



*A Chess Story of
Drive and
Determination*

Photo Credit: Austin Fuller

AN INTERVIEW WITH WFM SOPHIE MORRIS-SUZUKI

By WIM Ellen Wang & IM Justin Wang

1. How did you start to play chess, and what attracted you to it initially?

I started to play chess in 2014, and there were just a lot of people who played chess. I always say I kind of was pressured into the game. There were a lot of friends who were playing chess casually at the time, during breaks and stuff in school, and my brother was picking up chess, so I also saw a lot of chess in the house, and eventually I wanted to join in. This might be surprising, but at the time, I was really convinced of the whole stereotype of “chess being for nerds,” so I was like, “I’m not a nerd, I’m not going to join in.” I was very hesitant to join in because of that stereotype, but then I found out I was wrong on both accounts. Because 1) I am a huge nerd, so I was wrong there, and 2) well, you know, chess is for anyone. Yeah, so that’s kind of how I got started. I was pressured to learn, and then once I got started, once I was motivated by the environment, I really picked it up very quickly. I started playing in tournaments a few months later, and I made progress pretty quickly.

2. Since you learned chess relatively late compared to other top players, what was the key factor that helped you progress so quickly?

I wouldn’t know what to say other than just sheer will, drive, and determination, because at that point I had a lot of time. I didn’t start chess super young like a lot of my peers, but I still had a lot of time, because I was in middle school, and I didn’t really have much else to do, so I dedicated a lot of my time to watching videos about chess, reading books, doing tactics and playing online, and of course, playing in tournaments, and I think that was just how I made progress. I really had it in me to learn a lot of stuff. Now, when I look back, it’s hard to even imagine, but I think my brain was kind of in a state where I really just wanted to learn something and stick with it and get really good at it. I also just played a lot, that was the other thing.

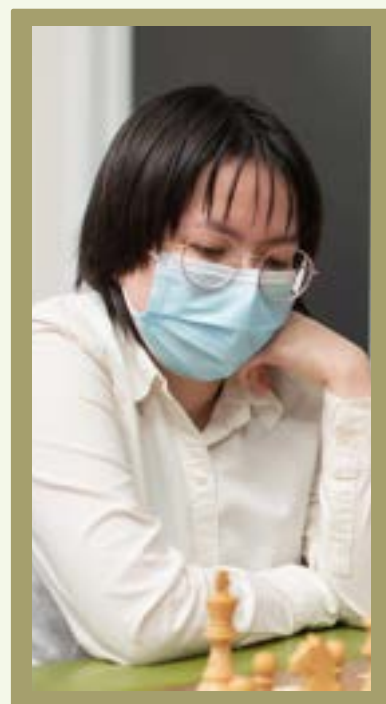


Photo Credit: Austin Fuller

3. After playing competitively for so many years, what is your favorite part of chess now, and in your opinion, what aspects of chess are the most enjoyable?

That's a really hard thing for me to articulate, because I never know why, I don't really know what draws me into chess so much. I know that there is something there, because I keep finding myself wanting to play in more and more tournaments, even though I've already played in many tournaments before, and had many experiences, I keep wanting to play more, and I'm not sure why. I have considered quitting chess in the past, a few years ago, when I was super down on myself, but I can't. I just can't. I don't know, there's still something in there that motivates me to continue playing. If I were to try to answer, I might say the tournament experience. I can't really specify more than the tournament experience as a whole, because there's just so much that motivates me still. I always think of it as a good opportunity to get away from home for a bit, which is always fun, to see some friends, there's always some people I know at chess tournaments, and to continue to improve, because if I'm already good at something, relatively speaking, it just makes sense for me to get as good as I can. I don't know for sure, but I feel like I can still improve. I feel like I have not reached my plateau, and I think I have a lot of improving I can do still. And of course, winning.

4. What is your biggest strength as a chess player? What do you think makes you unique?

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5. Do you think that one of your strengths is your fighting spirit?

That's a good point. Yeah, I guess you might be onto something. I used to always play for a win, even when it's unwise to. But, I have been trying to tone that down a little bit, recently. I think back when I used to always go for a win no matter what, I was very inconsistent and I had a lot of disastrous tournaments. And recently, I haven't as much, because I'm trying to consciously recognize that sometimes, I should just not play for a win, and settle for a draw, and conserve my energy. It's less stressful playing that way sometimes too. But I don't want to make that a cornerstone of my chess personality, I just want to be able to utilize the strategy of not always playing for a win, hopefully in rare circumstances, but I think that is something that is helping me not tilt as much as I used to in some tournaments. I also don't like to resign. I am a notably stubborn player. I have a lot of unpopular opinions about resigning and not resigning, mainly being that I don't actually care if you do or don't, I think that's a personal choice. If you want to just make moves, that should be fine. I think when both players begin a chess game, they agree to make all the moves on the board, or if one side wins by checkmate, or on time, or whatever. I think as long as you are not stalling, that's where I would draw the line, but I think not resigning in itself is perfectly legitimate, and I actually know of at least one player who never resigns, as a philosophy. Always plays until checkmate. I really admire that, I don't have the guts to do that myself, always, but I really admire that attitude, and I know that a lot of games have been saved as a result of that.

6. You have played in the US Girls Championships several times, and very recently had an incredible performance. Do you have any specific preparation methods, and how do you approach playing the game against strong opponents?



Ok, so I think this is where my work ethic comes in handy, because I admit I have gotten lazier over the years, but when it comes to tournaments like this, that's not happening. I knew my opponents well in advance, so I had a whole file and I would just rigorously go over everybody's openings. Everyone was searchable, so I would just make detailed opening files for each player against both colors, since colors aren't known until the night before. That really came in handy. I think there were maybe 2 times during the tournament where I chickened out of my original lines, and revamped my original files, and prepared entirely different lines than what was there. I think at least 1 out of 2 times, what I ended up playing in the game was much better than what was originally in my file, so I will do as much as possible to prepare, when I have enough time and information. I also played in various local tournaments, to get some practice, and I also tried to play some training games with people online, and I think all of those were pretty helpful to get back into the swing of things, because I haven't actually been playing chess for almost a year. So I think I really needed those practices, to get used to playing chess again. Part of the benefit of making opening lines in advance is that it saves time and energy during the tournament. One of the things I wanted to be able to do during the tournament was relax and just have fun, so not having to come up with entirely new preparation the night before the round definitely allowed me to do that. But I still spent like a good 3-5 hours before every game reviewing my lines.

7. During a game or a tournament, how do you stay in the moment without getting ahead of yourself and thinking about the result? You had a really long winning streak, so how did you maintain that without faltering?

I wish I knew how to stay in the moment. I am probably one of the worst players when it comes to focusing and not getting distracted. I really don't know how to stay focused on the game, it's not really a skill I've learned. I'm trying to work on that, I'm trying to get a coach right now, and hopefully that will help. I have long known that that is something I need to improve on. Just not getting too hyped up or too emotional in general, I know that's something I just haven't really figured out. I don't know, I think I'm really bad at handling pressure because of that. Because I just don't have it in me to focus on the game in the moment enough, and I always find myself drifting off into thinking about what will happen if I get this or that result. If I could slap myself in the face 10 times to make it stop, I would, but that doesn't work, unfortunately.

8. Which part of the game, in terms of the opening, middlegame, or endgame, is your favorite? And how would you suggest studying each?

It depends on which part of the game I have the best position in. I just want to have a good position, that's really all that matters. At the moment, I don't really study anything besides openings. I kind of go off of intuition and/or major calculation sessions when it comes to the other two. Because I guess there is probably some way to methodically study middlegames and endgames, but it doesn't seem as straightforward as studying openings. There are so many ways for people to study the opening, and I think that's probably true for most players, because you kind of already know what you're going to get in the opening. I guess I should study middlegames and endgames. I used to, but nowadays I mostly just study openings. I don't even study openings that much outside of tournaments anyway. Before, I read a lot of books and watched videos on middlegames and endgames. I watched a lot of lectures on things, I watched live commentary. I actually still do. Maybe that's my way

of studying middlegames and endgames, is through osmosis. Just kind of watching people play chess. That's something I enjoy. When I first got started, I used to watch a lot of ChessNetwork, lectures by the Saint Louis Chess Club, especially by Ben Finegold, those are some of my favorites, and I used to watch live commentary on various tournaments, like the 2015 Sinquefeld Cup and the 2015 US junior championship. I used to even just watch people play bullet, and that was kind of inspiring, but that wasn't as instructive. Nowadays, I watch and recommend Rapid Chess. That channel does do commentary, but I mainly watch that channel for the games, because there are a lot of games on the channel, and the level varies from top grandmasters to people around my rating. I actually much prefer watching games featuring people around my rating, or maybe slightly higher rated, like IM and GM norm tournaments, as opposed to top GM games, because I find it much more educational to watch games of the types of people I'm more likely to get paired against at tournaments, so I have a better sense of what to expect. I've always found that to be a very useful thing.

9. Which tournament do you enjoy playing the most?

The obvious/primitive answer is that I enjoy the ones I win, but it's not that simple. Mostly the tournaments I win are small, local tournaments, and I wouldn't say I enjoy those the most. I think the ones I really enjoy are the tournaments where I get to travel, and the ones that have particularly nice locations. Chess tournaments take up a certain place in my mind, in terms of the experience, not just the chess. The location, the environment, the food. I think some of my favorite tournaments have been a lot of the tournaments that take place in places that I found to be really nice, like the K-12 nationals in Orlando, FL, where there was a huge resort that was really pretty, and it wasn't overly cold. I also really enjoy the tournaments in St. Louis. I actually just played in the US open, which was a great experience. My performance was pretty average, but the location gave me throwbacks to the K-12 nationals in Nashville, where the hotel was something else. The first time I got to the hotel, it looked like a forest. I was like, "Where are we?" I want to go back there someday, maybe as a coach to an elementary, middle, or high school team. Even if I'm not playing, it'll be worth it.

10. From being a scholastic player to now a more mature player, what are the biggest changes that you have made to your game?

I think I had a really set image for myself when I first started because of other influences like Judit Polgar. I had her entire trilogy, and I would read through the whole thing very often, and I would take notes. I had all kinds of funny notes in there, it was interesting. I took so much inspiration from her games, and I really wanted to translate that to my own games. I had this set image of myself as a super aggressive player. I played a lot of more theoretically heavy lines than people at my level, and I was always trying to sacrifice things and checkmate people. That was just what I did. It definitely came from thinking of myself in that image. Part of that is what I aspired to be, I just wanted to be that glorious player who won the brilliancy prize every time. But then I realized that wasn't always working, especially as black. I played a lot of openings as black that Judit Polgar played that were considered to be more on the aggressive side, but didn't work for me. I had to experiment a bit and change my openings, including playing not particularly aggressive ones. I guess having a defined style propelled me through the beginning stages, but it didn't last. I needed to learn how to become a more well rounded player. Where that all fits today, I don't know. I guess to some extent I don't really know what I am anymore as a chess player, but that's another story.

11. Can you talk about chess as a game, in terms of the aspects of technical vs. psychological, tactical vs. positional, and how much do you think these factors contribute to the final result of the game?

The infamous dichotomies of chess. The first one, I haven't heard as much. I guess, because people don't really talk about that. But I think in general people value the technical side more; there's a lot more written about it, rather than getting into the psychological stuff. Perhaps because the psychological stuff is harder to talk about. I guess this is where I would say it depends on the player because I think I am one of those players that need to work on psychological aspects much more than other players. I guess that's kind of made things a little harder in terms of

searching for a coach who will really get to the root cause of why I'm struggling and why I'm stuck and why I'm not improving. I actually have a coach now, sort of, and so far, I think it's been going well. I'm looking forward to our future lessons, because so far, I'm having a pretty good experience. I think I decided at some point that I need outside help to get it figured out because I can only improve my psychology so much by venting to my friends on social media or whatever. With the other aspect of tactical vs. positional, I think the main thing I find interesting about that dichotomy is that there are so many different ways to word it and they kind of mean the same thing, but if you're really a stickler for language, they kind of don't. There's tactical vs. positional, aggressive vs. solid, attacking vs. strategic. To some extent, I'm thinking to myself that it's not always a dichotomy depending on how you word it. Tactical vs. strategic is the classic dichotomy you'll see in a lot of other games, not just chess. That's the most common one I hear when I'm reading about games in general. I think the other words are very specific to chess. Positional is one of the words I never hear outside of chess; it's so specific. I would say there's tactical vs. strategic, dynamic vs. static, quiet/solid vs. aggressive, those are the dichotomies. But those words all kind of end up meaning the same. I guess to go back on topic, I think referencing those dichotomies is pretty common for people who are trying to understand themselves as players. It's definitely reductive, but sometimes those reductive frameworks can be helpful to simplify things and help people understand themselves in simple terms and their strengths and possible points of improvement.

I guess for a long time because I don't really know who I am as a player, I probably annoyed a lot of my former coaches by asking "what is my playing style?" or "what am I?" I kind of just learned to not really think of things in those terms, but I think everyone does to some extent. I kind of like to joke about it, but I think there is some value to it, and I still kind of wonder if I fit anywhere on that spectrum.



Photo Credit: Crystal Fuller

12. Do you have a favorite chess player, one that you look up to or inspired you to play chess the most?

My #1 chess player is Jennifer Shahade. Legitimately, when I'm just not in a good chess mood, when I feel like I'm losing hope when it comes to chess, I remind myself that Jennifer Shahde exists, and it brings me hope. I hope that if she reads this, she doesn't think that's weird or anything, but I really admire her. I actually know her personally, I've talked to her, which has always been great, but besides her playing style which I think is really fearless and aggressive, I also really admire her activism and her commitment to making the chess environment more egalitarian, especially when it comes to minorities, I guess women and girls in chess being the most notable, but just everything in general. I really admire chess players who give a lot of energy to social issues, because they need more attention and there are just not enough people who are doing that. And my second favorite chess player is Judit Polgar, who I've already talked about a bit, but I've really enjoyed her trilogy and studying her games, and I would say even years later she still inspires me.

13. Do you have a specific goal that you are aiming for in your chess career?

I guess if you had asked me this a few months before, I probably would have said I'm just trying to get as good as I can, but now I have a better sense, and one of my goals is to become at least an FM. So that's always in the back of my mind. But I think for me, what's more important for me than rating, is winning tournaments. I really just want to win a tournament, because I haven't in a very long time, and that's something that I want to experience. Not just any tournaments, big name tournaments. I'm not talking about local tournaments. That's not really what matters to me, even though it's always great. I really want to win some sort of national level tournament, or international level tournament. That's really what I want. It would also be cool to be able to qualify for certain international tournaments, like the Olympiad.

14. From your own experience, do you think there's any difference between male and female chess players, and if so, what could be the reason?



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I don't think so, honestly, I can't really think of anything, at least in my own experience. Of course, there's the huge difference in the number of men and boys who are playing than any other gender, and there's a lot of work to be done regarding closing that gap. And I guess to some extent, that does push gender minorities out, and the environment that gap creates is a huge factor.

I think that partly explains why there is much more gender diversity among really young players, and when we get into the teenage years, that's when the gap really begins to display itself. It is definitely very true that the environment really does a lot, and the male dominated environment really does a lot in pushing gender minorities out of chess, which is sad. There are things that can be done about that. Gender-specific tournaments are a good initiative. I kind of have mixed opinions on gender-specific tournaments on the top level, like national or world championships, but just casual or local low-stakes events can be so helpful in helping gender minorities find a sense of community. I think those are pretty good initiatives. And other than that, I think most tournaments people end up playing in are going to be male dominated, and so I think a lot of men need to be more cognizant of their behaviors and they need to take responsibility. There are many who are already doing that, but there are also many who aren't, and have strange and antiquated views on women in chess. I at least hope that all of these people are kicked out from positions of authority, because there are too many problems with those people who have really high positions of authority, even FIDE officials. There have been cases of some who do not have the best views on gender in relation to chess.

15 Have you ever considered becoming a full time chess player? What role will chess play in your future life?

As much as I can't envision myself ever quitting chess, and I really hope I don't, as chess tournaments are one of the only things that keep me going, I don't see myself becoming a professional chess player. That sounds just as hard as quitting chess. I definitely don't have a completely positive relationship with chess. I already put so much pressure on myself to have good results at tournaments, and if I was a full time chess player, that would just increase tenfold and I am not ready for that, since I would need to have good results to make money. No part of me wants to take on that challenge. So I definitely am looking for some other way to sustain myself.

16. How do you balance chess playing and schoolwork/other things?

I don't think I did a very good job of balancing schoolwork and chess in high school, or now, in college. I think in high school, I spent too much time on chess, and I kind of regret it. I actually wish I had focused more on schoolwork, because I think there was a lot to be learned from a lot of my classes, but I'm trying to catch up now that I'm in college. Now I'm focusing more on school. I guess I've pretty much been focusing exclusively on school during the semester, but I don't know, in order for me to focus on school, I have to stop playing online chess, which I haven't been doing so great at. But generally, school is my priority now, and I haven't played any tournaments during the school year, which was very difficult, because there was always the compulsion to play in tournaments. But also part of the problem is that my school doesn't have any chess community. During the summer, I'm trying to take advantage of the opportunity to play as much as I can. I'm glad I'm focusing on school now, though, and I'm undoing my regrets from high school, I guess I could say. I'm just trying to figure out how to balance things to the best of my ability.

17. What do you think are the differences between studying chess and other things?

It's kind of hard to compare, because I don't study chess a lot anymore. I'll do puzzles and play online once in a while to refresh my chess muscles, but I don't really do that much active chess studying anymore. I think studying other subjects is a little different, because a lot of the time, if you're taking classes for school, there are certain things you have to do, like homework. Chess isn't exactly the same, because you can't really study things that methodically, and know exactly what you're going to get. Whereas, with school, you can do a pretty good job of predicting what questions will be on the test. So I guess when it comes to preparing for chess rather than school, I do it in the same way, but the outcomes won't be the same because chess is a lot less predictable, because your opponents won't give you any hints as to what you're going to get in advance. I guess I've kind of found it helpful to approach both in a similar sort of fashion. I kind of learn a lot of opening lines that way. I'm not the best at committing things to memory long term, but if I accumulate enough information, I can kind of remember certain things.

18. What are some important skills that you have developed from chess?

There is maybe one area in particular where I think chess actually helped in regard to life skills. Which is that I think because of my experience playing chess, I am a lot better at discerning time intervals, and that takes hold in a few different ways. For example, I'm actually pretty good at predicting what time it is, sometimes it's even subconscious. I think a lot of that comes from experience playing timed chess games, and having to use a clock. And I think in terms of how that helps me specifically in life, it's definitely helped me be on time to things, because I think if you have a good sense of how long it'll take you to do things, or how long it's been since you last checked the time, that definitely help with scheduling and getting to things on time. I'm not always the best at that, but at least when it comes to chess tournaments, I'm almost never late. I'd say that's

one area where chess definitely helped me with general life things. Other than that, just getting to know people and having more experience socializing with people. Of course, that's generally helpful too, I guess I've always been somewhat confused by the stereotype that chess players have bad social skills. I'd say chess actually helped me in that regard, because I've gotten to meet more people through chess and I've gotten to develop relationships and bonds with people through chess. And that is actually one of the main ways in which I have formed relationships and bonds in my life. I give more credit to chess than almost anything else for that. So I guess I have maybe the opposite experience from other people, but I would say those are the two main areas.

19. What do you think can be done to break down the stereotypes regarding chess? What part of the media can be changed to perceive chess correctly?

I would say the media is the main reason why people have all these misguided stereotypes of chess players and the game in general. While there is some truth to some stereotypes that are ascribed to chess, the media is also very one sided in the way it portrays chess players. In almost any popular media that I've heard of that focuses on chess, I have almost never seen chess player being portrayed as anything but socially reclusive, and just focused on solely just chess. I have nothing against people like that, I would consider myself one of those people actually, but in my experiences as well, the chess community is very diverse. I wish chess in the media would be portrayed to represent the amount of diversity in terms of people's personalities and characters and in terms of all kinds of things. Another common type of personality in chess, which isn't as much of a trope, are the really loud and overly competitive chess players, who are sort of the opposite to the more common, quiet, chess players that are portrayed in the media, but they are very present. People who trash talk a lot, and are playing blitz in the skittles room, and making bets for money, a lot of them are the type of people to do that, and generally they have a lot of confidence, or exude a lot of confidence, and are very charismatic. That is a very common chess player who is not

portrayed in the media, and it would be very entertaining if it was. I'm pretty critical of media tropes in general; I think they exacerbate stereotypes in a lot of not great ways, and often times they can be very discriminatory. But I kind of understand why they exist. They are a good selling point, but I don't understand why they have to stick to just one stereotype of chess players.



Photo Credit: Austin Fuller

Sophie Morris-Suzuki was a relatively late starter in chess who learned the rules at the age of 11. It didn't take long for Sophie to start playing in tournaments, and Sophie soon found competitive success. Sophie's first major achievement was taking second place in the U14 section of the 2016 All-Girls National Championship. The following year, Sophie won the 2017 New York Girls State Championship and the U18 section of the 2017 All-Girls National Championship. Sophie is a four time competitor in the US Junior Girls Championship (2018, 2020, 2021, and 2022) and Sophie recently played in the 2022 US Women's Championship.