

PURE INTELLIGENCE

Words Peter Wendes

'THE SUBTLETIES OF THIS GAME ARE BEYOND THE REACH OF THE LAZY, ITS TRIUMPH TOO EXQUISITE FOR THE VULGAR AND MATERIALISTIC PERSON' *HERBERT A. GILES*

It is the world's second most-played strategy game (after Chinese Chess) with some 60 million players, but you could spend a lifetime in the West without ever seeing it in the flesh. It appears in such films as *Pi* and *A Beautiful Mind*, but only in fleeting glimpses and without ever being named. It is regarded as the quintessential game: pure, simple, but profoundly difficult to master. What is it? The ancient strategy game of Go.

Originating in China, where it is known as *weiqi*, at least three thousand years ago, Go's beginnings are wrapped in myth. The board, consisting of a grid of lines in each direction, indicates a link with the lunar calendar, and the black and white playing pieces, called stones, with the concepts of yin and yang. Some stories tell of an Emperor who used the game to sharpen the mind of a wayward son. Undoubtedly, Go has been valued since ancient times for the way it develops not only logical and strategic thinking but also judgement, balance and respect for your opponent – much like the physical martial arts.

Throughout its long history the game has sustained the interest of many sections of society. Older than Buddhism, in Japan it captured the attention of Zen monks and the samurai warrior class, who both recognised Buddhist philosophy reflected in the interplay of the game's simple rules and almost esoteric complexity. Though the equipment can be exquisite (and also very expensive) a board and stones can be improvised anywhere with whatever is to hand. In India, small children in orphanages use bottle caps and cardboard to play through professional game records, while in Canada and Alaska construction workers caught without a set use river pebbles, coins or sweets.

To get started, all you need is a grid of lines (19x19 for the full-sized board, although 13x13 or even 9x9 work well). Stones can be improvised from any small objects of contrasting colour, and sets can be made from recycled or reused materials. Players place their stones on the intersections of the lines and try to surround areas of the board. At the end of the game, the player who has surrounded the most vacant territory is the winner.

Since neither player can have the whole board, and greedy or arrogant moves tend to be punished, the aim is try to gain a little more than half the board: a model of democracy rather than total war. Stones which become blocked in by enemy stones are captured and removed as prisoners. For absolute beginners, this principle of 'surround and capture' can be treated as a game in itself, and as useful training for the vast creative possibilities of the full game, summed up by Zhang Yunqi as encompassing 'the tactics of the soldier, the exactness of the mathematician, the imagination of the artist, the inspiration of the poet, the calm of the philosopher and the greatest intelligence'.

If you'd like to try Go yourself, there are a vast number of resources available online, including a facebook application. Most countries have a national Go association which holds a list of clubs. ■

britgo.org
zenmachine.co.uk

Peter Wendes is Vice President of the British Go Association and founder of Zen Machine

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