

2023 WOMEN'S WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP

JULY 5, 2023 ■ ROUND 01

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



Lei Tingjie

Round Score

$\frac{1}{2} - \frac{1}{2}$

Match Score

$\frac{1}{2} - \frac{1}{2}$



Ju Wenjun



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.

Even those who (unfairly) claim all Berlin Defenses are boring must at least admit that each Berlin Defense is boring in its own unique way.

The first game of the 2023 Women's World Championship might have been a Berlin draw, but it still featured a surprise on the first move, a gambit of a central pawn, and a defending champion on the ropes in the middlegame. If this is what counts as a "boring" game between defending champion GM Ju Wenjun and challenger GM Lei Tingjie, then we're in for quite a match.

Playing with the white pieces, Tingjie deviated from her queen's pawn opening that served her well throughout the Candidates cycle, and Ju was ready with a Ruy Lopez defense. Tingjie's choice to play into the main line of the Berlin at first suggested an unwillingness to take risks in the first game.

But, by move 13, she was in the sideline of a sideline of a gambit that had only been

played once over the board before (successfully, I might add, last December by GM Jordan van Foreest over GM Alireza Firouzja). This appeared to be the move that took Ju out of her prep, but Lei continued to blitz out another half-dozen moves on her way to a comfortable position with full compensation for the sacrificed pawn.

At this point, Ju elected to return the pawn to simplify the position, but White was clearly better at this point with the bishop pair and equal material. A key moment occurred after Black's 28th move, where the defending champion miscalculated her position. Her decision to open the kingside was understandable, but also put her in serious danger of losing the resulting endgame.

Instead, a few very subtle inaccuracies from Lei allowed Black to come closer to equalizing the position, and eventually Lei's decision to swap down to a pure rook endgame cemented the game as a draw.

PHOTOS: BONHAGE / FIDE (WWWCC); OOTES / SLCC (TATEV)



RUY LOPEZ, BERLIN DEFENSE (C67)

GM Lei Tingjie (2554)

GM Ju Wenjun (2564)

2023 FIDE Women's World Chess Championship, Shanghai (1), 07.05.2023

Annotations by WGM Tatev Abrahamyan

1. e4

While Lei Tingjie plays both 1. e4 and 1. d4, she had consistently chosen to start with 1. d4 throughout the entire Candidates cycle.

1. ... e5

Ju Wenjun is also a Sicilian player, but most likely wanted to be solid in the first game of the match. If Lei sticks to 1. e4, it will be interesting to see whether Ju sticks to 1. ... e5.

2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bb5 Nf6

Ju has been quite consistent in her choice of the Berlin Defense in her most recent games.

4. 0-0 Nxe4 5. Re1

White avoids the Berlin endgame, which begins with 5. d4 Nd6 6. Bxc6 dxc6 7. dxe5 Nf5 8. Qxd8+ Kxd8 and is seen quite often in top events.

5. ... Nd6

Surprisingly, Lei has only one game in the database in this line. She played 6. a4 against her countrywoman GM Tan Zhongyi in 2019, and the game eventually ended in a draw (on move 109!).

6. Nxe5 Be7 7. Bf1 Nxe5 8. Rxe5 0-0 9. d4 Bf6 10. Re1 Re8

So far, the players are following standard theory for this line.

11. Nc3!?



This enterprising pawn sacrifice has been tried by Caruana, Vachier-Lagrave and, most recently, twice by GM Jordan Van Foreest.

11. ... Rxe1

Ju took her first think of the game, and after five minutes, decided to grab the pawn.

12. Qxe1 Bxd4 13. Bd3

The idea behind this pawn sacrifice is to make development difficult for Black and pose some practical issues to solve. To finish her queenside development, Black must either move the knight and d-pawn or try to fianchetto the bishop. Both of those moves run into trouble, which means that Black must secure the kingside first.

Caruana and MVL both went with 13. Bf4 here. Now, Lei follows "JVF."

13. ... Bxc3

After another six-minute think, Ju decides to give up the bishop pair to finish her development.

Instantly losing is 13. ... Ne8?!, which will run into 14. Qe4 winning.



POSITION AFTER 13. ... b6

Also losing, but less straightforwardly, is 13. ... b6 14. Nb5! which is a nice idea. White is removing the defender, as the d6-knight is covering the e4-square. After 14. ... Nxb5 15. Qe4 Bf6, then 16. Qxa8 is winning.

14. Qxc3 Ne8 15. b3 d5

A novelty. Based on the time management of the players, it is safe to assume that Ju was not familiar with this line and had to find her moves over the board, while Lei was blitzing out her preparation.

In the only previous game in this position, 15. ... d6 had been tried. The Black king found himself under attack in that game, but

he is no better off here. Play continued 16. Bb2 Be6 17. Qb4 Bd5 18. Qf4 Nf6 19. Re1 Be6 20. Re3 Kf8 21. c4 Nh5 22. Qf3 Nf6 23. Qxb7 Ng4 24. Rg3 Rb8 25. Qe4 Qg5 26. Qxh7 Ke7 27. Qxg7 Qd2 28. Rf3 Qe1+ 29. Bf1 Nxe2 30. Kxh2 Qxf1 31. c5 Qd1 32. c6 in Van Foreest – Firouzja, Zagreb, 2022.

16. Bf4 Be6 17. Re1 Qd7 18. a4 Nd6 19. Re3

White takes her first think in the game, spending over 10 minutes on this move. The challenger has put all her pieces on their optimal squares and is now looking to cause some problems for Black on the kingside.

19. ... Ne4



After a long 20-minute think, Ju tries to



clarify the matter with this committal move.

I am not sure how Lei would have reacted to a logical move such as 19. ... Nf5. Perhaps she would have repeated with 20. Re1 Nd6 and then choose another move, such as 21. h4 with lingering pressure.

A very different try is 20. Rh3!?. Now both 21. Qc7 and 21. g4 are threats.

White could also try 20. Bxf5 Bxf5 21. Qe1 but would not get far after 21. ... Be6.

20. Qxc7 Qxc7 21. Bxc7 Nc5

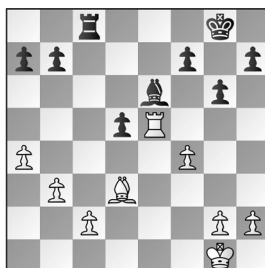
Black would be happy to trade the knight for the d3-bishop and enter an opposite-colored bishop endgame.

22. Bf1

Naturally, White wants to hang on to the bishop pair.

22. ... Rc8 23. Be5 Nd7 24. Bd3 Nc5

Black's main alternative was 24. ... Nxe5. Now, after 25. Rxe5 g6 26. f4, we reach an important position.



POSITION AFTER 26. F4

Although the engine evaluates this position as equal, practically speaking this is an unpleasant endgame for Black due to the isolated pawn and the worse minor piece. White will eventually get the king to d4 and will try to create more weaknesses with the f4-f5 pawn push.

25. Be2 Nd7 26. Bc3

White naturally avoids a repetition, as the bishop pair will give her fighting chances in the endgame.

26. ... a6

Getting rid of the weak pawn is worth the consideration: 26. ... d4 27. Bxd4 Rxc2 and we reach a crossroads.

a) The logical 28. h4 b6 looks like a solid set up for Black, as the knight will head to the d5-square. After 29. b4 Nf6 30. a5 Nd5 31. axb6 axb6 32. Ra3 f6, the b-pawns will likely be traded off soon, and the shrinking board will help Black's chances.

b) 28. Bxa7



POSITION AFTER 28. Bxa7

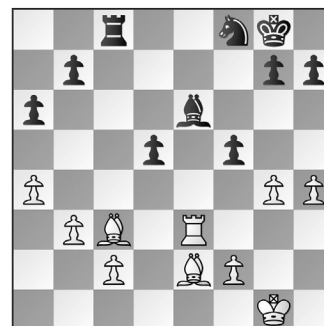
A strong engine finds a brilliant idea here for Black: 28. ... Rc1+ 29. Bf1 b6! trapping the bishop! White's pieces are completely paralyzed 30. f4 Kf8 with the threat of ... Rc1-c7! (the immediate 30. ... Rc7 runs into 31. f5! Bxf5 32. Re8+ Nf8 33. Bxb6 winning) 31. a5 when White already has to look for ways to liberate the trapped piece. Now, 31. ... bxa5 32. Kf2 Nf6 is equal, and Ju would have been quite happy with this outcome as the trade of the a- and b- pawns is coming.

27. h4 Nf8

Again, 27. ... d4 is possible. Now, 28. Bxd4 Rxc2 29. a5 and, compared to the previous position where Black's pawn structure featured pawns on a7 and b6, now White has a grip on the pawn structure on the queenside.

If White manages to trade rooks, Black's queenside might just fall. Black must tread carefully here. For example: 29. ... Rc1+ 30. Kh2 Rb1 31. Bf3 Rxb3 32. Rxb3 Bxb3 33. Bxb7 Bc4 34. Kg3 is promising, as now the advantage of the bishop pair becomes clear as the dark-squared bishop dominates the knight and slows down Black's king-march to the queenside by attacking the g7-pawn.

28. g4 f5?



This is an understandable decision by Black, who is looking for some activity and doesn't want to get steamrolled by White's pawns on the kingside.

29. gxf5?

White misses a huge opportunity with 29. Bb4!, taking advantage of the fact that the bishop on e6 is now loose. As an added bonus, White's own bishop is now on a more secure square. It turns out that the threat of Bb4xf8 is extremely difficult to deal with.

- a) The logical 29. ... Kf7 30. gxf5 Bxf5 31. Re7+ Kf6 runs into a surprising idea.
- a1) 32. c4!



POSITION AFTER 32. c4!

This is more accurate than immediately grabbing the pawn as it stops the black rook from entering on the second rank. If Black tries 32. ... dxc4 (or 32. ... d4 33. Rxb7 Re8 34. Bf3 when White is winning by denying the rook any entry squares on the e-file) 33. Bxc4, then the bishop pair and the active rook give White a huge advantage. She will soon win a pawn on the queenside.

a2) Also promising is 32. Rxb7 Rxc2 33. Bxa6, when White has good chances here, but Black's passed d-pawn is quite advanced and White's king is not safe.

b) Instead of moving the king, 29. ... f4 is a critical move that needs to be calculated accurately. 30. Re5 Kf7 is dangerous, as it is played with the threat of ... Nf8-d7, trapping the rook. But White has 31. Bxf8! Rxf8 32. g5, when Black is really tied down here and doesn't have a way of getting the king to the d6-square. Her most natural moves fail tactically, which means that she has no choice but to suffer here. It is already difficult to suggest good moves.

b1) If Black tries the patient 32. ... Rd8, then after 33. a5 White is not in a hurry and can fix the pawn structure on the queenside. 33. ... Rd6 is a way that Black can try waiting, but after 34. Kg2 then the most natural moves for White lead to picking up one of Black's pawns: 34. ... Rd8 35. Kf3 and White is much better.

b2) But other apparent tries lose horribly: 32. ... Rc8?? 33. Rxe6 Kxe6 34. Bg4+ wins.

b3) No better is 32. ... Ke7?? 33. Bg4 with a winning attack.

29. ... Bxf5 30. Bf3 Be4

Black is counting on tactics to make this work, as she is saddling herself with a very weak e-pawn.

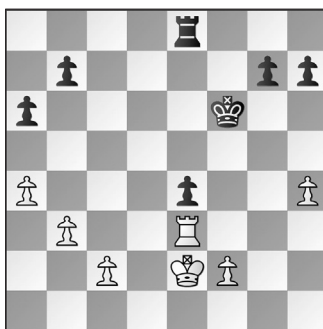
31. Bxe4 dxe4 32. Bb4 Re8

An alternative was 32. ... Rxc2, but this is a difficult decision for Black to make. Now, 33. Rxe4 Rc8 is forced, as there is no other way to save the knight from the ... Rc8-e8 threat. After 34. h5, even though the engine evaluates this position as equal, practically it is difficult to enter into a passive endgame.

33. Bxf8

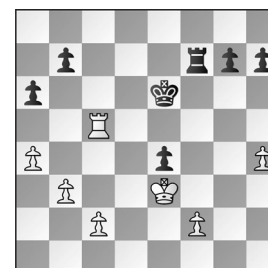
Lei decides to look for chances in the rook endgame. White can win a pawn by force here with 33. f3 Ng6 34. Be1 Ne5 35. fxe4 Rc8 36. c4 Rd8, but Black maintains a strong blockade with the knight and should be able to hold this endgame.

33. ... Kxf8 34. Kf1 Kf7 35. Ke2 Kf6



36. Rg3

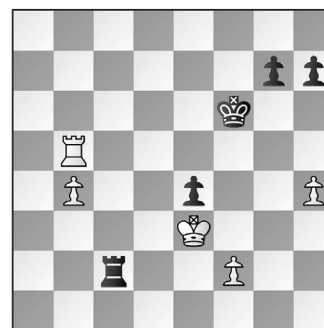
An interesting alternative was 36. Rc3, with the idea of placing the king on e3. If play continued 36. ... Re7 37. Rc5 Ke6 38. Ke3 Rf7, we reach a position that looks close to winning.



POSITION AFTER 38. ... Rf7

Now that White's king is the piece that wants to capture on e4, the black rook attacks the pawn that the king is defending. But after 39. Rc4 Rf3+ 40. Ke2 Ke5 41. Rc7 b5!, Black has a way to hold the draw here with 42. axb5 axb5 43. Rxd5 Rc3 44. Kd2 Rf3.

36. ... b5 37. axb5 axb5 38. Rg5 Rc8 39. Kd2 Rd8+ 40. Ke3 Rc8 41. Rxb5 Rxc2 42. b4



After the simplifications, Black now makes a draw without any trouble.

42. ... Rc3+ 43. Kxe4 Rc4+ 44. Kf3 Rxh4 45. Rb6+ Kg5 46. Rb7 g6 47. b5 Rb4 48. Rxh7 Rxb5 49. Kg3 Rb3+ 50. f3 Kf6 draw agreed. ♠

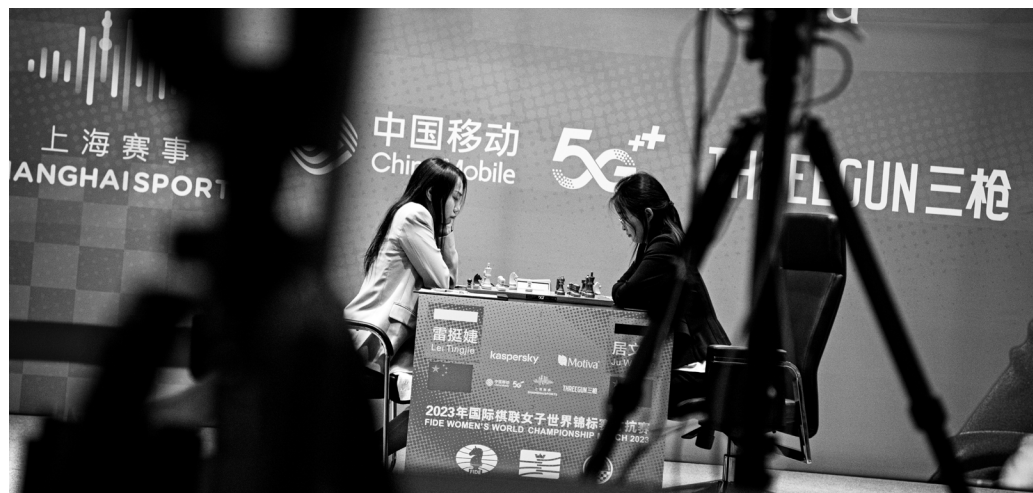


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