

바둑학연구, 제19권 제2호, pp. 59-78

Journal of Go Studies

2025. Vol.19, No.2. pp. 59-78

## Breaking Barriers: Chinese Female Go Players in the Mid-to-Late 20th Century Through the Lens of Rui Naiwei

罗婧玥·南治亨 (Luo Jingyue & Nam Chihyung)

明知大学 (Myongji University)

### Abstract

As an outstanding female Go player in the world, Rui Naiwei's life experience clearly shows the constraints that female Go players in China and the world have faced and the breakthroughs they have made in recent years. This article will analyze Rui Naiwei's experience from the aspects of social environment and career development, and discuss the challenges faced by female Go players in the middle and late 20th century, as well as a series of breakthroughs, and finally obtain a relatively equal status and recognition with the male players in the field of Go .

**Keywords:** Rui Naiwei, Female Go players, Gender discrimination, Career development

## I. Research background

The development of Go in China has a long history of more than two thousand years. Historically, as an ancient board game, Go was regarded as a male-dominated pursuit.

However, female players have also left a significant mark on its history. Especially since the 1980s, Chinese women's Go has risen to prominence on the international stage. Led by Rui Naiwei, a 9-dan professional, the team known as "Four Heavenly Kings" showed their strength, surpassing Japanese women's Go at the very beginning of their establishment, and even defeated top Japanese players in international competitions. Rui Naiwei, as an outstanding representative of Chinese women's Go, has made many achievements in the field of Go and earned global respect of the world for her contributions to the game.

However, the development of Chinese women's Go has not been smooth sailing. Rui Naiwei and other pioneers have faced various injustices in the Chinese Go community. Nevertheless, Rui has remained committed to the game, and her unwavering professionalism has become a source of inspiration for players around the world. In recent years, with the support of policies and improvements in the tournament system, Chinese women's Go has made great progress. A new generation of players, such as Yu Zhiying, has gradually emerged, and the overall level of Chinese women's Go has been significantly improved.

Rui Naiwei's journey in the world of Go serves as a microcosm that shows the evolution of Chinese female Go players from enduring various forms of injustices to gaining recognition and establishing a strong presence in the professional Go community. This article takes Rui Naiwei's life as a clue to

analyze the difficulties encountered by female Go players in the last century and the changes that have taken place since then.

## II. Research objectives

By analyzing the development of Chinese women's Go and Rui Naiwei's personal experience, this article aims to reveal the difficulties that Chinese women players have faced and their current breakthroughs. In the 1980s and 1990s, Chinese female Go players were faced with many challenges from social culture, competitive environment and opportunities. However, with their perseverance and love of Go, they gradually emerged on the field both at home and abroad.

Rui Naiwei, a standout among her peers, has inspired generations of female players with her tenacity and dedication to Go. Her experience not only sets an example for Chinese female Go players but also provides them with valuable insights and lessons for those who follow. With policy support and improvements in the tournament system, a new generation of female Go players, such as Yu Zhiying, have gradually emerged on the international stage, injecting new vitality into the development of women's Go in China.

By analyzing the constraints and dilemmas encountered by Chinese female Go players in the last century, this paper hopes to provide valuable references for future research and practice, and promote the sustainable development of Chinese women's Go.

### III. Development of Go in China in the 20th century

#### 1. 1960-1980s

In the 1960s, the development of Go in China experienced several twists and turns. At the beginning of the People's Republic of China, Go was under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Sports, but in 1960, it was put under the administration of the newly established General Administration of Sport, which was a significant change that influenced the development direction of modern Go in China.

Lv Guoliang(吕国梁), a famous Go educator, believed that the shift was related to the one-sided policy adopted by China after the establishment of diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. It was imperative to adopt the Soviet sports model, which reclassified Go as a competitive sport. In addition, the Chinese Go community, weakened by social upheaval and war throughout the first half of the 20th century, saw catching up with Japan as its primary goal. The new approach emphasized Go's competitive nature, challenging traditional concepts of the Japanese notion that placed excessive value on the beauty of art and the idealized shape of the move. With the support of state leaders such as Chen Yi, Go developed rapidly in China during this period.

As a visible outcome of these reforms, the Chinese National Go Training Team was formally established in 1961. However, the momentum did not last long. Due to the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution, Go was banned as the "Four Olds," and the regular study and competition of Go could not be carried out. As a result, the development of Go in China was stagnant for years.

It was not until 1973 that the Chinese National Go Team was reorganized, and the development of Go returned to the right track. That same year, Rui Naiwei began learning Go at the age of 11. In 1979, she placed second in the National Girls' Go Competition and was selected to the National Go Training Team.

## 2. 1980-2000s

Following the reform and opening-up, China entered a period of recovery. The revival of Chinese Go began with institutional reconstruction at the national level and immense spiritual encouragement. In 1982, the National Sports Commission introduced an official dan-ranking system for Go, marking the formal establishment of China's Go ranking system and the initial steps toward professionalization. At that time, the criteria for rank evaluation were based on ten players who were officially on the roster of the national team and were treated as the "benchmark cohort." Rankings were determined with reference to these ten players' previous competitive results. Among them, Chen Zude and Nie Weiping, having won national championships multiple times and defeated Japanese 9-dan professionals, were accordingly conferred the rank of pro 9-dan. Wu Zongseng, who had repeatedly finished as runner-up in national tournaments and defeated a Japanese 9-dan in a best-of-three match, was likewise promoted to 9-dan. Wang Runan and Hua Yigang, both national runners-up, were rated 8-dan. Luo Jianwen, Shen Guosun, and Huang Dexun were evaluated as 7-dan. The female player Kong Xiangming was ranked 6-dan, while another female player, He Xiaoren, was ranked 5-dan.

Meanwhile, in 1987 and 1988, the Tengen(天元战) and Meijin(名人战)

Go tournaments were launched one after another, modeled on Japan's title-holder challenge system, providing an important platform for players and greatly energizing the Go community.

However, the event that truly propelled Go from a niche pastime to a nationwide phenomenon and elevated it from a sport to a symbol of national spirit was the China-Japan Go Supermatches, which commenced in 1984. In these protracted battles spanning several years, Nie Weiping single-handedly achieved stunning reversals at critical junctures, creating the legendary "eleven consecutive wins" and earning the nickname "Nie Whirlwind." This victory not only greatly boosted national confidence but also sparked an unprecedented "Go fever" across the country, attracting a large number of young people, represented by Chang Hao and Gu Li, to take up the game. This laid a strong foundation for the emergence of future Go prodigies.

Inspired by the "Nie Whirlwind," Chinese Go began to accelerate its systematic construction and integrate fully into the world Go scene. Firstly, the playing strength of the players, centered around Nie Weiping and Ma Xiaochun, improved comprehensively, reaching a level capable of competing for world titles. Within the same system, women's Go also received strategic support. The establishment of women's divisions in national tournaments gave rise to the first generation of leading players, represented by Kong Xiangming. The pinnacle of this achievement was Rui Naiwei's promotion to 9-dan in 1988, making her the first female 9-dan player in the world. This was not only a result of China's Go institutional development but also signified that Chinese women's Go had reached the world forefront.

Simultaneously, 1988 saw the inauguration of the first World Professional Go Championship, the "Ing Cup," regarded as a milestone in Go's globalization. Although Nie Weiping narrowly lost to Korea's Cho Hun-hyun in the

inaugural final, the emergence of world championships set a higher competitive goal for Chinese players.

In 1995, Ma Xiaochun won both the “Tong Yang Securities Cup” and the “Fujitsu Cup,” becoming China’s first world champion. This marked the “zero breakthrough” for Chinese Go in the highest level of international recognition after years of steady progress, reaching the peak of this phase.

Meanwhile, the domestic Go ecosystem continued to improve. Outside the official system, private Go academies, such as the Nie Weiping Dojo, began to emerge in the 1990s. This new talent cultivation model, blending traditional mentorship with modern training, became an important cradle for future top players.

Chinese Go’s upward trajectory encountered severe challenges in the mid-to-late 1990s. South Korean players, represented by Lee Chang-ho and Cho Hun-hyun, became formidable rivals. Particularly, the “Stone Buddha” Lee Chang-ho, with his impeccable and stable performance, long suppressed generations of Chinese players, including Ma Xiaochun and Chang Hao, plunging Chinese Go into a relatively prolonged “resistance against Korea” downturn.

To address these challenges and seek sustainable development, Chinese Go initiated profound reforms in the professional system. The core measure was the establishment of the Chinese Weiqi League (Wei Jia) in 1999. Through its home-and-away format and the introduction of foreign players, the Chinese League created a market-oriented, regularized, high-level competitive platform, fundamentally altering the previous training and competition model dominated by individual tournaments and invitational events. It not only ensured the quantity and quality of players’ games but also greatly facilitated exchanges among players and nurtured the growth of young tal-

ents like Chang Hao and Gu Li.

In short, from the 1980s to the 2000s, Chinese Go completed its transformation from a symbol of national spirit to a professional sport. It achieved social popularization and spiritual mobilization through the China-Japan Supermatches, established a preliminary professional system through the creation of the dan ranking system, national tournaments, integration into world championships, and finally, under the impact of the “Korean Wave,” embarked on a path of deepened professionalization through measures like the establishment of Chinese Weiqi League. This series of developments laid a solid foundation in terms of institutions, talent, and market infrastructure for the comprehensive revival of Chinese Go in the 21st century.

#### IV. Rui Naiwei’s Go experience

Rui Naiwei, born on December 28, 1963, in Shanghai, China, is the world’s first female professional Go player to achieve the rank of 9 dan. Her promotion to 9 dan in 1988 marked a historic breakthrough for Chinese women’s Go, elevating its competitive standard to new heights. However, at the peak of her career, due to a combination of personal and institutional problems, she left the national team in the early 1990s and spent over two decades living abroad in Japan and South Korea, becoming a “wandering Go traveler.”

However, Rui Naiwei’s absolute dominance in women’s Go also revealed a “lonely peak” phenomenon in the women’s scene. Her strength far surpassed that of her female contemporaries and allowed her to compete on equal footing with top male players. However, her extended absence from China left



the domestic women's Go scene without a central figure. At the same time, it opened a new generation of talent to emerge and grow.

Her time overseas coincided with a shifting landscape in the global of Go. Her achievements in South Korea were particularly remarkable, as she notably won the Kooksoo Title by defeating top male players such as Lee Chang-ho and Cho Hun-hyun, solidifying her historical status as the “greatest female Go player in history” with compelling results. Approximately twenty-one years later, she eventually returned to her roots and came back to China. Her career trajectory—from her early breakthroughs domestically, to her mid-career exile and peak achievements abroad, and finally her late-career return—is not only a personal legend but also serves as a critical historical footnote for exploring the constraints and breakthroughs experienced by Chinese female Go players in the mid-to-late 20th century. Even now, well past the age of sixty, she remains active as a professional player, her longevity and cross-regional influence being rare in the history of Go.

### 1. The famous “Three Gorges Incident”

As previously mentioned, in 1979, Rui Naiwei won second place in the National Girls Go Competition and was selected to join the national Go Training Team. From 1986 to 1989, she won the National Women's Go individual Championship four times in a row. But it was in the golden period of Rui Naiwei's career that she encountered the “Three Gorges Incident,” which profoundly changed her life. At that time, the match was held on a passenger ship in the Three Gorges section of the Yangtze River, and it subsequently came to be known as the “Three Gorges Incident.”

In 1987, she participated in the China-Japan Go Match on behalf of the Chinese Go team. That year, only three women qualified to participate: Rui Naiwei, Yang Hui and Zhang Xuan. The Chinese team is the host, and the Japanese team sent a delegation of eight players, including Masao Kato (head), Noriki Yoda, Naoto Hiban, Shunya Imamura and Koichi Oya.

At that time, the Chinese Go team enforced a controversial rule intended to protect female players: female players were prohibited from entering the room of male players. During a break, Noriki Yoda of the Japanese team warmly invited the Chinese players to play fast games. Due to the restriction, Rui Naiwei and Zhang Xuan initially decided to play in the corridor. However, the lighting in the corridor was too dim, and the Japanese players' room, located in the Foreign Guest Department, offered much better conditions, so the players eventually moved to the Japanese team's room to play games.

After this incident became known to the Chinese coaches, both Zhang Xuan and Rui Naiwei were summoned for formal interviews and instructed to write self-criticisms. As a result, Rui was banned from the national tournament, while Zhang was disqualified from the preliminaries of the Go tournament. At the time, male players could play two games in the national competition, whereas female players had only one game, despite both male and female players being at the same level. This disparity highlighted the gender inequality in the system, and the suspension was especially harsh for the two female players.

However, in the year-end summary report of the Training Authority, the incident was labeled as "improper behavior of female Go players", and Rui Naiwei and Zhang Xuan became subjects of widespread discussion. Reflecting on the event, Rui said, "I've always thought that Zhang Xuan and

I went to the Japanese male player's room solely to play Go. Our only fault was violating the team's rules. Since we had broken the rules, we deserved to be criticized, but I do not agree with the severity of the punishment." Rui Naiwei felt deeply wronged by the incident, viewing it not only as a personal injustice but also as an insult to women who place great importance on their reputations.

## 2. A dilemma with no chance to play Go

In June 1988, Rui Naiwei became 9 dan, becoming the world's only female player to reach that level at that time. However, behind the outstanding accomplishment lay a lot of pressure. From 1980 to 1988, Rui had been a member of the national Go team for nearly a decade, but the opportunities to play in the international competition were extremely limited. The competitions designated by the team were reserved only for the strong male players, and Rui was not considered eligible to participate.

In 1988, there were only two major international Go tournaments: the Fujitsu Cup and the Ing Cup. The Ing Cup was held once every four years, and in the Fujitsu Cup, only the top two male players from the national team were directly qualified, and other male players had to play a qualification tournament for a chance to participate.

Rui Naiwei felt this policy was unfair. She had earned her 9 dan by competing with male players and had won the women's individual Go championship multiple times. Rui asked the coaching staff whether the women's champion could also be granted direct entry into the World Championship, but her request was denied. Willing to compromise, she proposed participating in the men's qualification tournament instead. However, her proposal

was again rejected by senior figures such as Nie Weiping, Hua Yigang, and Luo Jianwen, on the grounds that there was no precedent for a female player competing in the men's division.

Rui Naiwei found herself with no way out, which was undoubtedly unfair to her. However, it was a systemic problem within the Chinese Go and could not be resolved by individual will at the time. "Three Gorges Incident" caused lasting damage to Rui with all kinds of pressure, and Rui Naiwei had no choice but to leave the Chinese national team, looking for a chance that could provide a fair atmosphere for female Go players.

### 3. The wandering experience on Go career

The age range from 27 to 36 is considered the most valuable period in a Go player's career. But during this crucial decade, Rui Nian Wei has been in a state of stagnation with no Go competition to attend.

In 1990, she went to Japan to find opportunities to play Go. However, since she had not officially left the Chinese Go Association, she could only take part in one or two official competitions per year. The rest of the time, she could only watch others play in Japanese Go Association. "Rui Naiwei Incident"

In 1992, the second Ing Cup World Professional Go Championship was originally scheduled to be held in China. However, following Rui Naiwei's departure from the Chinese national team, the Chinese Go Association maintained that she was still a registered player of the Chinese Go Association who had been trained by the national Go team for many years. As a result, they opposed her participating as a representative of China. The tournament organizers extended an invitation for Rui to participate independent-

ly, without representing any country. Both South Korea and Japan supported this arrangement. In the end, the Chinese Go Association reluctantly agreed to allow Rui Naiwei to participate as an individual, but the Chinese team withdrew from the tournament as a protest, and the hosting country was changed from China to Japan.

This was Rui Naiwei's first appearance on the top stage of the World Championship, in which she defeated Hideki Komatsu, Li Changho, and Liang Daihao to reach the final four, setting a record for the best result ever achieved by a female Go player in the World Championship. After losing to Japanese player Hero Otaki in the semifinals with a score of one to two, Rui Naiwei broke down in tears, not because she doubted her skill or lamented the hardships of her game, but because she had no more game to play.

In 1996, Rui Naiwei finally requested permission from the Japanese Go Association to participate in professional tournaments in Japan. However, the director, Kazuichi Fujisawa, informed her that he had received a letter from the Chinese Go Association stating, "We hope you will refuse to allow Chinese players to play tournaments in Japan." The Japanese Go community agreed with this and denied Rui's request. Unable to enter the Japanese professional Go scene, Rui Naiwei chose to move to the United States with her husband, Jiang Zhujiu, who was also a 9 dan player of Chinese Go Association.

In 1999, she officially became a guest player of the Korea Go Association. Her journey found a new direction when Cho Hoon-hyun successfully convinced the Association to accept Rui Naiwei and her husband as guest players.

It was not until 2011 that Rui Naiwei returned to the Chinese Go team. After a 21-year absence, she finally chose to return to her roots. Having

won eight world women's individual titles, Rui Naiwei returned to China and once again joined the Chinese national team.

#### 4. In Summary

Rui Naiwei chose to leave the Chinese Go team due to the limited opportunities to participate in the world championships and the unfair treatment she experienced in the national team. After her departure, the Chinese Go Association implemented many reforms, such as giving female Go players spots in international tournaments, reducing the percentage of the prize money for the male champions. For example, less than three years after Rui Naiwei left the team, the Chinese Go Association issued a resolution to allow the winner of the national women's individual competition to compete in the Fujitsu Cup. Ironically, Rui herself had never been granted such an opportunity during her time on the team.

### V. The constraints imposed on Chinese women Go players in the 20th century

Rui Naiwei's early experience can be seen in the constraints imposed on Chinese women Go players in the 20th century.

#### 1. Gender discrimination and social prejudice

Traditionally, Go has been considered a domain where men are good at,

and women's participation was often dismissed as "unprofessional". Rui Naiwei also encountered similar prejudice in her early stages of her career. Despite her exceptional talent, societal expectations for female Go players remained low, and their abilities were.

## 2. Uneven playing field

Chinese women Go players often face an unequal playing field when they compete with their male counterparts. In the professional Go field, the number of female Go players has long been far lower than that of men. Female Go players have faced considerable disadvantages in training and competition opportunities and sponsorship. It was 1978 that China held its first separate women's individual competition, marking a shift from the previous model where men and women competed together in the national Go championships. That year, Kong Xiangming made history by winning all 15 games and became the first female Go champion in China. despite such milestones, female players have continued to face systemic barriers. Their chances of being selected for international tournaments have remained much lower than those of their male counterparts, making it difficult for female Go players to show themselves on the world stage, and their career development path is relatively narrow.

## 3. Social concept and public opinion pressure

The unfair treatment Rui Naiwei received in the "Three Gorges Incident" was compounded by the Chinese Go coaching team's mischaracterization of her behavior as "improper behavior." This stigmatization affected Rui

Naiwei's performance in Go for a long time. This reflected the pressure of public opinion on women in society at that time, and all these factors had a negative impact on the psychology and career development of female Go players.

## VI. The Change and breakthrough of Chinese female Go players: Rui Naiwei's success and the Changes of the Times

Rui Naiwei's decision to leave China marked a turning point in her personal journey and indirectly affected the development pattern of women's Go in China. After Rui Naiwei withdrew from the national team, the Chinese women's Go team lost a leading figure, and the performance of the Chinese women's Go was not satisfactory in the international arena. This has aroused social concern about gender equality in Go, and prompted the Go community to reflect on and improve the treatment and competition opportunities of female players.

### 1. A shift in social attitudes

With social progress and increased awareness of gender equality, public acceptance of women's participation in Go has greatly increased. Society has given more recognition and respect to the skills and achievements of female Go players. The Go community has also begun to make efforts to create a more level playing field for female players. For example, in the past, male players were given two selection spots in the World Series while female



players had only one. Today, both men and women have equal opportunities.

## 2. Go Policy Changes

The Chinese Go Association has issued a series of policies. In 2016, the association also put forward the “Go for all” strategy, and women’s Go gained unprecedented attention. The Government has also gradually increased its financial investment in the sport, especially its support for women’s Go. The Chinese Women’s Go Association has also been established to formulate and implement the development plan for women’s Go. The emergence of Chinese Women’s Go Master Tournament and Women’s League has improved the competitive level and popularity of women’s Go. In addition, international events have been introduced, such as the Women’s Go World Cup and Women’s Go Team Championship.

## 3. Training and development of female Go players

The professionalization of Go has increased, with more opportunities for women’s career development, and the training resources, competition opportunities and sponsorship available to female players have all improved. The promotion channels for professional Go players have become fairer, providing more room for female players to develop.

## 4. Role models

Rui Naiwei, the world’s first female 9 dan professional player, won the world Women’s Go Championship several times in just 10 years and swept

the world women's Go arena, setting an example for later women players. Her achievements and influence inspired more women to pursue the career of Go, breaking the concept that "Go is only for men".

## 5. Increased media attention

Compared with the past, the media has paid significantly more attention to female Go players, and their matches and achievements have been more widely reported, enhancing the social influence of female Go players.

## VII. Conclusion

Rui Naiwei's life story vividly illustrates the constraints faced by female Go players in the past and the breakthroughs made by the following generation. Although women still face some challenges in the field of Go, with the progress of society and the promotion of women's status, it is believed that more and more female Go players will emerge, and they will shine on the global stage of Go, adding more colors to the sport. Standing on the shoulders of their predecessors like Rui Naiwei, the next generation should continue to work hard and contribute to the realization of true gender equality.

## References

- 王公平. 我国运动智力研究的现状及趋势[J]. 体育世界(学术版), 2018, (02): 17-18.
- 张景, 黄亚飞. 我国智力运动发展策略研究[J]. 体育文化导刊, 2009, (07): 42-45.
- 庞煜.“最高决战”: 中日建交后两国围棋的交流与竞争[C]//中国体育科学学会. 第十三届全国体育科学大会论文摘要集——专题报告(体育史分会). 天津商务职业学院, 2023: 3.
- 陈宇. 中日韩国棋博弈史研究: 1980-2020[D]. 天津体育学院, 2022.
- 苏甦. 从历史发展看中日围棋文化比较[D]. 上海体育学院, 2010.
- 李凤梅, 朱海涛. 从社会变迁看我国围棋的发展[J]. 少林与太极(中州体育), 2009, (10): 20-22.
- 吴锡超, 蓝松金. 陈毅元帅与围棋运动[J]. 福建党史月刊, 2001, (12): 14-16.
- 刘晓君. 疾风知劲草——第九届中日围棋擂台赛决战写真[J]. 新体育, 1995, (02): 19-21.
- 刘善承. 建国以来的围棋活动[J]. 体育文史, 1988, (01): 20-27.
- 谢奇. 中国古代女性与围棋[J]. 浙江体育科学, 1994, (05): 52-53+58.
- 李超. 芮乃伟棋子落长亭[J]. 新体育, 2000, (04): 18-20.
- 名家名作之江铸久、芮乃伟[J]. 青少年日记(教育教学研究), 2019, (02): 3+265-266.
- 深度还原围棋三峡事件: 重新解读芮乃伟与罗建文的是非恩怨 <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?>
- 围棋发展简史 <https://wenku.baidu.com/view/e8e9818f680203d-8ce2f2411.html?>
- 中国围棋50年 <https://www.163.com/dy/article/EF5F0T5F05438Q4K.html>

联众围棋网<https://www.ourgame.com>

Received : 1, Nov, 2025  
Accepted : 20, Nov, 2025