

2023 WOMEN'S WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP

JULY 9, 2023 ■ ROUND 04

BY **JJ LANG** ■ ANNOTATIONS BY **WGM TATEV ABRAHAMYAN**



Ju Wenjun

Round Score

1/2 - 1/2

Match Score

2 - 2



Lei Tingjie

TATEV ABRAHAMYAN



WGM Tatev Abrahamyan is an Armenian-American chess player, teacher, and *Chess Life* columnist based in Kansas City, MO. Among her best results,

Abrahamyan has tied for first in two U.S. Women's Championships in 2005 and 2011. She is renowned for her uncompromising, attacking style of play, for which Susan Polgar awarded her a "Goddess Chess Award" for fighting play in 2008. Abrahamyan currently works as the Chess Ambassador for the ChessUp startup.

A well-played draw served as a fitting conclusion to the first third of the 2023 Women's World Chess Championship. The match is tied 2-2 with eight games remaining, and neither player is managed to land a decisive blow during the first third.

Headed into the final rest day before the halftime break, neither player appeared interested in taking excessive risks, but neither player made any major mistakes. Indeed, this was likely the most accurate game either player has played in this match. Perhaps some of the "jitters" have cleared up, and we can look forward to even sharper games in future rounds.

GM Ju Wenjun should be happy to have avoided any danger for the second straight game, and perhaps challenger GM Lei Tingjie is starting to regret a couple of her missed opportunities from the first two games.

At the same time, Lei should be happy to have neutralized Ju's queen's pawn yet again.

Given that she has appeared full of interesting ideas with the white pieces, Ju might need to come up with something more ambitious against Lei's Queen's Gambit Declined in order to have sufficient fighting chances.

The players also appear to be following different approaches to match preparation. Ju seems content repeating ultra-solid opening choices with both colors, while Lei has been "hopping around" and trying out a few different ideas.

Rather than repeat the Tarrasch Variation she played in round two, this time she equalized rather easily with the Three Knights' Variation of the Queen's Gambit Declined, albeit not the feisty Vienna. Could this be Lei's next "secret weapon" with Black? She has yet to repeat an opening yet in this match, with a creativity a bit reminiscent of GM Ding Liren's successful approach in his world championship match back in April of this year.



QUEEN'S GAMBIT DECLINED: THREE KNIGHTS' VARIATION (D37)

GM Ju Wenjun (2564)

GM Lei Tingjie (2554)

FIDE Women's Chess World Championship, Shanghai (4), 07.09.2023

Annotations by WGM Tatev Abrahamyan

1. d4 d5 2. c4 e6 3. Nf3 Nf6 4. Nc3

Normally a Catalan player, Ju decides to repeat what she played in game two.

4. ... dxc4

Lei is first to deviate. The only other time she has played this move was in 2017.

In game two, 4. ... c5 was her choice: 5. e3 Nc6 6. cxd5 exd5 7. Bb5 cxd4 8. exd4 Bd6 led to a draw in Ju - Lei, Shanghai (2), 2023.

5. e4



White plays the most challenging move for Black to face.

The tamer option is 5. e3, which Lei has faced before. Instead 5. ... c5 (or 5. ... a6, which is a clever move, waiting for White to capture on c4 to gain a tempo with ... b7-b5.) 6. Bxc4 cxd4 7. exd4 Be7 8. 0-0 0-0 9. d5 exd5 10. Nxd5 Nxd5 11. Bxd5 Bf6 12. Qb3 Nc6 13. Rd1 Qb6 14. Qxb6 axb6 15. Bg5 Bxb2 16. Rab1 Bf6 17. Bxf6 gxf6 18. Bxc6 bxc6 19. Rxb6 Rxa2 20. Rxc6 Be6 21. Rcd6 Rb8 22. Rd8+ Rxd8 23. Rxd8+ Kg7 24. h3 Ra1+ 25. Kh2 Ra2 26. Kg3 Ra3 27. Rd2 Ra2 28. Rd3 f5 was a draw in Guo - Lei, Riyadh, 2017.

5. ... b5!?

This trendy line has been tried out by many top players including Caruana, Firouzja, Nepomniachtchi and Jeffery Xiong (who played it quite consistently for some time). There are no games in the database of Ju facing this line.

Instead, 5. ... Bb4 6. Bg5 is the Vienna Variation of the Queen's Gambit Declined, with major theory and some sharp lines.

6. e5 Nd5 7. Nxb5 Nb6

Already, we see an interesting and rich position. Black's pawn structure is quite ugly with the doubled and isolated pawns, not to mention that three out of her first seven moves were done with the same knight, which ended up on b6. On the upside, Black does

get the long diagonal for the light-squared bishop and play against White's backwards d4-pawn.

8. Be2 Nc6 9. 0-0 Be7 10. Be3

The move 10. Qd2 is quite challenging for Black. The idea is to transfer the queen to g4 and attack the black king. The game that attracted me to this line for Black was Jeffery Xiong's quick victory from 2019: 10. ... Bb7 11. Rd1 Qd7 12. Qf4 g5 13. Nxc5 Bxc5 14. Qxc5 Ne7 15. d5 Nbx5 16. a4 Rg8 17. Qd2 a6 18. Nd4 0-0-0 19. f3 Ng6 20. Bxc4 c5 21. Nc2 Nh4 22. Ne1 Rxc2+ 23. Qxc2 Nxc2 24. Nxc2 Qc7 25. Bh6 Qxe5 26. Rac1 Rg8 27. Bf1 Qf6 28. Rxc5+ Kb8 and White resigned in Erdos - Xiong, Saint Louis, 2019.

10. ... 0-0 11. Nc3 Rb8 12. b3

After a four-minute think, Ju decides to offer a pawn exchange. This might feel counter-intuitive as the c4-pawn is a clear weakness in Black's camp.

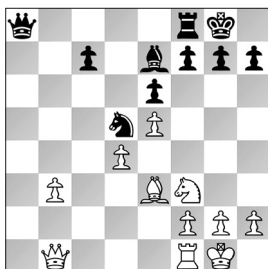
In the 2022 Candidates, Radjabov played 12. a3 against Firouzja. Now that it has been revealed that he is helping Lei, the opening choice is less surprising as he must know it quite well having faced it with White. The game went 12. ... Na5 13. Qc2 Nd5 14. Rad1 Ba6 15. Bd2 Nb3 with an unclear position that led to a draw in Radjabov - Firouzja, Madrid, 2022.

12. ... cxb3 13. axb3

The pawn trade stops any ... Nc6-b4-d3 ideas, and it also opens the a-file for the rook.

13. ... Bb7 14. Qb1 Nb4 15. Ne4

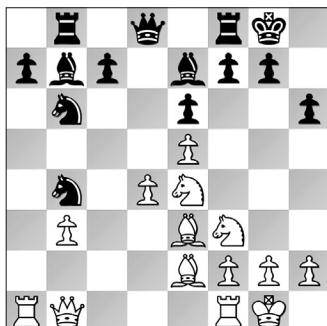
Of course, White can grab the pawn with 15. Rxa7, but Black gets quick counterplay. After 15. ... N6d5 16. Nxd5 Bxd5 17. Nd2 Ra8 18. Rxa8 Qxa8 19. Bf3 Bxf3 20. Nxf3 Nd5, White's extra pawn isn't impressive, as the knight on d5 is a beautiful blockading piece.



POSITION AFTER 20. ... Nd5

15. ... h6

This is the engine's top line and an improvement on a previous game played in this position. The idea is to stop a knight from going to g5. Once again, we see Lei's excellent preparation.



The predecessor went 15. ... a6 16. Neg5 g6.



Provoking this move created some weaknesses in Black's camp. White managed to exploit them in the following game: 17. Rc1 Bc6 18. h4 Bb5 19. Bxb5 axb5 20. h5 Qd7 21. Qe4 N4d5 22. Qh4 Bd8 23. Qh3 Bxg5 24. Nxc5 f5 25. hxc6 f4 26. Bd2 Rf5 27. Qxh7+ Qxh7 28. gxh7+ Kh8 29. Nxe6 f3 30. g4 Rf7 31. Ng5 and Black resigned in Daytman - Azarov, Cattolica, 2022.

16. Rxa7

Ju finds nothing better than to finally grab this pawn.

16. ... N6d5 17. Bd2 Nc6 18. Ra1 Ndb4 19. Be3 Nd5

Lei reached this position without spending any time. Her first think of the game was at this moment, where she spent three minutes.

20. Bc1 Ra8

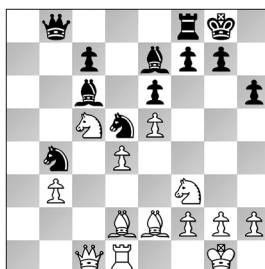
Black utilizes the open a-file. She has long-term compensation for the pawn and does not need to feel the pressure or trying to win it back.

21. Rd1 Rxa1 22. Qxa1 Ncb4

Black doesn't have to be afraid of exchanging even more pieces with 22. ... Qa8; the blockade on d5 is very strong and it is hard to see how White will ever make anything of her extra pawn.

23. Nc5 Bc6 24. Bd2 Qb8 25. Qa5

The top move that comes to my mind when I look at this position is 25. Qc1!?



POSITION AFTER 25. Qc1!?

With most of Black's pieces on the queen-side, it makes sense to switch gears and try to go after the king. Black has a number of possible replies.

- a) Things are interesting after 25. ... Na2, which the most logical way of disturbing White. 26. Qc4 Qb6 27. Ra1 Now Black has to be precise.
- a1) The best is 27. ... Ndb4 which is actually



an only move! I am not sure how natural it is for Black to play with a knight stuck on a2, but at the same time it is hard to suggest improvements for White.

- a2) Instead, 27. ... Nab4 28. Nxe6 is an amazing tactical shot for White! After 28. ... fxe6 29. Bxb4, there is no good way to recapture without losing material! For instance, 29. ... Bxb4 (alternatives: 29. ... Nxb4 30. Qxe6+ Rf7 31. Bc4 winning; or 29. ... Qxb4 30. Qxc6 winning) 30. Ra6 is winning.
- a3) Alternatively, 27. ... Ra8 runs into 28. Na4 Bxa4 29. bxa4 when the trade clearly favors White as she now has a passed pawn.
- b) Another human approach, 25. ... Kh7, attempts to prevent Bd2-h6. Unfortunately, White meets it with 26. h3! with the idea of Nf3-h2-g4. I can see this position getting annoying for Black if the knight manages to get to g4.
- c) The engine cold-bloodedly ignores the threat of the Bd2-h6 sacrifice and suggests 25. ... Qb6 26. Bxh6 Na2! (not 26. ... gxh6? 27. Qxh6 followed by Nc5-e4-g5 and checkmate) 27. Qd2 Nac3 28. Re1 Nxe2+ 29. Rxe2 Rb8. Only an engine can suggest such moves and evaluate the position as equal. The idea is to offer a queen trade, followed by capturing the c5-knight and the b3-pawn.

25. ... Rd8 26. Rc1 Qb6

Lei correctly offers a queen exchange.

27. Qxb6

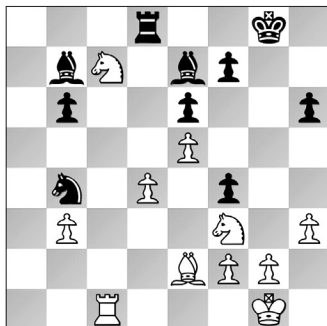
Instead, 27. Qa1 only invites the Black rook into the game. Now, 27. ... Ra8 28. Qb2 Ra2 29. Qb1 Qa7 is good for Black.

27. ... cxb6 28. Na6

PHOTO: BONHAGE / FIDE

After 28. Ne4 Nf4 29. Bxf4 Bxe4, there is no way for White to make progress as Black maintains her grip.

28. ... Bb7 29. Nc7 g5 30. h3 Nf4 31. Bxf4 gxf4



Lei continues playing the computer's top suggestion. With the knight on c7, the f4-pawn cannot be targeted.

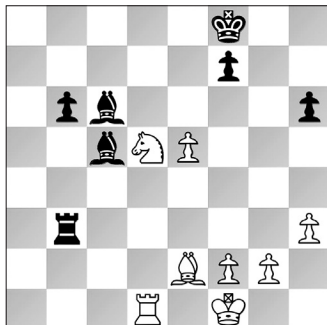
32. Nb5 Bc6 33. Kf1 Kf8 34. Rd1 Ra8 35. Nc3 Na2

Now Black is the one looking for activity.

36. Nxa2 Rxa2 37. Ne1 Rb2 38. Nd3 Rxb3 39. Nxf4

Some major changes have happened in the structure, but the bishop pair and the passed b-pawn give Black plenty of compensation.

39. ... Ba3 40. d5 exd5 41. Nxd5 Bc5



The correct decision to keep the bishop pair.

Inaccurate is 41. ... Bxd5, even though Black can immediately enter an opposite-colored bishop endgame. After 42. Rxd5 Ke7 43. f4, I think this comes with some risk as the b-pawn won't move very fast, but if White manages to get the pawn to f6, Black's f7-pawn will fall shortly.

42. Nf6 Rb2

Due to the f2-weakness, White can't really make progress.

43. f4 Rb4 44. g3 Rb3 45. Nd7+ Bxd7 46. Rxd7 Rxd7

With an equal number of pawns, the opposite-colored bishop endgame isn't scary.

47. Bg4 Re3 48. Kg2 Be7 49. Rb7 f6

Lei chooses the most concrete continuation.

50. e6 h5 51. Bf5 h4 52. Bg4

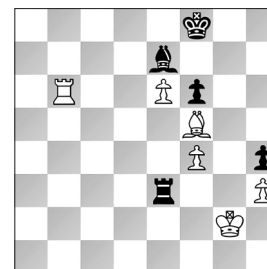
If White instead plays 52. Rxb6, White will lose the pawn back immediately.

(see diagram top of next column)

Now, Black can play 52. ... Rg3+ 53. Kh2 Rf3 54. Rb8+ Kg7 55. Re8 Bb4 56. e7 Re3 with a drawn position.

52. ... Rg3+ 53. Kf2 Bc5+ 54. Kf1 Be7 55. Ke2

Taking the pawn with 55. Rxb6 f5 56. Bxf5



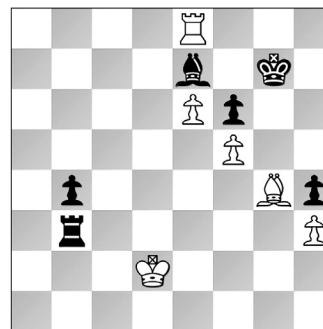
POSITION AFTER 52. Rxb6

Rf3+ 57. Ke2 Rxf4 goes nowhere, as Black has a fortress.

55. ... Rb3 56. f5 b5 57. Kd2 b4 58. Rb8+ Kg7 59. Re8 Bd6 60. Rd8

Pushing with 60. e7 Bf4+ 61. Kc2 Re3 allows Black to win the pawn with ... Bf4-d6.

60. ... Be7 61. Re8 Bd6 62. Rd8 Be7 63. Re8



Draw agreed. ♠



Match Recap

2023 WOMEN'S WORLD CHESS CHAMPIONSHIP

	White	Result	Moves	ECO	Summary
1	Lei - Ju	½-½	50	C67	White's gambit in the Berlin gives Lei chances, Ju holds on.
2	Ju - Lei	½-½	40	B32	Black gains edge out of the opening, Ju holds on once again.
3	Lei - Ju	½-½	49	C65	Ju again surprised in opening, holds her own and pushes for first time.
4	Ju - Lei	½-½	63	D37	Another Lei opening surprise leads to steady equality.