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Preface

I first heard of the name ‘Ding Liren’ in 2008. Back then, I used to play the French Defense as Black and was retooling my White 1.d4 repertoire. Somehow, the games of this anonymous 2400-rated Chinese player kept popping up when I researched my opening lines in the database. I found it unusual that this Ding fellow kept punching considerably above his weight, beating ‘regular’ GMs and drawing 2600 and even 2700 players. He also had interesting opening ideas, and I hurriedly stole some of them before they became mainstream.

Not a year later, news came from China: the national chess champion for 2009 was 16-year-old Ding Liren! A Chessbase.com article that covered the event featured a photo of a skinny, fragile-looking kid sitting at the board, waiting for his last-round opponent. I had definitely seen the lad had ‘something’ when studying his previous games, but to think he could win the strong Chinese Championship so quickly – no way! However, as I played through his games from Beijing and, later that year, from the China-Russia match, I realized that the fact that my Elo rating at the time was higher than his was a joke. This young man was poised for at least 2700, I thought.

Fast-forward fourteen years, and you won’t find many chess players who haven’t heard of Ding Liren. He has played many brilliant games, broken a few chess records, and established himself as one of the best players in the world in the meantime. When he won the World Championship title in his 2023 match against Ian Nepomniachtchi, I had a warm feeling, partly for selfish reasons – as I had ‘discovered’ his potential earlier than most people. However, I was primarily genuinely happy to see such a humble and respectful person and immensely talented chess player rise to the top.

When I approached my publisher, New In Chess, with the proposal for the book about Ding Liren in May 2023, I had no idea, or maybe just a brief sketch in my mind of what it might look like. It was instead an intuitive impulse – like when you see a chess move that you immediately know is right – I knew that Ding deserved a book written about him and that I could write it ‘in a flow’. It was easy to draw inspiration from his already rich oeuvre and the unique progression in his chess career alone.

What I found out while doing research and analyzing his games for the book increased my appreciation for this exceptional chess player.

I knew Ding was a sharp calculator with a classical playing style and a knack for attack. However, I only became aware of his world-class endgame technique and his remarkably fearless play with his king when I studied his games more deeply. The prevailing opinion about the Chinese Challenger before and during the 2023 World Championship Match was that he was psychologically too unstable to handle the pressure. However, what I saw and read about Ding gave me a different impression. Behind the seemingly frail exterior lies a determined fighter capable of turning even the most hopeless situations in his favor.

If you picked up this book, chances are you already know a thing or two about Ding Liren. You may have heard about his 100-game unbeaten streak from 2017-18 or read about his incredible path from oblivion at the beginning of 2022 to becoming a World Championship Challenger only a few months later. You may have noticed Ding's unusual sincerity when he talks to the press in English. In this book, you will learn much more about the undisputed 17th World Champion as a chess player and a person.

We start with the big picture in the first two chapters. Chapter 1 offers a short biography focusing on Ding Liren's chess career. You can learn there at a glance about his most significant achievements; the details will be revealed in Chapters 3 through 9. In Chapter 2, I profile Ding through game fragments, accounts, and quotes from his life, illustrating his chess and personal qualities. This chapter should help you better understand what sets him apart from other chess players and makes him tick.

Chapters 3 to 9 follow chronologically Ding Liren's rise from his first chess steps in provincial China in the 1990s to the top of the chess world in 2023. Here, we dive deep into Ding's chess career, closely examining the most significant events from his life and his best games. Each chapter follows a 2–3-year period that typically marks a phase in Ding's personal and chess development. For example, Chapter 5 covers the period from 2013 to 2015, when Ding began studying law at Peking University while establishing himself as a super-GM. Chapters 3, 8, and 9 are exceptions to this pattern, focusing on periods with specific common themes. Chapter 3 covers Ding's childhood and adolescence until 2009, while Chapters 8 and 9 focus only on one year in Ding's career, 2022 (his Candidate year) and 2023 (his World Championship year).

Since this book is a 'best games' collection as much as it is a biography, Ding's annotated games constitute a significant part. The World Champion was kind enough to permit us to publish eleven games with his annotations. They give you a unique opportunity to gain insight into the

inner workings of his chess mind. Apart from these games, you can enjoy 47 additional games annotated by the book author, 58 in total. The main criteria for selecting the games were their quality/uniqueness, historical importance, and instructive/illustrative value.

Unfortunately, due to the limited space, many of Ding's excellent games that would otherwise have been worthy of such a best games collection didn't make the cut. Some of the winning combinations from these games were included in the final chapter, No. 10, 'Win like Ding'. This short chapter will allow you to test your tactical skills and gain further appreciation for Ding Liren's tactical prowess.

When researching material for the book, I used primarily online resources, such as interviews, articles, and videos from major chess websites, magazines, and news portals. You can find a list of the references I used in the Bibliography pages at the end of the book. For the sources published in Chinese, I used Google Translate. Even though this method may have affected the accuracy of the translations somewhat, it was worth sacrificing occasional imprecise wording for valuable information that was otherwise unavailable in the international media.

Where appropriate, I tried to provide a broader historical or general context for episodes from Ding's life, such as the development of 'International' (Western) chess in China or Ding Liren's status in the Chinese 'Four-Step' strategic plan. Quotes by Ding and other people close to him, such as his parents and competitors, should help you better understand the instances described in the book. Additionally, photographs from Ding's life and career and flashcards with interesting statistics and information about him will enrich your experience of the material.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the contribution of several people to the preparation of this book: Rammelt Otten for providing guidance, Frank Erwich and the New In Chess editing team for keeping everything running smoothly, Dirk Jan ten Geuzendam for some invaluable first-hand insights about Ding Liren, a friend who preferred to remain anonymous for insights about chess in China, my wife, Iva Videnova-Kuljasevic, for helping with the research, and, last but not least, Ding Liren himself for permitting us to include the game notes he wrote for New In Chess Magazine in the book.

I hope you will enjoy reading about this unique chess player!

Davorin Kuljasevic
Plovdiv, September 2023

CHAPTER 2

A World Champion's profile

In this chapter, we will attempt to understand Ding Liren better as a person and a chess player. His biography reveals a talented, hard-working, and persistent individual, but these attributes inevitably come with being a top performer in any field. But what makes Ding Liren tick, and how does his personality affect his playing style and creativity over the board? We need to dig deeper into his chess games and personal life to find out.

Since this is primarily a chess book, we will examine Ding Liren's characteristics as a chess player first and his personality in the second part of the chapter. Having studied hundreds of games from all stages of his career, I identified ten essential qualities in his play. They paint a picture of an immensely talented and skilled player who can handle almost any position at the highest level. These chess qualities also provide insights into Ding's overall character. His outstanding precision, rationality, and stoicism in the face of adversity on the one hand, and his imagination and proactivity on the other, indicate a balanced yet nuanced personality.

The list of Ding's key chess-playing attributes below contains six core and four mature qualities. Core qualities are those that Ding already displayed at an early age. As you will discover in the games section, he demonstrated an outstanding depth of ideas and a variety of advanced skills even as an eight-year-old. We can consider these qualities his innate, natural talents.

a) Core qualities:

Quality #1: Flair for the attack, initiative, and dynamic play

Quality #2: Willingness to take risks by sacrificing material

Quality #3: Sharp tactical and calculation skills

Quality #4: Incisiveness when exploiting weaknesses in the opponent's position

Quality #5: Skilfulness with the bishop pair

Quality #6: Active and fearless play with his king

On the other hand, mature qualities are those Ding has largely acquired as a battle-hardened chess professional. Of course, the seeds of these

qualities were always there, but nurturing and growing them into what they are today took years of experience against other strong players. Many great chess talents never achieve their full potential due to chess-related, psychological, or lifestyle issues. Ding's blossoming into a well-rounded and strong player is a story of life balance, persistence, and the ability to learn from mistakes.

b) Mature qualities:

Quality #7: World-class endgame technique

Quality #8: Psychological resilience

Quality #9: Patient positional play

Quality #10: Handles imbalanced positions well

Let us now examine Ding's qualities with the help of examples from his chess career. These range from his earliest recorded games in 2001 to the ones when he had already crossed the 2800 Elo barrier. You will notice that some of the game fragments contain references to later chapters. The reason is that these games will be analyzed in more depth when we discuss Ding's career chronologically.

In this chapter, I have provided shorter segments of these games to illustrate particular qualities in Ding's game. After studying this section, I hope you will better appreciate Ding's unique playing style and strength.

Ding Liren's core qualities

Quality #1: Flair for the attack, initiative, and dynamic play

Ding Liren showed a knack for attacking in his earliest games. Of course, everyone likes to win in a mating attack, but Ding often does it with superior skill and imagination. Moreover, his ability to sense the right moment to take the initiative and dynamize the game has helped him take charge and win many fine games.

His childhood opening repertoire reflects this – 1.e4 with White and the King's Indian Defense and the French with the black pieces usually lead to positions where a player has to show attacking creativity.

The following game played in the 2002 World Youth U10 Championship is an excellent initial example of his attacking skill.

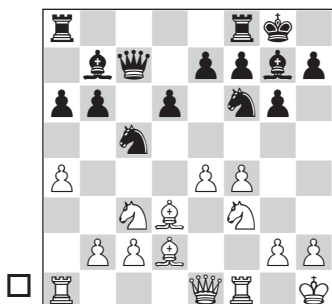
Game 1

Ding Liren

Y Sandyeep

2019

Heraklion Wch U10 2002 (5)



In a sharp Sicilian middlegame, Ding launches the kingside attack without hesitation:

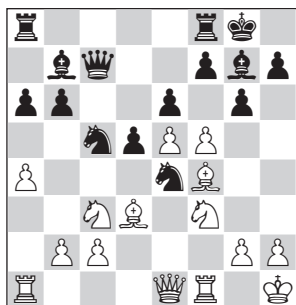
14.f5!?

14.b4 ♖xd3 15.cxd3 was a reasonable alternative, intending to strengthen the white center.

14...d5!?

Ding’s opponent understandably counters the flank attack with a break in the center.

15.e5 ♗fe4 16.♙f4 e6



With his last move, Black made sure to prevent 17.f6? by virtue of 17...♙xf6 18.exf6 ♖xf4. 17.fxg6 is not too appealing for White either, because it gives Black the f-file for counterplay after 17...fxg6 18.♖h4 ♗f5!, followed by ...♗af8.

It seems like White’s attack has ground to a halt, but young Ding finds a way to keep the pressure with an inspired pawn sacrifice:

17.♖h4!? exf5!?

Black goes for the apparently safer capture on f5, but this move only adds fuel to White’s attack.

17...gxf5! looks riskier as it opens the black king. White could go for 18.♘e2 (planning to attack with ♘e2-g3-h5 or g2-g4). However, Black could have organized a proper defense with 18...♖d8 19.♖h3 f6!, and White would, at best, have only positional compensation for the pawn.

18.e6 ♖c8?

Defending is always more difficult than attacking. This move is already a decisive mistake.

Black would have remained in the game had he played 18...♖c6 19.♙xe4 dxe4 20.♘g5 h5 21.exf7+ ♗xf7! 22.♘xf7 ♙xf7 with

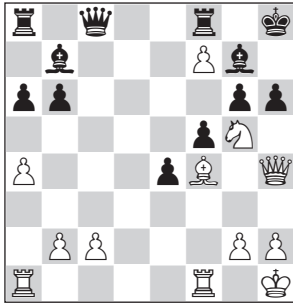
compensation for the exchange thanks to his active pieces. Now Ding demonstrates the full extent of his attacking talent:

19.♙xe4!

The e4-knight has to be eliminated before White can go ♘f3-g5.

19... ♖xe4 20. ♖xe4 dxe4 21. ♖g5 h6
22. exf7+ ♔h8

22... ♖xf7 23. ♖xf7 ♔xf7 24. ♖xh6
 was a lesser evil, although White's
 material advantage should tell in
 the long run.



23. ♖e5!

Ding begins weaving the mating
 net around the poorly defended
 black king.

23... h5 24. ♖f4!

An elegant follow-up. The queen
 eyes the e5- and h6-squares.

24... ♖c6 25. ♖e6!

The dagger. Black cannot avoid
 checkmate anymore.

25... ♖xf7 26. ♖h6+ ♔g8 27. ♖xg7
♜d7 28. ♖xg6

Black resigned.

In the strong Chinese 2009
 Individual Championship, 16-year-
 old Ding took the field by storm.
 His brilliant attacking effort to beat
 the top seed Ni Hua will be fully
 covered in Chapter 3. I would like
 to present a short segment from
 this game here to showcase Ding's
 attacking instinct.

Illustrative Game Fragment 1

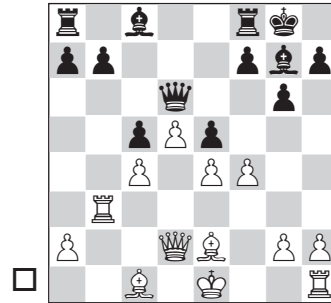
Ding Liren

2458

Ni Hua

2724

Xinghua Jiangsu ch-CHN 2009 (6)



Black had just played 15...e5,
 blocking the advance of the white
 e-pawn. Among several reasonable
 continuations, such as 16.0-0 and
 16. ♖b2, Ding opted for the most
 ambitious one:

16. f5! gxf5 17. exf5 ♖xf5 18.0-0 ♖g6

On the surface, it seems like White
 has nothing better than regaining
 the sacrificed pawn with 19. ♖xb7.
 Many players would choose this
 safe solution, but not Ding, who
 was not interested in petty material
 gains. Instead, he went for the main
 prize with

19. h4!

launching a dangerous attack
 against the black king. To find out
 how this decision paid off, please
 refer to Game 21.

The King's Indian Defense is an
 opening Ding Liren played from
 childhood well into his professional
 career. It has brought him many
 outstanding victories, and we will
 see some of his best KID games

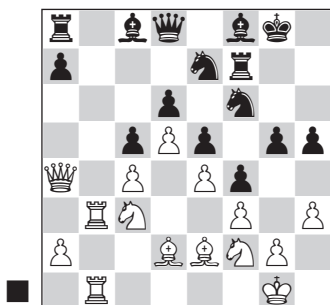
later in the book. Here, I would like to show his impressive attack crowned by a beautiful finish from a game played in 2011.

Game 2

Krikor Sevag Mekhitarian 2528

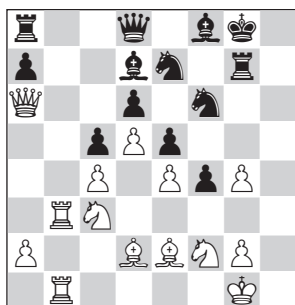
Ding Liren 2628

Moscow 2011 (4)



We have a typical double-edged KID plot on the board. With the center closed, White tries to arrange a breakthrough on the queenside and Black tries so on the kingside. Ding strikes first:

20...g4! 21.fxg4 hxg4 22.hxg4 ♕d7
23. ♖a6 ♜g7!



The Chinese prodigy follows the usual attacking scheme while

setting up a devious trap for his opponent.

24. ♖b5

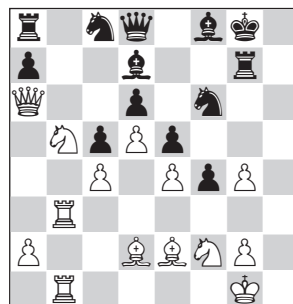
Taking the pawn with 24. ♖xd6?? was a big mistake as 24... ♖c6! traps the queen! Mekhitarian understandably increases the pressure on the queenside.

24... ♖c8

A necessary defensive measure.

However, this move simultaneously increases Black's attacking potential as it opens the d8-h4 diagonal for the queen.

24... ♖xg4? would have been premature in view of 25. ♕a5 ♖e8
26. ♖xg4 ♕xg4 27. ♕xg4 ♜xg4
28. ♖xd6 when Black loses the central pawn for no compensation.



25. ♕a5?!

Very tempting, but this bishop will be sorely missed in the defense.

Instead, White had a strong tactical resource: 25. ♖c7!!, deflecting the black queen from the kingside.

After 25... ♖xc7 26. ♕a5 ♖b6
27. ♕xb6 Black would have no choice but to enter a worse endgame with 27... ♖c8 28. ♖xc8
♕xc8 29. ♕a5 ♖xg4 30. ♖xg4 ♕xg4
31. ♕xg4 ♜xg4 32. ♖f1.

25... ♖b6! 26. ♗xa7

It would appear that Black collapses on the queenside, but Ding saw one move deeper than his opponent.

26... ♗xg4 27. ♗xg4



27... ♖g5!!

This beautiful intermezzo turns the tables. White will be up a piece, but Black will attack with full force.

Perhaps Mekhitarian expected only the straightforward 27... ♗xg4 28. ♗xg4 ♖xg4 29. ♖xb6 ♖g5, when White would have enough defensive resources: 30. ♖1b2 ♖h5 31. ♗c6 ♖h4 32. ♖h3, preserving the decisive material advantage.

28. ♗xb6?

A decisive mistake, but it's hard to blame the Brazilian grandmaster for failing to find the only defense after Ding's shocker.

28. ♗f6+! was essential to deflect the black queen. After 28... ♖xf6 29. ♗xb6 ♖g6! 30. ♗f3 ♗g4 31. ♖1b2 ♗xf3 32. ♖xf3 ♖xe4 33. ♖a3!, White barely holds on, although I believe most people would still take Black in this position due to his attacking potential.

28... ♗xg4 29. ♗f1

The alternative 29. ♗xg4 ♖xg4 30. ♖1b2 doesn't help in view of 30... ♖d1+ 31. ♗h2 ♖h7+ 32. ♖h3 ♖xh3+ 33. gxf3 f3!, with the unstoppable threat ... ♗f8-h6-f4 mate! White's pieces are on the other end of the globe and can't help their king, even with a tempo to spare.

29... ♗e2!

Attractive and efficient. White's defense won't be able to hold much longer.

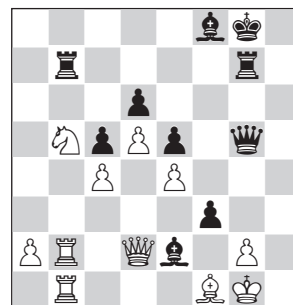
30. ♖3b2 f3 31. ♖a3 ♖b8 32. ♗b5

In the event of 32. ♗c6 Black seals the deal with 32... ♖xb6! 33. ♖xb6 ♗xf1 34. ♖xf3 ♗xg2.

32... ♖xb6

Black has won the sacrificed piece back, so the outcome of the game is decided. Mekhitarian plays a few more moves by inertia, which only allows Ding to prepare and execute a pretty finishing combination.

33. ♖c3 ♖bb7! 34. ♖d2



34... ♖xg2+!!

This queen sacrifice forced White to resign in view of 35. ♗xg2 ♖xg2+ 36. ♗h1 ♖h7+, with checkmate on the next move.

Flashcard 1: Ding Liren’s opening repertoire

Year/ Period	White repertoire		Black repertoire against 1.e4		Black repertoire against 1.d4/1.♟f3/1.c4	
	2001- 2005	1.e4, attacking style	1.♟f3 and 2.g3, aiming for the King’s Indian Defense with reversed colors	French Defense, dynamic style		King’s Indian Defense, dynamic style
2006- 2009	Switches to a classical 1.d4 repertoire with ambitious main lines, forming the basis for his long-term White repertoire					
2010- 2011			Adds the Kan Sicilian to play for a win against lower-rated opponents			
2012- 2013			Caro-Kann becomes his main repertoire against 1.e4	Stops playing the French Defense		
2014			Adds the solid 1...e5 to his repertoire as he starts playing super-GM’s on a regular basis		Adds the Semi-Slav to his repertoire for more variety and solidity	
2015	Brings back 1.e4 and plays it occasionally to mix things up, particularly against lower-rated opponents	Adds 1.♟f3 and the English Opening for variety, primarily to avoid the main lines of the Grünfeld and Nimzo-Indian Defenses	Replaces the Kan Sicilian with the more reputable Najdorf and Classical Sicilians to play for a win against lower-rated opponents		Adds the solid Nimzo-Indian Defense to his repertoire as he starts playing super-GM’s on a regular basis	Keeps playing the King’s Indian Defense occasionally
2016	Starts playing the solid Catalan and g3-based systems on a regular basis		1...e5 becomes his main repertoire		The Nimzo-Indian/Semi-Slav becomes his main repertoire	
2017- 2018	His opening repertoire with White is well-rounded, and he can play virtually any type of position on the highest level					
2019- 2023	Strategic openings like the English Opening, the Réti, and the London System take a more prominent role in his repertoire				Switches to the super-solid Ragozin/Queen’s Gambit complex during the COVID lockdown	

CHAPTER 5

2700 (2013-2015)

Super-GM

Soon after he began studying at the university in the fall of 2012, Ding Liren reached a new milestone in his chess career. Due to his steadily improving results, crossing the 2700 Elo mark was only a matter of time, and FIDE's October 2012 rating list officially showed '2702' next to Ding's name. This achievement put him in the super-GM league, provided he could maintain this level of play. The next step was to see whether he could pass the test in an exclusive super-GM tournament.

Fortunately, Ding did not have to wait long for an invitation to play against the world's elite. The Alekhine Memorial in 2013, co-hosted by Paris and Moscow in honor of the 4th World Champion, would be the 20-year-old's initiation into the circuit. With an average player rating of 2745, the tournament featured two World Champions and the second-highest-rated player in the world at the time, Levon Aronian. As fate would have it, Ding was paired exactly against him in round one.

Notes by Ding Liren

Game 30 Slav Defense

Ding Liren 2707

Levon Aronian 2809

Paris/St Petersburg 2013 (1)

**1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.♘f3 ♘f6 4.♗c3 a6
5.e3 e6 6.c5 ♗bd7 7.b4 b6**

The old main line is 7...g6, of which I have some sweet memories.

[author's note: Ding refers to his win against Wang Hao from the 2009 Chinese Championship, analyzed in Game 22].

8.♙b2 a5 9.a3

Here 9.b5 will be met by 9...♙b7.

9...♙e7 10.♙d3 0-0 11.0-0

If I want to prevent Black's next move by playing 11.♖e2, Black can free himself after 11...axb4 12.axb4 ♖xa1+ 13.♙xa1 bxc5 14.bxc5 by playing 14...e5.

11...♙a6

In case of 11...♙b7, White continues 12.♖e2.



12.♗e1

And this is my idea!

I want to put my knight on d3, where it will have a huge influence on the center. 12.♔xa6 ♖xa6 13.b5 looks ambitious, but after 13...cxb5 14.c6 ♗b8 15.♗e5 ♗e8 with ...f6 to follow, Black is doing fine.

12...♔c4

Levon spent some 3 or 4 minutes on this move, but I think it gives me a long-term advantage.

A) The immediate 12...e5 is risky: 13.♔xa6 ♖xa6 14.b5 exd4 (the only move). And now, instead of capturing the rook, White has a very strong move: 15.♗xd5 when one possible line is 15...cxb5 16.♗xe7+ ♖xe7 17.c6 dxe3 18.fxe3 ♖xe3+ 19.♖h1 ♗e5 20.♗f3 and White has the initiative;

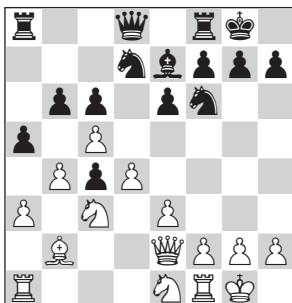
B) Alternatively, 12...♔b7 seems interesting, but after 13.♗a4 (to prevent 13...e5) 13...♖c7 14.♖e2, White is going to play ♗f3 again;

C) Maybe it was safer to play 12...♖c7 13.♖e2 ♔xd3 14.♗xd3 ♗e4.

13.♔xc4

Otherwise ...b5 will come.

13...dxc4 14.♖e2



It's important to force Black to block the queenside so that I can push my central pawns.

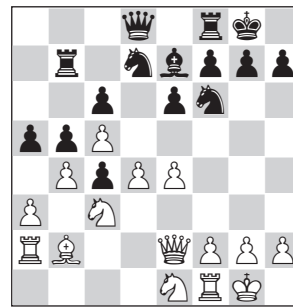
14...♖b8

I think it's better for Black to play 14...b5 15.e4 axb4 16.axb4 ♖xa1 17.♔xa1 ♗b8 18.♗c2 ♗a6 19.♔b2 ♗c7, when after the exchange of a pair of rooks, Black's pieces may have a breath of fresh air.

15.♖a2

15.♖b1 is more logical here, but during the game, I was afraid of some tactics. I thought that after he would play 15...b5, I could break the queenside by a4 at some point.

15...b5 16.e4 ♖b7



A very interesting plan. With this move, he wants to regroup his pieces.

17.♗c2 ♗b8 18.♖a1

I rejected the immediate 18.♔c1 because of 18...♗a6 19.♔f4 ♖d7 and Black threatens ...♖xd4. But I overlooked 20.♖f3 with the idea of 21.♔d6.

18...♖c8 19.♖ad1 ♖d8 20.♔c1

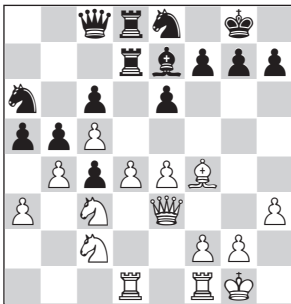
20.f4 is another way to launch an attack, but I preferred to transfer the bishop to f4.

20...♗a6 21.♔f4 ♖bd7 22.h3

The computer suggests 22.bxa5 followed by ♗a2 and ♗ab4, but it's really hard to make such a decision.

22... ♖e8

Here 22...axb4 23.axb4 ♘xb4
24.♘xb4 ♗xd4 25.♗xd4 ♗xd4
26.♗e3 e5 looks pretty, but it fails
to 27.♗xd4 exd4 28.e5 and White
wins.

23. ♖e3**23... ♗f6**

A brave move and actually the
best! Black gives up two tempi and
allows me to put my knight on d6,
but he gets the strong d5-square as
compensation. Other continuations
like 23...♗ac7 24.♗d2 f6 25.♗fd1 or
23...f6 24.d5 would be passive.

24.e5 ♗e7 25. ♖e4

I should have played 25.bxa5 ♗ec7
26.♗f3 ♗d5 27.♗d2, but who can
resist the temptation to attack?

25... ♗ac7

25...♗ec7 was another option and
may have been better: 26.♗g3 axb4
27.♗h6 g6 28.axb4 ♗d5 29.♗f3 ♗a7
30.♗d6 ♗xd6 31.exd6 ♗dd7 and
Black's position remains solid.

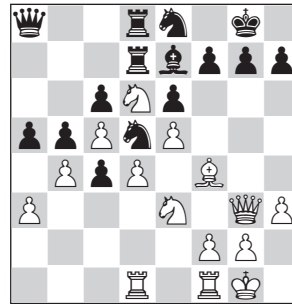
26. ♗d6 ♖a8

After 26...♗xd6 27.cxd6, the knight
on e8 is stupid.

27. ♖g3 ♗d5

On 27...axb4 I wanted to play
28.axb4 ♖a4 29.♗e3 ♖xb4 30.♗g4

♖b3 31.♗e3, but I missed 31...f5.
Better was 28.♗b4 and White is
clearly better.

28. ♗e3**28... ♗c3**

Surprisingly, this turns out to be
a serious mistake. He should have
taken on d6 first. White is clearly
better after 28...♗ec7 29.♗h6 ♗f8
30.♗g4 ♗h8 31.♗g5 ♗b8 32.♗a1
with ♗d2 coming next.

So, he should have played 28...♗xd6
29.cxd6 (in case of 29.exd6,
29...♗xf4 is the point: 30.♖xf4
axb4 31.axb4 ♗f6) 29...♗c3 30.♗de1
♗e4, and now I would need to find
31.♖g4 (31.♖h4 ♗d2 32.♗f5 ♗f3+
33.gxf3 exf5 leads to an unclear
position) 31...♗d2 32.♗d5 ♗xf1
33.♗b6 ♖a7 34.♗xd7 ♖xd7 35.bxa5
♗a8 36.♗xf1 ♗xa5 37.♖f3 with the
plan ♗f4-d2-b4 and then push the
kingside pawns.

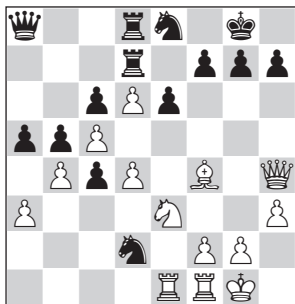
29. ♗de1

I thought I was much better now,
but I simply missed his next move.

29... ♗xd6

This first made me nervous, but
then I calmed down and realized I
was better anyway.

30.exd6 ♗e4 31. ♖h4 ♗d2



32. d5

The only move that won't lose material! But there is a more beautiful line: 32.d5 cxd5 33.f5 fxf1 34.f6+ e8 (34...xe7 35.f6) 35.f6 and it's White who stands better!

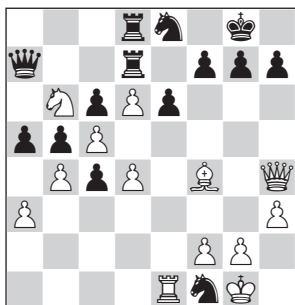
32... f3+

is met by 33.gxf3 cxd5 34.f2.

33. f6

f6+ doesn't work due to 33...xe7 34.f6 f6.

33... a7



34. f1

If I had known what he would play next, I would have thought about 34.f1 to prevent it: 34...axb4 35.axb4 f6 36.g5 fxd6 37.cxd6 fxb6 38.gxf6 gxf6 39.e3 f8 40.f6+ e8 41.f6 fxd6

42.g3, and after a series of precise moves, White is winning.

34... f6

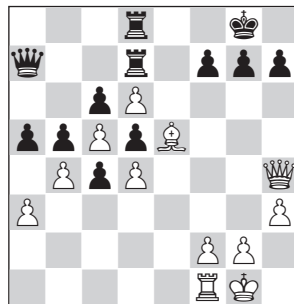
Another possibility was 34...axb4 35.axb4 f8 (but not 35...f6 36.g5 fxd6 37.cxd6 fxb6 38.gxf6 gxf6 39.f1, threatening f1a3, and the open a-file favors White) 36.fxd7 fxd7, although after 37.d5 exd5 38.e5 White is much better.

35. e5

e5h6 fxd6 36.g7 f6g7 37.f5+ f8 38.fxf6 fxd4 is equal. After 35.fxd7 fxd7 36.g6 f6 37.f3 f6 38.bxa5 fxa5 39.f6g4, White is only slightly better.

35... f6 36. fxd5 exd5

36...cxd5 37.c6 fxd6 38.f3 loses the rook.



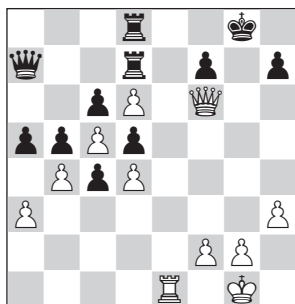
Now comes the critical moment of the game.

With about 10 minutes left, I couldn't find any decisive tactics. So, I decided to play the safest line, annoyed by the winning chance I may have missed.

37. g7 f6g7 38. f5+ f8

And suddenly, I realized that I may be winning here. Restraining my excitement, I first repeated moves to pass the time control.

39. ♖f6 ♘g8 40. ♗g5+ ♘f8 41. ♗f6
 ♘g8 42. ♜e1



And that's the winning move!
 Sometimes there is a miracle.
 Unfortunately for my opponent,
 Black's position is already
 hopeless.

It couldn't have been a better debut for Ding! He showed his vast potential on the big scene. However, the rest of the tournament was a tough experience for the young man. Vachier-Lagrave, Anand, and Gelfand found holes in his Caro-Kann and King's Indian Defenses, inflicting three consecutive Black losses on him. Meanwhile, his white pieces were neutralized relatively easily in the remaining games, so the win against Aronian remained his only one in the tournament. He finished near the bottom of the table with 3½ points out of 9 games (+1 =5 -3), ahead of only the struggling Peter Svidler. In a twist of fate, his first-round victim, Aronian, rallied afterward to win the tournament on a tiebreak with 5½ points.

Still, this result wasn't a fiasco; it was more a 'first pancake is always spoiled' kind of experience. The level of Ding's play was more or less on par with the other top grandmasters, but it was apparent that his opening repertoire needed an upgrade. Top-level chess requires more solidity with the black pieces and more variety with the white ones, and Ding made the appropriate changes to his repertoire in the following years (please see Flashcard 1 in Chapter 2 for details).

After such a heavy-duty contest, Ding's return to China must have felt like coming to a children's playground. That's what his overwhelming win in the 4th Danzhou invitational tournament one month later suggested, anyway. The Wenzhou native won first place with 7/9 (+5 =4 -0) and a 2819 Elo performance, one point clear of Bu Xiangzhi and Ni Hua in shared second place.

42...axb4

If 42...h6 43. ♜e3 ♘h7, then 44. ♜e7 is decisive. 44...♜xe7 45.dxe7 ♜g8 46. ♗xf7+ ♘h8 47.e8 ♗ ♜xe8 48. ♗xa7 c3 49. ♗f7 ♜e1+ 50. ♘h2 c2 51. ♗f8+ ♘h7 52. ♗f5+ and White is just in time.

43. ♜e5

Of course, not 43. ♜e3 ♗xa3.

43...h6 44. ♜h5

If 44. ♗xh6 f6 and Black holds.

44... ♗xa3 45. ♗xh6 f6

45... ♗a1+ 46. ♘h2 ♗xd4 47. ♜g5 mates.

46. ♗xf6 1-0

Act 6: Nerves of steel

Once again, Ding Liren was saved by the bell; out of nowhere, he got another chance to qualify for the World Championship Match. However, it was never meant to be easy for him. Hikaru Nakamura won his 13th-round game against Duda and leapfrogged to second place, half a point ahead of Ding. As luck would have it, they played each other in the last round! That meant that Ding had to win on demand to claim second place and (possibly/probably) qualify for the World Championship Match with Nepomniachtchi.

Game 52 Tarrasch Defense

Ding Liren 2806

Hikaru Nakamura 2760

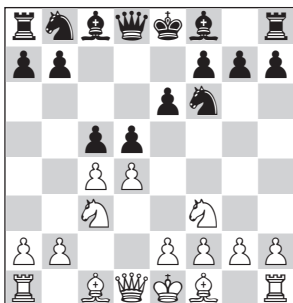
Madrid ct 2022 (14)

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♗f3 d5 4.♘c3

Ding goes for the sharper move in a must-win game compared to 4.g3, the Catalan Opening.

4...c5

The first surprise in the game comes early. Nakamura seldom plays the Semi-Tarrasch Defense. He is one of the leading experts in the Queen's Gambit Declined, 4...♙e7. In his preparation for the game, Ding probably focused most of his attention on the bishop move.



5.e3

A sensible choice when you want to avoid your opponent's direct

preparation. This move usually leads to a quieter battle than the main line 5.cxd5. In this case, needing only a draw in this game, Nakamura might have gone for the super-solid 5...cxd4 6.♖xd4 exd5 when it's not easy for White to demonstrate an advantage.

5...♗c6 6.a3

This flexible move is the most popular in the symmetrical four-knights Tarrasch Defense tabiya. White prepares to take on c5 and follow up with b2-b4. Earlier that year, the Chinese star went a different route with 6.cxd5 exd5 7.♙b5 a6 8.♙xc6+ bxc6 9.0-0 ♙d6 10.dxc5 ♙xc5 1-0 (35) Ding Liren-Van Foreest, Chessable Masters pre-rapid 2022.

6...dxc4 7.♙xc4 a6

Nakamura follows the modern main line, transposing into some sort of Queen's Gambit Accepted.

8.♙d3!?

Ding responds with a rare move, first played by Rafael Vaganian in 1973. In essence, White prepares to capture on c5 without allowing the opponent to trade the queens down the d-file.

The main line goes 8.0-0 b5 9.♖a2 when White uses his a2-a3 move to keep pressure on the a2-g8 diagonal. Ding had already played like this in the 2018 Candidates Tournament, so it is safe to assume that Nakamura was ready for it. After 9...♖b7 10.♗e2 ♗c7 11.♙d2 ♙e7 12.♝ac1 c4 13.e4, the players soon entered wild complications in the game Ding Liren-Grischuk, Berlin 2018.

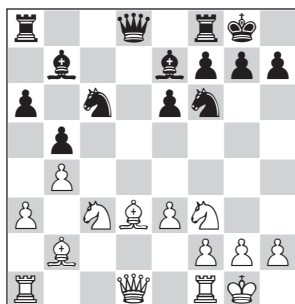
8...b5

Nakamura follows the most straightforward path. Alternatively, Black could insert 8...cxd4 9.exd4 before going 9...b5, forcing an IQP middlegame. Considering the tournament situation, the American's more balanced choice is more logical.

9.dxc5 ♙xc5 10.b4 ♙e7

A wise retreat since the bishop will be useful on the d8-h4 diagonal for defensive purposes. Now that the central tension has been cleared, both players complete their development.

11.0-0 ♙b7 12.♙b2 0-0



The position is almost entirely symmetrical, the only difference

being White's extra tempo and his bishop's slightly more active placement. Ding makes good use of these tiny advantages:

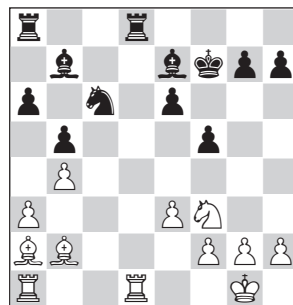
13.♗e4 ♗xe4 14.♙xe4 f5!

Nakamura quickly neutralizes one of White's active bishops. He could have accomplished a similar goal with 14...♗a5!? 15.♙xb7 ♗xb7. After 16.♗d4, the white position is a bit easier to play because of the difference between the two knights, but Black should equalize with correct play.

15.♙b1

Ding is quick to exploit the weakening of the e6-pawn with the ♙e4-b1-a2 maneuver. However, this is not such a significant positional factor in the endgame that ensues now:

15...♗xd1 16.♝xd1 ♜fd8 17.♙a2 ♙f7



Even the most optimistic chess players could hardly consider White's slight positional initiative significant here. The e6-pawn is well-protected, and White gets nothing from exchanging pieces on e5. A strong technical player like Nakamura surely didn't mind

playing this position in a game where a draw ensured him clear second place. With this in mind, seeing how Ding keeps his winning chances alive in this equal endgame is fascinating.

18.h4

We have already seen Ding advance the rook's pawn to get action on the flank. White threatens to win the bishop pair with ♖g5+, and Nakamura, naturally, stops this:

18...h6

However, he was 'upset with himself' after the game because he thought he should have traded a pair of rooks with 18...♖xd1+ 19.♗xd1 ♜d8 first and play 20...h6= only after 20.♖c1.

19.♗dc1!

Realizing that he won't achieve much on the d-file and that piece trades work in Black's favor, Ding abandons this plan and looks to create some problems for Nakamura on the c-file. 20.♖xc6, followed by 21.♗e5+ is a direct threat.

19...♗d6

An interesting choice. It doesn't spoil anything, but 19...♗f6! was more straightforward, provoking exchanges of several pieces: 20.♗d4 (20.♗xf6?! ♜xf6 is already better for Black since he threatens to invade via the d3-square) 20...♗xd4 21.♖c7+. Perhaps Nakamura did not want to allow this check, but it shouldn't be a big deal since 21...♜g6 22.♗xd4 ♗xd4 23.exd4 ♗d5 leads to a very drawish rook endgame.

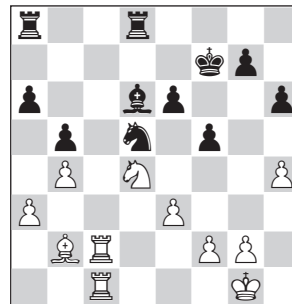
20.♖c2 ♗e7

Nakamura continues maneuvering to trade the annoying a2-bishop with ...♗d5. 20...a5!? was an interesting alternative. If White takes on a5, Black activates his rook and gets counterplay against the a3-pawn. However, Nakamura might have disliked 21.♖ac1!? axb4 22.♖xc6 bxa3, which leads to a double-edged position with three possible results.

21.♗d4!

Ding finds the best way to keep the tension. The knight moves toward the queenside to exploit weaknesses like c6 and a6 after the inevitable bishops trade while also preventing the ...a5 break. In case of 21.♗e5+ ♗xe5 22.♗xe5, the white bishop pair gets neutralized with 22...♖ac8=, followed by ...♗d5.

21...♗d5 22.♗xd5 ♗xd5 23.♖ac1



The position has simplified a bit, but White hasn't got any closer to a genuine winning chance, nor has Black increased his drawing chances significantly. It's still a fairly balanced fight in which perhaps Ding's only advantage is the psychological initiative since

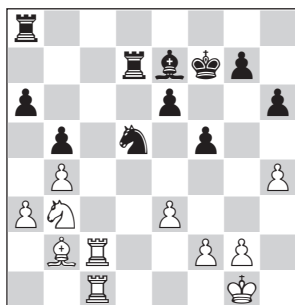
his opponent doesn't need to win as desperately as he does.

23...♖d7 24.♘b3!

The Chinese No. 1 prepares a piece regrouping (♙d4, ♙/♘c5, or ♘a5) to exploit the dark-square complex.

24...♙e7

A tempting move, as Black wins a tempo by attacking the h-pawn to transfer his bishop to f6. The engine suggests a somewhat surprising plan instead: 24...g6!? 25.g3 h5, freezing the kingside and preparing to trade the rooks via c7.



25.h5?!

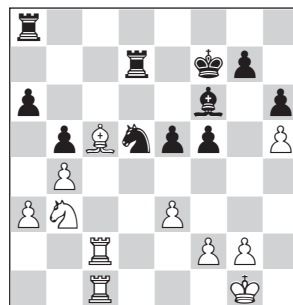
Ding's favorite move (also seen in his game against Wei Yi) is inaccurate because the pawn will become exposed on h5. 25.g3! was stronger to preserve structural integrity and provide the white king with the g2-square. In case of 25...♙f6 26.♙xf6 ♘xf6, White keeps a slight edge with 27.♘d4, thanks to his control over the c-file.

25...♙f6 26.♙d4!?

A sensible move. While it doesn't improve White's winning chances due to Nakamura's reply, it keeps the necessary tension in the position.

The straightforward 26.♙xf6 ♘xf6 27.♖c6 ♘xh5 28.♘c5 ♖e7 29.♖xa6± might have been Ding's initial idea. However, Black can play more actively: 27...♖ad8! 28.♖xa6 ♖d1+ 29.♖xd1 ♖xd1+ 30.♗h2 ♘g4+ with a lot of counterplay on the kingside.

26...e5 27.♙c5



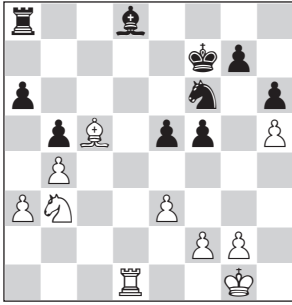
The status quo remains. Nakamura is still on track to making a draw if he doesn't make any significant mistake, while Ding tries everything in his power to tilt this heavy maneuvering affair in his favor.

27...♙d8

Another slightly controversial choice by Nakamura. His plan to target the overextended h-pawn with ...♘f6 is ambitious, but he compromises his piece coordination a bit with this move.

Most people would be more inclined to activate the idle rook; for example, 27...♖c8 28.♖d2 ♖dd8= and if we are fair, there wouldn't have been much White could do to improve his winning chances.

28.♖d2 ♘f6 29.♖xd7+ ♘xd7 30.♖d1 ♘f6



The h-pawn cannot be protected, but Ding finds a way to compensate for that:

31. ♖d6!

As Boris Gelfand once succinctly put it: ‘Every move has a good side and a bad side.’ The upside of 27...♞d8 was making space for the knight, but the downside is that it weakened the e5-pawn. Ding exploits just that while also clearing the c5-square for his knight. The bishop was not a happy piece on c5.

31... ♜g4!

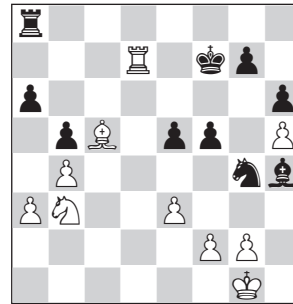
As was to be expected from a player of his class, Nakamura finds the best solution to the new problem. He leaves the h5-pawn be and instead plants the knight on a strong outpost. White has a slight advantage in the endgame in case of 31...♜xh5 32. ♞xe5 ♞f6 33. ♞xf6 ♜xf6 34. ♜c1 ♜d8 35. ♜d4 or 31...e4 32. ♜d4 ♜xh5 33. ♜xf5.

32. ♞c5 ♞h4

Not necessarily a mistake, but one has to wonder why Black did not repeat moves with 32...♜f6. It’s not like White has anything better than 33. ♞d6, in which case he would have to come up with something

else after 33...♜g4 to try to win the game. Objectively, though, it’s all dead equal with correct play.

33. ♜d7+



33... ♞g8!

Another counterintuitive yet precise move by the American grandmaster. Moving the king toward the center seems more logical, but 33...♞e6 gives White an important tempo to improve his pieces: 34. ♜d6+ ♞f7 35. g3 ♞g5 36. ♞b6! with slight pressure since Black cannot trade the rooks on d8.

34. g3 ♞g5

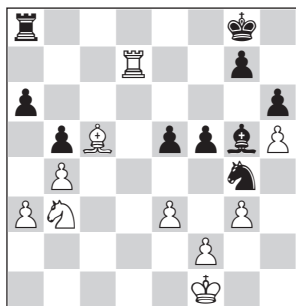
There is nothing wrong with this retreat; Black keeps everything under control. However, the immediate 34...♜d8! would have been stronger since 35. ♜a7 allows Black to obtain a lot of counterplay with 35...♜d1+ 36. ♞g2 ♞g5 37. ♜xa6 ♜b1!, while 35. ♜xd8+ ♞xd8 leads to a drawish minor-piece endgame as discussed in the 35. ♞f1 ♜d8! line below.

35. ♞f1?!

I read an interview somewhere with grandmaster Daniil Dubov, who observed that Chinese chess players have a peculiar style of play:

sometimes they make a move that you do not expect and that is not objectively the best or most logical, but it happens to work better than it looks at first. That's precisely the case with Ding's move.

35. ♖d6 was obviously critical, threatening to invade with ♗b3-c5-e6, etc. This would virtually have forced Nakamura to find the correct 35... ♖d8!, which leads into a drawish endgame.



However, now that he is given a choice, the American makes a massive mistake:

35... ♖d8??

The d8-square is unfortunate for this bishop. Nakamura prepares the f6-square for the knight (since the immediate 35... ♗f6 allows 36. ♖e7), just like on move 27, but the crucial difference is that White already has a rook on the seventh rank here, which renders the black position precarious.

Therefore, 35... ♖d8! was a must. Black succeeds in trading off the dangerous rook after 36. ♖xd8+ (since 36. ♖a7? doesn't work due to 36... ♖d3) 36... ♖xd8 37. ♖d6. The a6-pawn is in a critical condition,

which might have diverted Nakamura from this continuation. However, Black has everything in order if he plays 37... ♖f7 38. ♗c5 ♖e7! (38... e4!? 39. ♗xa6 ♖e6= works, too) 39. ♖xe7 ♖xe7 40. ♗xa6 ♖d6 – getting there in time to protect the b5-pawn and picking up the h-pawn with ... ♗f6 next, Black surely makes a draw here.

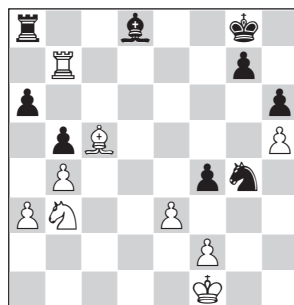
36. ♖b7!

Ding quietly steps away from the 36... ♗f6 tempo and keeps the black rook pinned to the a-pawn.

36... f4!

The best practical chance. In the event of 36... ♗f6, White carries out the familiar bishop maneuver 37. ♖d6 ♗xh5 38. ♖xe5+–.

37. gxf4 exf4



The tensions are rising higher, and the time on the clock is lower, so mutual mistakes inevitably creep in. Ding tries to be sophisticated with

38. e4?,

which creates a passed pawn but leaves one of the enemy forces alive. The brute force move 38. exf4 would have been better since 38... ♗f6 39. ♗d4 ♗xh5 40. f5! ♖f6 41. ♗e6

gives White complete positional domination.

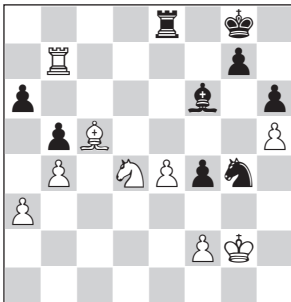
38...♙f6?

Nakamura misses his last chance. With this move, he finally wanted to bring his rook into the game, but it's too late. Instead, 38...f3! 39.♘d4 ♘e5!± would have been surprisingly stubborn, but it hinges upon an unexpected tactical detail that is not easy to find in advance. The point is that 40.♙d6 doesn't work because of 40...♖c8! and the white king is caught in a mating net!

39.♘d4 ♖e8

That was Nakamura's idea: he activates the rook with a tempo. However, it meets a powerful refutation:

40.♔g2!



The 40th move is often a fateful one, but in this case, in a good way for Ding Liren. The e-pawn is defended indirectly after 40...♖xe4 because 41.♔f3 is a double attack. After reaching the time control, Nakamura finds himself in a tough situation because the white pieces dominate, and his weaknesses, most notably a6 and g7, won't hold out much longer.

40...♘e5

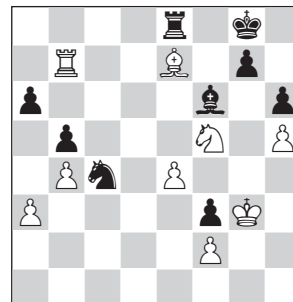
40...♙xd4 41.♙xd4 ♘f6 was a more challenging defense, but even then, White would have had all the chances to win the game after 42.♔f3! ♘xh5 43.♖b6 and the queenside pawns fall like ripe apples.

41.♘f5!

The crucial reply. The knight is untouchable on f5 and exerts influence on critical squares such as g7, e7, and d6. Without this move, White could hardly have converted his positional advantage.

41...f3+ 42.♔g3 ♘c4 43.♙e7!

Ding coordinates his pieces marvelously. With this strong move, he shuts down the black rook and seals Nakamura's fate. After the game, he noted his opponent might have missed this when he embarked upon the ...♘g4-e5-c4 maneuver. 43.♔xf3? would have run into 43...♘d2+.



43...♙b2

Nakamura goes for the a-pawn. 43...♙xe7 is hardly any better because 44.♘xe7+ ♔f8 45.♘g6+ catches the black king in a mating

net. White wins by gradually advancing his central pawns, for example 45...♔g8 46.♕xf3 ♖xa3 47.e5! ♖c2 48.♕e4 ♖xb4 49.f4.

44.♕xf3 ♕xa3 45.♔g3

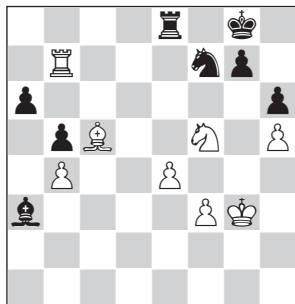
There is no need to rush things. One of the main rules when converting an advantage is to deny the opponent any unnecessary resources. The king steps away from the knight's checks.

45...♖e5

In case of 45...a5, White wins by attacking the weakened g-pawn: 46.♕c5! ♖xe4 47.♖xg7+ etc.

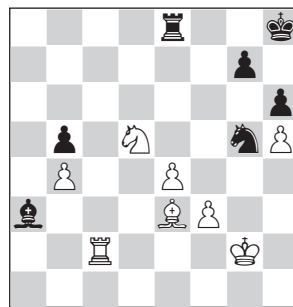
46.♕c5 ♖f7

The knight has returned to cover the seventh rank. However, after **47.f3**,



a move grandmaster Sam Shankland called 'rather sadistic', it becomes clear that Black can offer only symbolic resistance. He is too passive to protect his queenside pawns or prevent the advance of the white central pawns. On the elite level, saving such an endgame is equivalent to a miracle. Ding doesn't allow it to happen:

47...♕c1 48.♖a7 ♕d2 49.♖xa6 ♕e1+ 50.♔g2 ♕c3 51.♖a7 ♖g5 52.♖e7+ ♔h8 53.♖g6+ ♔g8 54.♖e7+ ♔h8 55.♖d5 ♕b2 56.♖a2 ♕c1 57.♖c2 ♕a3 58.♕e3!



This move traps the black bishop, so Nakamura resigned.

An epic struggle in a high-stakes game! Ding tried to squeeze water out of a stone for most of the game until Nakamura finally collapsed. In a 2022 ChessBase interview, he explained his patient game strategy: 'I was playing for a win in this game. It was like my game against Duda: if my opponent plays very well, then a draw is acceptable; at least I tried. If he doesn't, then I have my winning chances.' Decisive games like these are often more about having good nerves than anything else.

After the game, the American super-GM admitted to 'caring too much' about the outcome: 'I couldn't control myself. I was just not very happy with what was happening throughout the game.'

Thus, Ding Liren finished the 2022 Candidates Tournament in clear second place with 8 points from 14 games, 1½ points behind

Nepomniachtchi and half a point ahead of Radjabov and Nakamura. Despite catching COVID right after the tournament, which delayed his return home for a couple of weeks, the Chinese chess genius had all the reasons to celebrate his best career result. However, the elephant in the room was still there: does this mean he will play the World Championship Match? Carlsen promised to publicly announce his final decision a few weeks after the Candidates Tournament.

Act 7: The Decision

On July 20, 2022, it all became clear. On ‘The Magnus Effect’ podcast, the World Champion confirmed he would not defend his title in the 2023 WCC match. ‘I’ve spoken to people in my team, I’ve spoken to FIDE, I spoke to Ian as well. The conclusion is very simple: I’m not motivated to play another match,’ Carlsen explained, as he opened the door to ‘a new era’, as Ding Liren put it concisely in a 2022 interview for Chess.com. FIDE president Arkady Dvorkovich responded by confirming that the Nepomniachtchi-Ding Liren 2023 World Championship Match was a fact. After all the trials and tribulations in the preceding year, Ding Liren became the Challenger to the chess throne against all odds!

‘There are a lot of feelings around my mind right now that I have to deal with,’ said Ding in a first reaction to Chess.com. ‘But I am very excited about playing a World Championship Match to fight for the crown next year.’ As far as Carlsen’s decision went, he responded: ‘I knew he had doubts, but I expected him to play. But I understand it also. Being World Champion means a lot of responsibilities; there are a lot of things to handle.’ And speaking of his new responsibilities for the match, Ding candidly noted: ‘I have to improve my English now!’

On the other hand, Ian Nepomniachtchi sounded a little underwhelmed by the news when talking to Chess.com. Even if Carlsen’s decision did not come as a complete surprise to him, he said, ‘Frankly, it’s quite disappointing. The re-match was something I was really looking forward to.’ Looking ahead to his new opponent, he only had praise for Ding Liren. ‘I would say chess-wise, overall, his chess skills could easily match those of Magnus. Ding has undisputedly been one of the best players of the last few years. He also had this 100-game undefeated streak, which is quite something. He has a very different style, though, it’s a very different person, a very different player – and a very serious opponent. It will be tough!’