

What They Said: Quotes From Over Two Thousand Years of Go History

by Peter Shotwell

Taken from my articles and from some at www.kiseido.com

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From *Doers and Dreamers*:

Teng Yuan Sui wrote about two 18th century Chinese masters who played the legendary “10 Games of the West Lake.”

Only Shi could match Fan, but the sun could set over Shi’s moves of defense while Fan, smiling and lighthearted, could exchange jokes with his friends, or go to sleep between the moves of his opponent.

Fan Si-pin’s style is wonderful and lofty, like the divine dragon shifting shape—its head and tail are indistinguishable. His opponent, Shi Ting-an, is accurate and strict as an old horse galloping along without a misstep.

Yuan Wei wrote on Fan’s gravestone:

Shi was like the ocean in great flood, containing much that is profound. Fan was like the high mountains, with aspirations that were lofty and marvelous.

Su Shi, an 11th century poet and politician began a poem about being in exile on S. China's heat-drenched Hainan Island. While watching his son play the local magistrate-overseer, he remembers better times.

*In front of Five-Old-Men Peak,
Was a place left by the White Crane.
Tall pines shaded the courtyard;
The breeze and sunshine were pure and lovely.*

*I was visiting alone,
And hadn't met a single gentleman.
Who was it playing wei-ch'i?
Outside the door, two pairs of shoes.*

*No human voice was heard,
But occasionally I heard stones being put down.
Sitting across from each other over the lined board
Who understands the flavor of the scene? . . .*

From *Speculations About the Origins of Go*:

Change Nui wrote sometime between 1049 and 1054 AD in his *Classic of Go*:

There are on the Go board 360 intersections plus one. The number one is supreme and gives rise to the other numbers because it occupies the ultimate position and governs the four quarters. 360 represents the number of days in the [lunar] year. The division of the Go board into four quarters symbolizes the four seasons. The 72 points on the circumference represent the [five-day] weeks of the [Chinese lunar] calendar. The balance of Yin and Yang is the model for the equal division of the 360 stones into black and white.

The 17th century Catholic missionary **Mateo Ricci** wrote one of the first descriptions of go playing to reach the West:

Most important among them is a . . . game. On a board of three hundred cabinets, several play together with two hundred stones of which some are white, others black. . . . Upon this game the Officials pounce most eagerly and often they spend the major part of the day on playing . . . He who is experienced in this game is, though he did not distinguish himself in any other matter, respected and invited by all. Yes, even some also choose them as teachers, according to the customs usual to them, in order that they may thoroughly learn from them the theory of the game.

Wang Yao, a 3rd century AD anti-go Confucian wrote:

Limits are so exceeded that some even bet their clothes and personal objects . . . [as a go game progresses] tempers change, honesty and correctness are abandoned and expressions become not only choleric but even violent . . . the game is not included in the [Confucian] Six Arts . . . Adopting inconsistency and fraud as methods of play is a demonstration of the use of incorrect and disloyal principles, employing technical terms like jie [‘invasion’] and sha [‘killing’] means being devoid of ren [humanity]. Lastly, spending the day deserting one’s occupation brings no advantages and so we may wonder if there is any difference between placing stones on a game-board and simply throwing stones . . . where can we find on the [wei qi] board any relation with a prefecture? And the three hundred pieces with an army of a thousand soldiers? Imperial robes, bells and musical stones are much more important than pieces and game-boards: who would exchange one for the other?

Yang Xiong, a similar-minded 6th century AD scholar railed about weiqi’s Daoist associations:

Some believe that criminal law corresponds to Dao because it too is spontaneous. But I say that criminal law, like weiqi, like fencing and magic practices which confuse the eye, although they are all spontaneous, still have a true Dao only generally speaking, but in their particulars they have a perverse Dao.

The stirring second act of *The Battles of Coxinga*, a Japanese Kabuki play by **Chikamatsu**, begins with some Immortals visiting China from their home on the moon. Seated atop their sacred mountain, they are playing a game of go. My comments follow one of theirs.

The ordinary man, confused of mind, takes it for a mere contest between go stones . . . the fish swimming in the water . . . mistakes it for a fish hook . . . the bird soaring above the clouds . . . is frightened, thinking it a bow . . .

Although the two Immortals were observing that one can see on a go board anything one wishes, as they spoke they were not looking at the 'Sky'—a traditional metaphor for the go board with its black and white stones and star points. The 'it' they viewed as mirrored on their mystical board referred to the waning and waxing of the forces of *yin* and *yang* over the land of China displayed before them—the cause of the hero's exile in the face of the invading Manchu hordes in the 17th century.

A medieval **Tibetan** story with my commentary:

A young boy's father had been murdered and the boy and his mother wanted revenge as quickly as possible. At last, when she felt he had grown old enough to take action, she took out a go set to see whether the moment was propitious. As he played out a game with himself, his right hand taking White, his left playing Black, at crucial moments the mother shouted Bon power-mantras at him, and the boy's guardian-spirit sat on his right shoulder offering timely advice. Finally, White (that is, he) won, indicating the time was auspicious for finding and killing the man, which he promptly did.

The mother and son were not fortune-telling, nor seeking omens or trying to read the future in our sense of it. They were ascertaining the state of the universe at that moment: was the time auspicious or ill? Who was playing the black stones? Who was playing White? No one. It was the stones that were 'playing' the boy, just as a shaman might be 'danced' by powers greater than him- or herself.

From *Appendix V of Speculations About the Origins of Go*:

In the early 3rd century BC *Zuo Zhuan*, with translator James Legge's spelling, **T'ae-shuh Wan-tsze**, an outraged minister is said to have spoken out about his erring cousin around 543 BC:

Ning-tsze is dealing with his ruler not carefully, as he would at go. How is it possible for him to escape disaster? If a go player lifts his stone without definite object, he will not conquer his opponent. How much more must this be the case when one tries to take a king without a definite object? He is sure not to escape ruin. Alas that by one movement a family whose heads have been ministers for nine generations should be extinguished!

From *Combinatorics*:

Mathematician **John Tromp** wrote about a possible go game that doesn't end until a previous position for both sides is repeated.

. . . the longest possible Go game has over 10^{48} moves (1 followed by 48 zeros). . . . [but], this game might run into time limit problems. According to one theory—the Big Freeze—if gravity fails to hold the universe together, there will only be another 1000 trillion years before all matter disappears. . . . With about 32,000,000 seconds in a year, the players would have to move very, very fast, since there would just be thirty-one sextillion seconds (32 followed by only 21 zeros) left to play in.

. . . the old adage that “there are more possible Go games than there are atoms in the universe” vastly understates the situation. [There are] . . . $2.081681994 \times 10^{170}$ possible positions, . . . and the number of particles in the universe is only 10^{80} .

[Comparing go with chess is not even like] . . . comparing the size of the universe with the size of the nucleus of an atom. . . [The] 41 orders of magnitude and the 125 orders of magnitude difference that Go positions have over chess positions dwarfs that. . . on a 2x2 board, there are 386,356,909,593 possible games [and]. . . even the number of digits in the number of 19x19 Go games is larger than the number of chess games. You really have to let that sink in. . . .

Some additional quotes from the homepage of Kiseido (www.kiseido.com):

Ban Gu, a 1st century AD historian wrote:

The board has to be square, for it signifies the Earth, and its right angles signify uprightness. The pieces of the two sides are yellow and black; this difference signifies the Yin and the Yang -- scattered in groups all over the board, they represent the heavenly bodies. These significances being manifest, it is up to the players to make the moves, and this is connected with kingship. Following what the rules permit, both opponents are subject to them -- this is the rigor of the Tao.

Yasunari Kawabata wrote about a 1938 historic match in *The Master of Go*:

That play of black upon white, white upon black, has the intent and takes the form of creative art. It has in it a flow of the spirit and a harmony of music. Everything is lost when suddenly a false note is struck, or one party in a duet suddenly launches forth on an eccentric flight of his own. A masterpiece of a game can be ruined by insensitivity to the feelings of an adversary.

Trevanian commented in *Shibumi*, his 1970s thriller:

Go is to Western chess what philosophy is to double entry accounting.

An **anonymous** go player once said:

The board is a mirror of the mind of the players as the moments pass. When a master studies the record of a game he can tell at what point greed overtook the pupil, when he became tired, when he fell into stupidity, and when the maid came by with tea.