

Appendix IV

Some Newer Thoughts About Early Go

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(Note: This was first posted in October 2006 and has only been lightly edited, with the exception of a few remarks that can be found by searching for asterisks ().*

It has been suggested that a chronological approach to the Yao/Dan Zhu/Shun myth cycle would improve the theories that I have been proposing about go's history. However, as I explained in the main Origins article, and have witnessed in Mexican Indian witchcraft wars while ghostwriting two books with Dr. Tim Knabb, myths are told to and written down by people who often pick out variations that are useful for their own agendas.

For example, in most of the variants, Dan Zhu is a scoundrel and/or wastes all his time playing go, so he is good for nothing else. However, for some groups with different interests, he is portrayed as a noble person who was righteously rebelling to claim his inheritance as a natural right, because Shun stole the throne and/or was a commoner.

Also, as I suggested in Appendix II, Dan Zhu might have been symbolically portrayed as revolting against the new Neolithic, imperial order that his father brought down from heaven and imposed upon the previously clannish, hunting and gathering, largely undefined Chinese tribes. And since the Shang actually did this, the feelings about these events might also be radically different, depending on whether a group was a winner or loser in the process.

Moreover, the Yao myth seems to have originally been a 'Control of the Flood' story in which the major characters once played symbolic roles and were later transformed into the 'good kings' and their various ministers in the Golden Age—a reverse-euhemerizing process that accelerated with the distortions produced by the Han historical writers, who modeled the ancient governments after an ideal version of their own.

**As mentioned at greater length in the main text, there is also the major problem that almost all the accounts are long removed from their original oral or literary sources and are not listed in standard go references, although they are available in English in China, where I read them. However, I wasn't contemplating writing essays like this and so the references have long been misplaced. However, their authenticity has been confirmed with various experts, so I have been left with only the fact that there were many variants whose meaning can be guessed at, based on material from other fields of inquiry.*

However, a chronology of the earliest literary references to actual go-playing is another story. Until last year, being occupied with other projects and concentrating what little time I had on the Daoist aspects of go, I was unaware that Dr. E. Bruce Brooks and his wife Taeko had chronologically dated the works of the early Confucian writers. Their

results appeared in *The Original Analects* (Columbia Univ. Press 1998) and on the Internet at *The Warring States Project* (www.umass.edu/wsp/).

By comparing texts, changes in society and verifiable events, the Brooks have been able to put forward a thesis that not only were most of the Confucian Analects and the Mencius written by others, but the actual dates of their production by their Schools were much later than generally thought. Of course, they have attracted controversy (and their lively rejoinders are a delight to read on the website), but their dating of the relevant go passages seem logical and well documented.

Inspired by their writing, I coupled together the three Confucian passages with that in the Zuo Zhuan and made some conclusions that have been presented in detail in Appendix V. Thus, this more general speculation of the course of early go had to be revised.

To begin with, there are the 4,000 year-old 'game stones' found in Shang houses and tombs and in Siberia myths that were described in detail in the main text.

Given the archeological record and the fact that the Chinese seemed to have always played numerous casual pebble games—as they do today in their streets, tents and tea houses—it seems reasonable that some kind or kinds of these games were played by the Shang with their stones. To say that one of the simplest, or even the most simple of these games is go, or one-eyed go, also seems reasonable, as I hope the teaching methods of my two books, *Go! More Than a Game* and *Go Basics* (Tuttle Publishing) have demonstrated.

That these original board games may have had a significant symbolic value as a non-chance game that was not derived from divination also seems logical, given the Yao and Yellow Emperor origin myths and the close association of the methods of playing go with Chinese hunting and warfare techniques that go back 5,000 years. These observations are also related in detail in the main text.

Perhaps when the momentousness of such an invention (or discovery) had passed and the Chinese were no longer being buried with their game stones and their minds had evolved to a more complex stage, playing go on small boards with ordinary pebbles may have settled into an ordinary activity.

Perhaps, children played it, or perhaps, like the telling of myths, it was played casually around camp fires or during long winters, on boards with no fixed number of lines that were scratched out on the ground, or drawn on wood. Perhaps many adults may not have even considered continuing to play, let alone practicing to become good, because the dice game of *liu bo* had probably become the major sacred gambling game.

If this is so, the level of play for hundreds of years must have been very low and probably did not improve much.

As I wrote in Appendix V, go may not have been written about before the end of the 4th century BC because it lay outside of the interests and classification systems of the philosophers and writers of these periods, especially those who were interested in history and man's moral development. As a strategic game, it was worthy of some seriousness, but it seems it was also just a pastime.

For further thought, think of how baseball and football evolved from neighborhood games to international, professional pursuits. The beginnings of football

are lost in English history and recent studies have shown that the same is true for baseball in America—meaning that most writers were not paying much attention as they developed. Again, these were sports that ‘everyone’ ‘just did.’ Everyone has played checkers today, but who writes about their experiences? And who compares them to war strategies or philosophy? Go, like checkers, is after all, basically a very simple game.

To give a personal example, in the 1960s, before the Internet, I considered go as an amazing game when I learned it, but I was taught by someone who had only just learned himself. For almost ten years, all over the world, I played once in a while, but without any instruction, and only against others whom I taught, or those who also had no instruction. In other words, go was fun and the greatest of games, but it certainly did not consume even a tiny part of my serious thoughts.

When I finally encountered a Japanese who was a 1-*dan*, I discovered that I was about a 15-*kyu* or worse—I don’t remember and, in any case, I think he was rather gentle with me. I’ll never forget my amazement when I was shown, on a 19x19 board (I didn’t know there was any other size), how playing in one corner can affect stones in the other three (and I believe that he was the one who also taught me that it was best to play first in the corners).

In other words, I had discovered that go was not just tactically chasing groups around and that grand strategies could be involved. Because go requires a visual-perceptual game wisdom that is not analogous with traditional literary or artistic learning, I think that this is might well be an analogue of what happened in early China which would again account for the lack of any mention until late in the 4th century BC.

As described in Appendix V, the go analogy of 547-8 BC in the *Zuo Zhuan* was no doubt an interpolation of perhaps around 315 BC—one more of the events, as the Brooks said of the *Zuo Zhuan*’s expansion of the laconic *Annals of the Spring and Autumn*, which ‘. . . gives a misleading picture of the age that was classic for Classical China, but [reflects] the concerns of Classical China itself.’

But Ning He’s political hesitation can be compared to hesitation in go only because this was something that everyone vaguely knew about—so much so that the phrase that described it became a forever-popular proverb involving the perennial idea of having ‘two-hearts’ —the heart being thought of as the seat of thinking in ancient China. But this still doesn’t mean that go at the time was played with a lot of skill—at least relative skill. The remark about no plans and hesitation while holding aloft a go stone is a remark I could have made with my 15-*kyu*-or-worse skill.

Thus, it is *not* surprising that go was *not* commented on by contemporary warrior/philosopher Daoists, such as Sun Zi, despite the fact that their strategies resemble in great detail those written about in later times. I think this might be because those strategies (and the sizes of board necessary to build them) had not yet developed in go.

So the *Mencius* writers’ first comment in c. 280 BC seems to describe what still might have been considered a children’s game played by adults (like baseball), so there were young noblemen playing it accompanied by the gambling habits and possibilities of addiction that obviously began in their childhood—think of the poker playing that begins in junior high school.

The Confucius writer's comment ten years later, in c. 270 BC—that at least the players' brains instead of their stomachs are somewhat active—may not so much reflect a negativity about the game. Instead, he and Mencius might be referring to the addictive powers of go, particularly when fueled by gambling. (He could also be implying that the amount of thinking required for a higher level of skill was not being employed). In other words, go may have still been a highly intuitive game, suitable for playing during wine-drinking, eating and watching singsong girls dance.

Ten years later, in c. 260 BC, although there is a Master involved and the game is described as 'small art,' the level of play does not seem to have advanced enough to be worth much of a mention by anyone else. (We can disregard the 681 BC *Shi Ji* event that is mentioned by Japanese historian Watanabe Yoshimichi as a later invention, if indeed it was go was being discussed).

If it had been important, then following the argument presented in Appendix IV, as part and parcel of the Confucian drift towards a more rational universe that required study and discipline, Xun Zi, the dominant philosopher of the period leading up to the Qin takeover would no doubt have mentioned it in his voluminous writings.

After the Qin period began in 221 BC, and up to the founding of the Han empire, 206 BC to 220 AD, chaotic conditions would have disrupted play, but after that, everything changes and everyone seems to be playing and teaching their sons, as evidenced by the preponderance of tomb boards, and, as discussed in the main article, by the frequent outcries of the Emperor's hack writers, who were told to promote Confucian values at the expense of rebellious Daoist thoughts. Go, the Confucians implied, looked like it was something good to teach one's kids, but it really wasn't—all one had to do was look at Dan Zhu, who fought his father using the dirty tricks of go strategies he learned from him.

Bolstering this idea is the fact that no one seems to have reacted negatively against the Daoist-principled game before the Han period. This is another indication that the danger of the game's deeper strategies were finally being recognized as akin to those of the mortally and morally dangerous Daoist warrior/philosophers.

But then Ban Gu (32-92 AD), a proper Confucian, came along and wrote about how go actually conformed with the *Dao*. His work is briefly described in the main text and in Appendix I, and in more detail on Dr. Paolo Zanon's websites. As described in Appendix V, we can see hints of this development in the second *Mencius* quote.

But what about the level of skill involved? To me, Ma Rong's (79-166 AD) ecstatic *Fu* poem seems to be similar to how 5 *kyus* tend to write about go (as I once did)—they tend to be impressed with the action, but do not yet see the overall strategies.

This excerpt is taken from John Fairbairn's http://www.gogod.demon.co.uk/NewInGo/MaRong_1.htm and the extremely thorough historical section of his *GoGod* CD available at www.gogod.demon.co.uk

First there is a description of rather rudimentary opening tactics that certainly could have been lifted from the writers of Sun Zi's *The Art of War*. The section that follows begins:

*The plan of how the game's contested
Lies in what I have just expressed,*

*But how to choose 'twixt slow and urgent
I have not yet distinguished,
For the muddled multitude of white and black
Is bound together like a creeping plant,
Disordered, diffuse, diverse, deviating
As turn by turn groups connect and cross.
First mark this: if your defence is weak and patchy
You will be undone by your gloating rival.
Go too deep into territory you covet,
And he'll attack and kill your men.
And if they struggle to help each other,
Every last one will be slain.
Cut off ahead and blocked behind,
On all four sides tightly hemmed,
Encircled or sparsely scattered,
You face a sobbing, sorry end.*

*. . . For strategy and success may cancel out,
In time each may falter,
Yet with care you can revive.
As you pick up your piece, eschew
Confusion and embarrassment,
And avoid devious, shallow trickery.
Think deeply and ponder far.
Then you can win, and will for sure.*

I think that is an adequate description of how a 5 *kyu* might look at the late stages of a complicated middle game where there has been no overall strategy applied. We could assume that such a noted person as Ma Rong would have known about overall strategies and described them, had they existed at the time. Other Han mentions of go do not describe strategies, either, beyond the rudimentary elements mentioned above.

Then, toward the end of the Han period, suddenly there is a go player who becomes famous because he could replay his games. *(I remember reading this many years ago, but have been unable to verify it—in any case, there are reports later on of players being able to do this).

As discussed in my go and cognitive psychology articles, go and chess studies have shown that some kind of order is needed to remember and replay moves—poor and/or random moves are remembered by neither beginner nor expert. This would imply that the man had strategies, and was not just reacting against local tactics, and also that he probably played them against other players whose grand strategies he understood and could remember. In fact, that degree of skill and perception is probably why the 1-*dan* level or its equivalent is still regarded as the first sign of excellence.

After the Han, things seemed to change radically. In the Three Kingdoms period (220-260 AD), as Shirakawa Masayoshi so excellently relates in his otherwise deeply

flawed book, *A Journey in Search of the Origins of Go* (see Appendix III), it is apparent that skill and enthusiasm improved remarkably.

However, the only game records from that period are partial and were probably written in retrospect during the Song period after 1000 AD. Like other 'ancient' artifacts from the Song, most likely these were forgeries (along with the so-called 'oldest' recorded game).

By c. 600 AD, perhaps inspired by Buddhism, the quiet beauty of go is being recognized in poetry, and the first go book, the *Games of Wu*, is mentioned. (This is discussed by Dr. Chen Zu-yan at

http://www.usgo.org/resources/downloads/black_and_white.pdf)

A hundred years later, in the Tang dynasty, a Department of Go and the ranking of players is organized and the discipline and the amount of thinking needed to be a top player enables the game to finally achieve the respect of being called, at least by some, one of the Four Great Arts. However, not all the *literati* would come to this conclusion until the Song, so perhaps this indicates that the game had to improve even more to gain true respect as the most magnificent of games.