asia)

One of the standout ancient games is *Liubo* (六博, "six rods"), the earliest game found in China's archaeological records. Though its rules are now lost, it was incredibly popular for centuries before fading away. What's truly interesting is that murals and models show it was enjoyed by everyone, from emperors to commoners, proving that the love for games has always been a great unifier.

Play vs. Game: What's the Difference?

The exhibition poses a simple but profound question: What's the difference between "play" and a "game"? Essentially, play is spontaneous and imaginative, while a game is a structured form of play with clear rules and an objective, like winning. This simple framework has inspired incredible creativity for centuries, and most traditional board games can be sorted into four main types: race games, space games (forming patterns), chase games, and displace games (capturing territory). It's a neat way to understand the psychology behind the games we still enjoy today.

Masterpieces of a Bygone Era



1. Folding game board, Western India, second half of the 16th century, Indian rosewood, teakwood, board, India, 17th century, Indian rosewood, teakwood, ivory, coloured mastic, Private collection

If you appreciate fine craftsmanship, you won't be disappointed. There's a stunning folding game board made in India for the European market back in the 16th century. It's ingeniously designed to play multiple games like chess and tric-trac, and even transforms into a writing desk.

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Ming dynasty (Xuande period, 1425-35) Cloisonné enamel The Palace Museum

Another highlight is the only known surviving cloisonné *shuanglu* board from the Ming imperial collection. For the uninitiated, *shuanglu* is an ancient game similar to backgammon, and this board, with its intricate lion motifs, is simply breathtaking.

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Tiered food box (jubako), Japan, Azuchi-Momoyama period, late 16th or early 17th century. Black lacquer with gold leaf and red lacquer.

I also spotted a beautiful Japanese food box, or *Jubako*, lavishly decorated with gold lacquer. But here's the twist – the motifs are of Portuguese playing cards! It's a fantastic example of cultural exchange, likely commissioned by a wealthy patron who had a taste for European games.

Classic Games That Stood the Test of Time

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1. Tigers and goats, India, 18th or 19th century, Stained ivory, cloth, Private collection 2. Tigers and Museum, xxxx-11058

Get ready for a classic showdown popular all across Asia! In the thrilling game of Tigers and Goats, it's a battle of wits between two mighty tigers and a clever herd of goats. The tigers are on the prowl, trying to pounce and leap over the goats to capture them. But the goats fight back with brainpower, scurrying to nearby spots to team up, surround the predators, and trap them completely!

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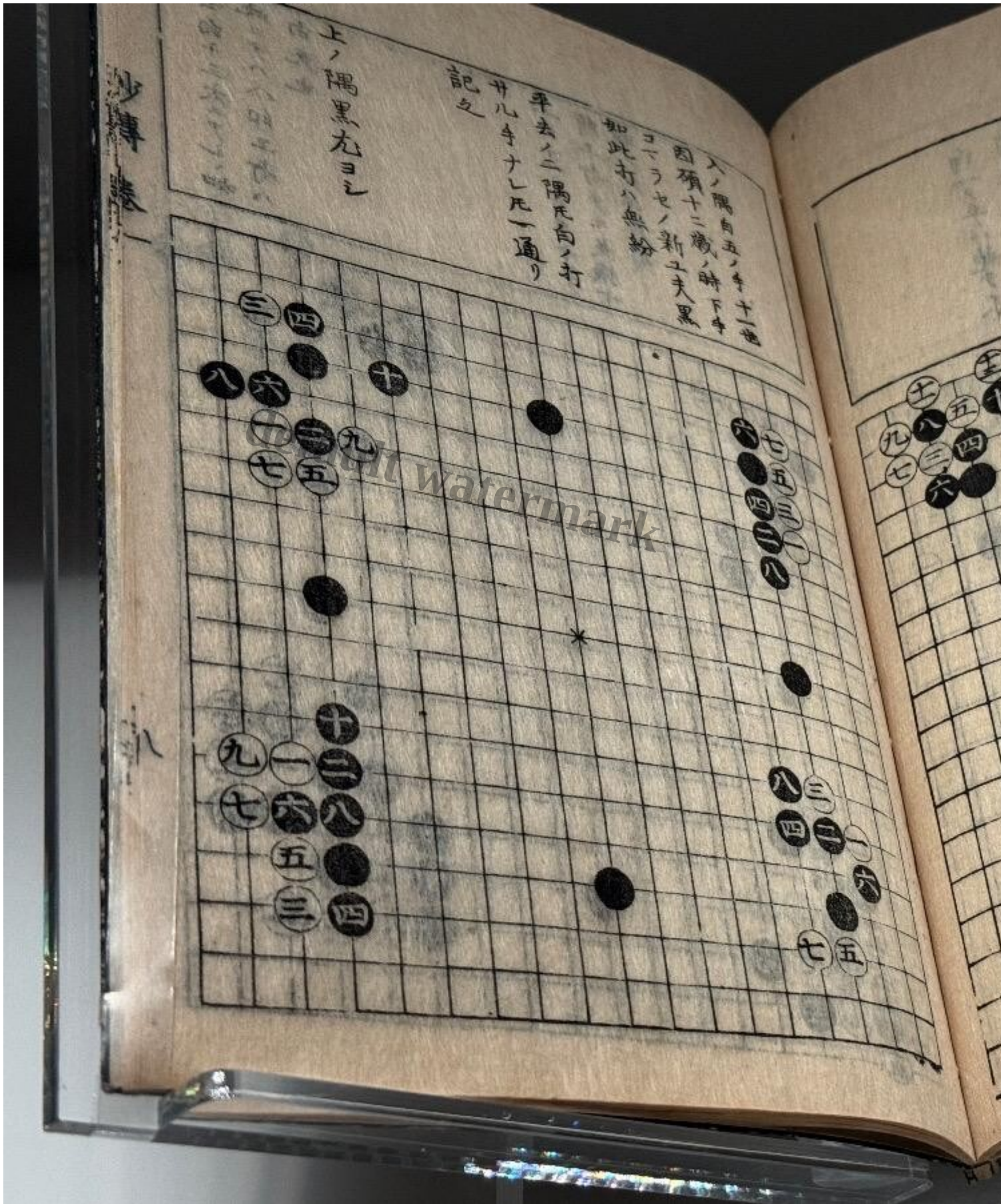


Chauker board, game pieces and dice, India, 20th century, Cotton, wood, cowrie shells. Asian Civilis

Of course, the exhibition features many games that are still beloved today. Youâ??ll find *Chaupar*, the popular Indian board game that was a favourite of the Mughal emperor Akbar and eventually became the basis for the modern game of Ludo. So, the next time youâ??re flipping the board in a fit of rage during a game of Ludo, you can blame centuries of tradition!

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For strategy lovers, thereâ??s a deep dive into *Weiqi* (or *Go*), one of the â??Four Artsâ?• of the Chinese scholar-gentleman. The exhibition traces its journey to Korea and then Japan, where it became a global phenomenon, partly thanks to the popular manga *Hikaru no Go*.

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Then thereâ??s *Xiangqi* (Chinese chess), with exquisite sets that were treated as luxury objects in the Qing imperial court. And who could forget *Mahjong*? Originating in 19th-century China, it became the first Chinese game to go global, sparking such a craze in 1920s America that animal bones had to be shipped from the US to Shanghai just to keep up with the demand for tiles.

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Mahjong tiles, China, early 20th century. Wood, metal, bone or ivory

A World Championship in Singapore

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One of the coolest displays for me was the recreation of the official match arena from the **2024 FIDE World Chess Championship**, which was hosted right here in Singapore for the first time. The exhibition features the actual bespoke table and signed chairs used by the players. It was a historic match where 18-year-old Gukesh Dommaraju from India defeated reigning champion Ding Liren of China to become the youngest World Chess Champion in history. It's a powerful reminder that these ancient games are still very much alive and evolving.

The Final Boss: Human vs. AI

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Just when you think youâ??ve seen it all, the exhibition brings you firmly into the 21st century. The final section explores the landmark 2016 match where Google DeepMindâ??s AlphaGo defeated world champion Lee Sedol in a game of Goâ??a game once thought too complex for machines. Here, you can actually see two AI systems play a game against a human opponent, using robotic arms to move the pieces. Itâ??s both eerie and incredibly impressive to watch. The display doesnâ??t just showcase technology; it also makes you ponder the future of human creativity and how our intelligence can coexist and collaborate with machines.

So, if youâ??re looking for something different to do, I highly recommend a visit to the Asian Civilisations Museum. â??Letâ??s Play!â?• is more than just an exhibition about games; itâ??s a celebration of human ingenuity, artistry, and our universal need to connect and have fun.

Exhibition Details

What: Letâ??s Play! The Art and Design of Asian Games

Where: Asian Civilisations Museum, 1 Empress Pl, Singapore 179555

When: 5 September 2025 â?? 7 June 2026

Website: <https://www.nhb.gov.sg/acm/>

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