

Meiling Cheng

Reframing the Game of Chess One Photo at a Time

Ken Lee

For anyone in the Pacific Northwest chess community, Meiling Cheng is a familiar face.

With her ready smile, friendly personality and handy phone, Meiling has been providing amazing photography for *Northwest Chess* magazine since 2021.

Meiling's three children—Howard, a sophomore at University of Washington in Bothell; Edward, senior at Garfield High; and Selina, seventh grader at Tillicum Middle School—have been a part of the chess community for many years.

I sat down with Meiling to discuss chess, photography, and her journey as a chess parent.

Ken: When did you first come to Seattle?

Meiling: I moved from Guangdong, China to Seattle in 2003 and had to learn to adapt to a completely new life. My kids were all born here in Seattle.

Ken: What got them interested in chess in initially?

Meiling: They were fortunate to have some great chess experiences as young kids. My sons got involved with chess early on at their elementary school in

South Seattle. FIDE Master (FM) Coach William (Bill) Schill and Steve Ryan from Seattle Chess School were my boys' first coaches at their elementary school. Later, they got involved with Detective Cookie's Chess Club.

Selina first started learning chess from Detective Cookie and Larry Greenawalt at the Detective Cookie Chess Club. She also worked with Coach Bill and Steve from her elementary school chess club. Both Edward and Selina learned a lot from National Master (NM) Coach Matt Fleury online during COVID.

Coach Ray Easterday from Orangutan Chess Academy has also supported my kids since we first met at the Seattle Public Library. Another amazing person has been Coach Valentin Razmov, who we met at a chess tournament. More recently, Woman FIDE Master (WFM) Coach Chouchanik Airapetian has been Selina's coach as well.

Ken: Wow, that's a lot of different coaches! Did you purposely plan to work with so many different coaches over the years?

Meiling: Well, believe it or not, that was unplanned. Fortunately, I had the opportunity to meet so many kind people who have helped us along the way. I figured that if a coach could inspire my kids to

be excited about playing chess, I would like to work with them. What a blessing for my kids to learn from such amazing coaches and friends.

Ken: I guess it pays to be friendly! Why did you want to support your kids' interest in chess?

Meiling: To be honest, it all kind of happened naturally. Even though I don't know much about the actual game of chess, our family felt like it was a great activity for our kids. It was clear to me that chess could help my kids develop and sharpen their strategic thinking, problem solving and decision making skills.

I also thought chess could help my kids learn to be more patient and resilient. Chess also taught them about goal setting and how to achieve those goals through dedication and hard work. Honestly, what I like most about chess is its energy. I think that the energy of chess and the intentionality of chess are good things for kids to experience.

Ken: Can you expand on that idea please?

Meiling: I believe that life is like a chess game. Chess is a journey filled with ups and downs, laughter and tears, joy and sadness, wins and losses. But for me, the most important thing about chess is that it's a boundless opportunity to learn something new, grow, and enjoy the process. Good sportsmanship is always something good for the entire chess community to embrace and promote.

Ken: How have your kids' chess experiences changed over the years?

"The most important thing about chess is that it's a boundless opportunity to learn something new, grow, and enjoy the process."



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Contact Lin S. Shih
(206) 954-0963
lin@linshih.com

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Meiling: It was very challenging for my boys to continue with chess in middle school because most of the elementary school friends quit chess to pursue other sports or interests. Also, there wasn't a chess club in their middle school. It's the same now with Selina. Her current middle school does not have a formal chess club or chess coach. This makes it harder for her to continue playing. But she has adapted and continues to play more online games and compete in tournaments. While one of my boys continues to compete occasionally, the boys' interests have expanded into other areas.

Ken: How did you get involved with becoming a photographer for the chess community?

Meiling: I started taking photos as a volunteer for Detective Cookie and her chess events back in 2016. Then in 2021, I was invited by WCF President NM Josh Sinanan to take photos at various chess tournaments. I've been doing it for years now and I love it!

Ken: What makes a good chess photo?

Meiling: I think a good photo requires the right body posture, facial expression, and movement. It also requires the right chess player on the right board with the best possible chess position. When I am taking photos at a chess tournament, my focus is more on the players than on the board. To me, the board tells about the position in a game, while the players tell the story about what they have been going through in a game or tournament.

I have observed a wide range of emotions from players over the years. They vary from boredom, disappointment, anger, anxiety, stress, and frustration to relaxation, contentment, confidence, joy, surprise, excitement, and pride.

The challenge is that chess players must try to keep their emotions in check and refrain from showing their emotions to their opponents. I think it's an interesting skill set that is unique to chess.

Ken: What makes a perfect chess photo?

Meiling: A perfect chess photo is the one that captures the most critical moment in a match and conveys the story about the game as well as the players involved.

Ken: What else would you like to share with readers after witnessing

thousands of chess tournaments?

Meiling: I would like to take this opportunity to say "thank you" to all the chess players, families, volunteers, organizers and especially my WCF team members for your absolute trust, understanding, consideration and support with my volunteer work.

I really want to give Detective Cookie and WCF President Josh Sinanan a special shout-out in providing me the great opportunity to make my photographic journey possible.

Ken: What do you think is the future of chess?

Meiling: As a volunteer and chess parent, I am glad to see supportive chess coaches and parents always be there for the players whenever they need them. I

am also happy to see the chess players help and support each other. I would highly recommend players, families and coaches to volunteer at tournaments or other events whenever possible.

I would also like to see more players and parents share their experience and stories through *Northwest Chess Magazine*.

Your articles for *Northwest Chess* help bridge the gap between people who are inside and outside the community and are very inspiring to all of us. I will keep on shooting photos! Ken, please keep on writing!



*US Junior Open, Chicago 2024, Meiling Cheng (L) and Selina Cheng.
Photo courtesy of Meiling Cheng.*