



GeneralsTale

Big Ideas on the Board

A SPARK & ANVIL STRATEGY BOOK

GeneralStale – Big Ideas on the Board

A Spark & Anvil companion book – free to download and share.

Ages 9-14. Game: xiangqi.

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This volume teaches strategy through the app's cast – 6 big ideas, one per chapter.

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*The other GeneralStale books teach how each piece **moves**. This one teaches how to **play well** at xiangqi – the ideas above the moves – through the cast you know. Keep a board nearby if you can.*

Chapter 1 – Open the File

Chariot Che is the strongest piece on the whole board, and Chariot Che knows exactly why: the chariot sweeps a whole straight line in one move – but only if the line is **open**. A file crowded with your own soldiers is a file the chariot cannot use.

"Give me a clear road," Chariot Che said, "and I reach the palace door from across the board."

So the first big idea of playing well is to get your chariots onto **open files** – the up-and-down lines with no piece blocking the way. Strong players trade or advance a soldier to clear a file, then swing a chariot onto it, aiming straight at the enemy general's home.

Say it out loud: *Put the chariot on the open road, pointed at their palace.*

The mistake is to leave your best piece trapped behind its own wall of soldiers while the enemy chariot rules an open file of its own. Whoever controls the open files usually controls the game.

Your turn: The workbook's "Open Road" pages show two files – one clear, one blocked. Which one do you put your chariot on?

The chariot does not need to capture on move one. Getting it onto a clear line IS the strong move – the attack comes later, and it comes fast.

Chapter 2 – Cross the River

Soldier Jin marches one careful step at a time, forward and never back. For most of the game the soldier is a small piece – but there is a moment that changes everything. When Soldier Jin crosses **River Chu**, the wide boundary in the middle of the board, the soldier grows: now it can step sideways too, not only forward.

"On my side of the river I am one small step," said Soldier Jin. "On theirs I move like something twice my size."

A crossed soldier deep in enemy territory becomes a real weapon – it can nudge sideways to attack, and near the enemy palace it can join the chariots and the horse in the final push. So playing well means pushing a soldier or two across the river at the right time, not leaving them all sitting quietly at home.

Say it out loud: *A soldier that crosses the river learns to step sideways – send one across.*

Your turn: The "Over the River" pages show a soldier on each side. Which one has the extra sideways step? Which one is closer to helping the attack?

A soldier feels small for a long time before it matters. Pushing one across the river is planting a seed – it pays off later, near their palace.

Chapter 3 – Guard the Palace

Marshal Shuai, the general, is the calm centre the whole game protects – and the general never leaves the little three-by-three palace. Advisor Shi stands beside the marshal, a diagonal guard who also never leaves. Palace Gong is the fortress itself.

"I do not chase the battle," said Marshal Shuai. "I keep my house in order, and I let my house keep me safe."

Playing well is not only about attacking – it is about keeping your own general safe. Strong players keep an advisor and an elephant near the palace as guards, so that when the enemy chariot comes racing down an open file, there is someone home to block the door. Strip your own defenders away too early, and your palace is an open house.

Say it out loud: *Keep a guard at home – an undefended palace loses fast.*

Your turn: The "Safe Palace" pages show two generals – one with its advisors home, one with them wandered off. Which palace is easier to attack?

Defending is quieter than attacking, and just as important. A safe general lets you attack without fear.

Chapter 4 – The Facing Generals

Sightline is the watcher of an invisible rule. In xiangqi the two generals may **never** stare at each other straight down an open file with nothing between them – that is against the rules. And clever players turn that rule into a weapon.

"Watch the empty line between the two palaces," Sightline whispered. "The general who ignores it walks into a trap."

Because the generals cannot face each other, a piece that is *pinned* in front of its own general cannot move – moving it would expose the general down the file, which is not allowed. Sightline uses this to freeze an enemy piece in place, or to force a winning move the opponent cannot answer. It is xiangqi's own special kind of pin.

Say it out loud: *The generals can never face – use the empty line to freeze a piece.*

Your turn: The "Facing Line" pages each show the file between the two generals. Which enemy piece cannot move without breaking the rule?

This rule feels strange at first. Once you see the invisible line, you start finding little traps everywhere along it.

Chapter 5 – Two Threats at Once

Knight Lu makes the leaping, sideways-hopping move that surprises everyone – and Knight Lu's favourite trick is the same one every game teaches: make **two threats in a single move**. A horse that lands on the right square can attack a chariot and a soldier at the same time. The opponent saves one; the other is yours.

Elephant Wei adds the long straight-line power, and the chariots do it best of all down their open files: one move, two targets.

Say it out loud: *Two threats at once – they can only stop one.*

The whole art is spotting the square that does two jobs. It is the same big idea in chess, in checkers, in every game with pieces: look for the move that attacks two things, and force the choice.

Your turn: The "Two at Once" pages ask you to find the horse or chariot move that threatens two enemy pieces at the same time.

A double attack feels lucky the first time. It is not luck – it is the habit of looking for the square that touches two. Keep looking.

Chapter 6 – The Endgame Edge

When most of the pieces are gone, the game does not stop being about strategy – it gets sharper. Now every soldier that crossed the river matters, every open file the chariot owns is decisive, and the general's safety is the whole story.

Chariot Che loves the endgame most of all: with the board clear, an open file is a highway straight to the enemy palace. A single chariot plus a crossed soldier can be enough to finish.

Say it out loud: *In the endgame, the crossed soldier and the open file decide it.*

Everything in this book comes together here: open the files (Chapter 1), push soldiers across (Chapter 2), keep your own general guarded (Chapter 3), and use the facing-generals line (Chapter 4) to force the finish. Playing well means thinking one move ahead the whole way – asking what the opponent will be forced to do, and what you will play then.

Your turn: The "Finish" pages are endgames with a forced win. Find the move that leaves the enemy general no safe answer.

You will not calculate every endgame perfectly, and no one does at first. Seeing one move further than last game is exactly what getting good feels like.

Keep playing at spark-and-anvil.org – the trainer runs these ideas as live positions, with the cast beside you.

Keep playing

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