

Weiqi (Go): The Martial Art of the Scholar

The second of the Chinese Four Arts is called “Qi”. Often this is translated as “Chess”, but the term describes all logical thinking games. Some see it as referring to “Xiangqi”, Chinese Chess, but that game’s tradition was among the working classes and not a suitable art for a gentleman. It is more commonly recognised that the game referred to is the classic game Weiqi (pronounced “way-chee”). Weiqi means the surrounding game. In the west Weiqi is known as Go. Go (more formally “Igo”) is one of the names used for it in Japan. We like to think of it as the martial art of the scholar, as it needs as much concentration and technique as the physical martial arts and certainly is a work out for the brain.

Go started in China, maybe 3000 years ago. The legend has it that the emperor Yao invented it to train the mind of his lazy son, Dan Zhu, so that he would become a mighty warrior. This legend would put the origin back more than 4000 years. Another version of the legend (recorded in about 280 AD) attributes it to the emperor Shun. Both were seen as very wise emperors. However the truth is lost in the mists of time.

One theory is that the boards existed first as a form of calendar or for divination, both also associated with Yao, and the game developed later. Go manuals from the 12th Century mention the calendar connection, with the number of days in a year being almost the same as the number of points on a Go board, but there is evidence that Go started on a smaller sized board so this connection is uncertain. The divining board option seems most likely. Go certainly existed by the time of Confucius as it is mentioned in the “Analects”, where it is thought of as one step up from idleness. Go is also mentioned in “Zhu Zhuan” and also by Mencius.

By the late Zhou period Go is one the four accomplishments, along with archery, chariot-driving and zither playing, none of which it is possible to stop learning. Detailed description of Go appear in the Han period. Stone boards have been found in ancient tombs of this period giving firm evidence of nearly 2000 years of play. Early dictionaries use the name “Yi” instead of Weiqi, which seems to be a regional variation which may also have applied to size of board used. The earliest game record in existence dates from about 200 AD and poetry describing the game also exists from this period.

What is sure is that the game spread through Korea, where it is known as “Baduk”, and reached Japan in about the seventh century. In all three countries Go was much played by the ruling elite, priest and warrior classes. Ancient warriors, such as the Japanese samurai and the great Chinese generals, used to play to train their minds for battle.

In Japan, Go became organised in the 17th Century when the shogun gave a stipend to the four best players and from this four Go schools developed. Through these schools a ranking system was set up, classifying professional players into nine grades or “dans”. The highest grade was “Meijin”, meaning expert. This title could be held by only one person at a time, and was awarded only if one player out-classed all his contemporaries. Meijin Dosaku of the Honinbo school, in the 1670s, was probably the best player ever, causing great advances in Go theory. All this structure changed when feudal power ended in 1868; Meijin and Honinbo are titles competed for by today’s

professionals (similar titles exist in China and Korea). Go remains popular in Japan today and often Go is referred to as Japan's national game.

Go was slower to develop in China and indeed, during the Cultural Revolution, its playing was suppressed. The Chinese professional system was only started in 1978. It is in China, Japan and Korea that nowadays you can play Go professionally and earn up to a million dollars a year. For many years the Japanese dominated the scene, and then in the 1990s the Koreans, but now it is the Chinese stars that tend to win international matches. It is, however, in Korea where Go is the most popular with an estimated one in ten of the population playing it.

However Go did not spread outside the Chinese sphere of influence, and it was not until the late nineteenth century that Go was discovered by the West, when contacts with China and Japan increased. Books on the game first appeared in Europe in about 1880. However it was not until the second half of the twentieth century that playing Go in the West really took off. Go has been played on an organised basis in the UK since the 1950s, with nowadays clubs in most big towns and cities and a tournament every couple of weeks, somewhere in the country.

Now Go is played on an organised basis in more than 70 countries around the world, including 36 in Europe. The level of Go is in general lower in the West than in the East. The number of western players who have been able to turn professional is still less than 10. The most successful of these is the American, Michael Redmond, who has reached the highest rank in Japan (9-dan), but has never won a top title.

As is natural, Go often features in art from the oriental countries. Painting, carvings and ceramics can all be found with a Go theme. Woodblock paintings often show Go being played, or glimpses of boards, or even Go boards being used as weapons to fight off a surprise attack. Often the players are warriors, or elegant ladies, or even the immortals. Items as such as Japanese inro cases and netsuke toggles can be found with carved Go boards. Wooden objects such as screens or cupboards are often painted or otherwise decorated with Go motifs. Plates, ink stands, boxes and vases often feature Go too.

Several such artefacts can be seen in British museums, such as The British Museum, The Victoria and Albert, The Ashmolean in Oxford, The Fitzwilliam in Cambridge, those in Maidstone, Bristol and Bournemouth, and several others. Some items even illustrate the four accomplishments, such as a Chinese porcelain stand in the collection of The Ashmolean and a pair of vases in The Lady Lever Art Gallery in Port Sunlight. Next time you visit an oriental collection keep a look out.

You can often come across Go in novels and in films and television programmes. Sometimes Go appears there in its oriental context, but often outside of it. There are too many to mention them all. "Shibumi" by Trevanian is perhaps the most famous novel and "A Beautiful Mind" the most famous film. Television shows that have featured Go include "Ally McBeal", "Enterprise", "24" and "Diagnosis Murder".

In Japan, at the end of the 20th Century, Go was seen as a game played by old people. However a children's manga and anime series called "Hikaru no Go" reversed this. The story revolves around the adventures of a boy, Hikaru, who is possessed by the

ghost of a long dead Go player who wants to play Go again. As Hikaru cannot play Go he has to learn fast and is soon racing towards professional level, with the ghosts help, much to the amazement of everyone else. In China there is an animated series set in historical times about children who play Go called “Weiqi Shaonian”.

How to Play

Go has one of the easier rule sets of such games, though it can be hard to understand written descriptions. It takes just a few minutes to learn how to place the black and white stones on to the grid-lined board, how to surround the opponent’s stones and capture them, and how to make territory and get control of more than half the board to win. However, because the game is so open and unrestricted, there are very many different choices on each move, and many possible strategies and tactics to employ. This makes the game harder to progress with than most; traditionally it is said to take a lifetime to master. There are so many different moves playable on the 19 by 19 grid board, that there is an astronomical number of possible games; no game is ever repeated.

The board is a square grid of lines, 19 across by 19 down. As play is on the intersections, where the lines meet, there are 361 possible places to play. Playing on the intersections feels a little odd if you are used to games played within the squares, but the lines are significant in Go. Any size of board can be used, and both 9 by 9 and 13 by 13 boards are used for quick games. The smaller sizes are especially useful when learning the rules as you can make your mistakes fast and get on to another game with the hope to do better.

The board normally starts empty. The less experienced player takes the black stones and starts first. If they are very much weaker than the white player they can take extra plays on the board to begin with as a head start. These handicap stones are usually placed on the nine dots that appear on the board where the 4th, 10th and 16th lines cross. Play then continues by alternation.

The aim of the game is to get control of more than half the board by occupying or encircling it by your stones to make territory. There are two main methods of working out the score at the end. The Chinese count the stones and the points they surround, but the Japanese use a simpler calculation by only counting the empty spaces but subtracting points for any stone lost through capture. The player with the bigger score is the winner.

Stones are captured when all the lines coming out of them are blocked by enemy stones. This is normally by four enemy stones for an isolated stone (or 3 if on the edge and 2 if in the corner). Stones can be linked to friendly stones along the lines and for these to be captured all the lines coming from all the linked stones have to be blocked in. Sometimes a string or group of stones gets into a hopeless position without getting all its empty lines filled in. This is called “dead” and gets removed at the end as if it was captured.

It is forbidden to play a stone such that at the end of your turn it is left with no empty lines. As a consequence, a group of stones must have at least two places the opponent

cannot play inside it (called “eyes”) to make itself invulnerable to capture (a “live group”).

There is a rule that prevents a single stone capture taking you back to the position you have just come from (called “ko”) and special rules that deal with the very rare situations where a repetition occurs after a sequence of plays.

Players continue playing alternately until eventually neither player can border off any new territory nor can they capture any more of the opponent’s stones. At this point both players pass and the score calculated. Because they are dividing up 361 points between them, draws are quite rare. Often between evenly matched players, white gets extra points added to their score as compensation for the disadvantage of going second. If a possible draw is unwanted then this is set as a fraction, say 6.5 points.

If you want to know more about how to play, or play better, then there are lots of books available that teach Go.

For more information on how to play, where to play, on books, artefacts, culture and history visit the British Go Association website at www.britgo.org.

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