

World on 361 Points

Understanding Chinese Culture via the Board Game **Go**

By Ze-Li Dou



Close-up of a Go player's hand showing how to hold and place a stone on the crowded board. Source: ©123RF. Photo by Saran Porong.

**The chessboard is a
battlefield, but the
Go board is a world.**

A culture may be likened to a river. While the collective history of the culture constitutes the main course of the river and defines its general direction, the philosophical, religious, and artistic traditions are major tributaries that greatly influence the river's contour. And, just as the river is ever-flowing, religion and philosophy evolve, art forms develop, and history gets interpreted and reinterpreted. A comprehensive understanding of culture is as fascinating and rewarding as it is challenging.

This essay is concerned with the ancient Chinese civilization. Its object of focus is a game—a board game called *weiqi*, or Go in English.¹ The objective of the article, however, is to introduce Confucianism and Daoism, the two most prominent philosophical traditions in China, and to illustrate their influence on the interpretation of history, as well as their own relative political dominance in history. We will achieve this by examining how philosophical attitudes are reflected in Go by literary means, which will also illustrate the interconnectedness of literature, philosophy, history, and art in China. In short, Go is like a little stone found on the bank of our grand metaphoric river; a close inspection of its polish and patina may throw light on the nature and history of the river itself.

Go is the oldest board game of strategy still played today. The work that contains the earliest unambiguous mention of Go, *Shiben*, was composed in the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE); Yao, the most revered among the semilegendary Five Sovereigns in Chinese history, is named as its inventor. This boast, though fabulous, establishes Go as a highly valued activity among the elite class. After all, many other inventions that are clearly valuable to the same people, such as Chinese characters and wine, are relegated to lesser luminaries (Cang Jie and Du Kang, respectively) in the same work.

The game is played on a nineteen-by-nineteen grid. Thus, the board contains a total of $19 \times 19 = 361$ points.² Two players take turns placing black and white “stones” on the intersections of the grid. Go differs from chess (invented much later, perhaps in the sixth century CE) on one essential point: while chess is a pitched battle of two “armies,” Go is a competition between two “colonizing forces.” Chess begins with all the pieces on the board, but Go begins with none. Chess pieces differ in value and movement; Go stones are all identical and, unless captured, remain in place once played. A chess game is lost when one army is destroyed; a Go game is won when one colony ends up controlling more territory. In short, the chessboard is a battlefield, but the Go board is a world.

The antiquity of Go makes it a witness of Confucianism and Daoism right from their own births. In the Spring and Autumn period (771–476 BCE), starting about one-third of the way into the very long Zhou dynasty, the centralized government of the Zhou court had collapsed, and China was marked by increasing division and warfare, accompanied by chaos and suffering of the people. The “Hundred Schools of Thought” that blossomed onto this wild landscape may be partly seen as inevitable reactions to the political reality of the day.

Confucius (551–479 BCE) envisioned a perfectly harmonious society—indeed, a vast extension of an ideal family—with a ruler entrusted with the “mandate of heaven” and a highly cultivated citizenry possessing “human-heartedness.” In such a society, the *Analects* explains, “a ruler is a ruler; a minister, minister; a father, father; and a son, son,”³ hence “as the wind blows over grass, [every blade] must necessarily bend [accordingly].”⁴ The overall vision also comes with a road map, for it is to be achieved through the graduated progression from cultivated persons to organized families, to well-governed states, and, finally, to a harmonious world.⁵ The fact that Confucius had envisioned a utopia on a grand scale against such a bleak background must have been astounding indeed to his contemporaries, and his tireless striving earned him the reputation of one who “knows what [one does] is impossible, but does it nevertheless.”⁶ Confucians have proudly worn this descriptor as a badge of honor ever since, but to the Daoists, it is an illustration of Quixotic futility.

Most scholars agree that Laozi, the probably mythical founder of Daoism, was supposedly a contemporary of Confucius. To Laozi, the *dao*, or way, though imbued with a heavy dose of mysticism, is in essence rooted in nature, which alone endures forever. Therefore, *wuwei*, or no striving, must be the true principle of a blameless life; a person of high virtue behaves like (lowly?) water, benefiting all yet struggling with none.⁷ This gives dao a strong sense of immanence. At the same time, however, Daoism assumes an otherworldly, spiritual dimension, especially in the work of Zhuangzi, another major framer of Daoism who lived in the Warring States period (475–221 BCE, roughly the last third of the Zhou dynasty). A human being’s ultimate goal is to identify with nature—but the *whole* of nature, hence the entire universe. In a work titled the *World*, Zhuangzi describes the paragon of Laozi thus: “Everyone else wishes to be fortunate, but he alone remains complete, even if in twisted form.”⁸ But the ideal person à la Zhuangzi “comes and goes alone with the spirit of heaven and earth, though without despising the myriad things.”⁹

The early philosophers viewed Go as a mere contest of skills, though its star rose steadily. Confucius was mildly contemptuous of Go: “Are there not people who throw dice and play Go? Even doing those would be better [than doing nothing]!”¹⁰ Mencius, an important Confucian philosopher contemporaneous with Zhuangzi, took a kinder view some 150 years later; while agreeing that “as a skill, Go is an insignificant one,” he admonished that “without focused mind and settled resolve, it cannot be mastered.”¹¹ Another couple of centuries later, one finds this couplet in the *Huainanzi*, a prominent Daoist-influenced text: “A single play in Go is insufficient for displaying one’s intelligence; a single pluck on a string [of *qin*, a stringed musical instrument] is insufficient for expressing one’s sorrow.”¹² Evidently, Go was by then an established game of intellect, just as the *qin* was the quintessential conduit for emotion. In time, both Confucianism and Daoism would exploit the idea of Go as *World*.

China was reunified in 221 BCE, and before long, one of the mightiest dynasties in Chinese history, the Han (202 BCE–220 CE), was founded. Emperor Wu, the most powerful Han emperor, issued an edict in 136 BCE, that decreed Confucianism the orthodox philosophy in China. Confucianism functioned much like an orthodox national religion, and the ideal world suddenly seemed nearer. With that, Confucian self-cultivation also became *de rigueur*, at least in theory. The overall goal welcomed a good metaphor, and the game Go needed a *raison d’être*. Sure enough, many literary works on Go emerged, in both prose and poetic forms. The following short excerpt of a prose poem titled *Yizhi*, or “Meaning and Aim of Go,” by Ban Gu (32–92 CE), the court historian who also authored the officially sanctioned history of Han, is representative:

*The board must be square, so that the Earth is represented;
The lines must be straight, so that bright virtues are manifested.
The stones are black and white, so that yin and yang are divided;
The set stones are spread out, so that constellations are approximated.¹³
These four essentials in place, the game now depends on the players—
So goes the wise governance of a kingly state . . .*

The brand of Confucianism reflected here—grand, square, and confident—is typical of the Han dynasty. The message is clear: playing Go is worthy, because *a game of Go can be just like life itself!*

It is striking that literary works on philosophical aspects of Go are far earlier, more numerous, and better preserved than works on technical aspects of the game. The earliest extant work that contains records of actual Go games was composed at least two centuries later than Ban Gu’s poem.

A decades-long civil war followed the fall of the Han dynasty, and when China found herself reunified again at the end of the third century CE under a new dynasty, the Jin (266–420), the political landscape had changed drastically. The Jin dynasty was politically and militarily wobbly, constantly

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—Mencius



Detail of *The Four Accomplishments* by Kano Eitoku. One of six folding screens, ink on paper, showing people playing Go. Japan, Momoyama period, sixteenth century. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/w5kaupt>.

Playing Go was no longer an appendage of some larger-than-life aim dictated by Confucianism, but an expression of a life that could directly commune with the universe itself, thus commanding abundant space for allusion and evocation.

harassed from the north and west by kingdoms belonging to five “foreign,” that is, non-Han, ethnicities. It may seem very surprising, then, that during the Jin dynasty, there was a surge of intellectual and artistic ideas so truly fresh and vibrant that, in terms of cultural development, Jin China could hold her own against any other time period anywhere in the world.

A look at the philosophical development during the Jin dynasty may help resolve this paradox. Succinctly put, when political world dominance was denied, the focus of philosophy shifted to the pursuit of a more personal enlightenment. Daoism, especially Zhuangzi, had already laid groundwork for this, but the Jin philosophers added sophistication and art to it. A type of philosophical disputation called *qingtan*, or pure conversation, became popular among the literati class; its aim was to find the most cogent and pithy expressions to explicate (usually) Daoist theses.¹⁴ However, it must be noted that this new style of philosophy, though ostensibly Daoist, was also deliberately syncretic.¹⁵ Most of the Jin philosophers continued to reserve for Confucius the position of the most exalted sage; underlying it was a reinterpretation of Confucianism so thorough that a celebrated three-word assessment (in Chinese) for the relationship between Confucianism and Daoism became “Wouldn’t they be the same?”¹⁶ Moreover, Buddhism, an imported religion from India, had gained such solid footing by the Jin dynasty that the *qingtan* participants were most often well-versed in the Buddhist sutras, in addition to the Daoist and Confucian works. Not only so, but they freely sought to interpret the meaning of each by the other.¹⁷ The *tetrad* (four stages) of mindfulness through breathing (*Ānāpānasati*) could be explained, for example, by a comparison with the Daoist idea that *dao* may be attained by means of diminishing actions: “Diminish and diminish again, until no-action [wuwei] is reached.”¹⁸

In this manner, for Jin scholars, philosophical endeavors became inseparable from literary and artistic ones. And this was accompanied by a way of life with an air of carefree spontaneity, calculated or not. This quality, reflecting a spirit so free and transcendent that worldly honors and riches may be despised, and a status so elite that conventional norms of society may be discarded, was called *fengliu*, which literally translates into “wind and stream.”

Go fit into this cultural scene splendidly. Playing Go was no longer an appendage of some larger-than-life aim dictated by Confucianism, but an expression of a life that could directly commune with the universe itself, thus commanding abundant space for allusion and evocation. This may be illustrated by three *yacheng*, or “poetic names,” it acquired during the period. The individualist and relativist nature of the ideas behind these poetic names contrasts well with the overarching universal grandeur of Ban Gu. The first, *lanke*, or “rotten ax handle,” is derived from an experience of “roaming through the infinite” and alludes to the relativity of time and space.¹⁹ After entering a mountain, a logger stops to watch some boys (in truth Daoist immortals) play Go. When bidden to leave after what seems a short while, he discovers that the handle of his ax has completely rotted away. The second poetic name points to a duality between one’s mind and one’s actions, a theme well explored by poets of the period, most notably Tao Yuanming. It refers to a familiar Daoist idea of detaching from worldly affairs by becoming a recluse (to which one must now add the Buddhist idea of “leaving home”): playing Go is *zuoyin*, or “becoming a recluse while sitting [in society].” The last poetic name declares Go-playing as *shoutan*, or “pure conversation with hand [thus not even needing words].” Most delicious, this last poetic name was coined by a Buddhist monk. If playing Go can bring one to such an exalted state of mind, it is certainly *fengliu*—indeed, *life itself can be just like a game of Go!*

A famous work titled *Shishuo Xinyu* [SX] is a treasure trove of records of pure conversations and contains the best illustration for the meaning of *fengliu* as understood during the Jin dynasty.²⁰ Xie An (320–385) is one of the great heroes in SX and is especially celebrated for his “cultivated capacity.” Xie An refused many calls to take up government posts until after he turned forty. Being a romantic recluse like that was called “transcending the world” then. Once, upon seeing the grand bearing of Xie An’s brothers and cousins at a family gathering—for they had all preceded him in becoming important civil officials—Xie An’s wife teasingly asked: “Shouldn’t a man [aspire to] be like this?” Xie An pinched up his nose before giving his reply, “I only worry that I might not be able to avoid it [forever]!”²¹ However, at a gathering for *qingtan*, Xie An asked his nephew, Xie Xuan, to identify his favorite lines in the ancient *Book of Poetry*. Xie Xuan, a practiced pure conversationalist himself, produced a sentimental couplet on separation, nostalgia, and melancholy:

*Yesterday when I left, languid was the weeping willow
And today as I come, unceasing are the rain and snow.*

Thereupon, Xie An revealed his own favorite, which reads:
His strategy is grand, hence his commands are firm;

*His vision is long, hence his edicts are timely.*²²

He remarked that these lines uniquely capture the depth of the cultivated man. Such is the image of a consummate Jin philosopher with *fengliu*—notice the thorough commingling of Daoist freedom of spirit with the Confucian sense of devotion to duty and cause.

Xie An was destined to explain himself further with his actions. As it turned out, the otherworldly pure conversations had this-worldly consequences. In 383, the Jin court experienced an existential crisis. Fu Jian, king of the former Qin, one of the sixteen “foreign” kingdoms that were collectively responsible for the threat to the Jin court, invaded with a vast army of over 800,000 men.²³ Holding a post equivalent to that of prime minister at the time, Xie An coordinated the defense, and an army of about one-tenth the size led by the above-mentioned Xie Xuan routed the enemy at River Fei. The Battle of River Fei delayed the first foreign takeover of China by about 900 years and is much celebrated, understandably, as a pivotal success in officially sanctioned Chinese histories.²⁴ It follows that Xie An, the hero of this pivotal event, must be depicted in a maximally positive light.

The question, however, is this: what kind of light is to be considered maximally positive? It depends on one’s philosophical viewpoint. While *SX*, composed shortly after the Jin dynasty itself, reflects the zeitgeist faithfully and adopts a syncretic philosophical view, the official history of Jin, the *Jin Shu [JS]*, was compiled during the Tang dynasty (618–907) and adopts a more Confucian attitude. The comprehensive chronicle of Chinese history, *ZiZhi Tongjian [TJ]*, or *Historical Mirror in Aid of Governance*, which contains the “definitive” narrative for the Battle of River Fei, was edited even later, in the Song dynasty. For its author, the famous conservative Confucian scholar Sima Guang (1019–1086), the whole purpose of the monumental work was to understand history with the right viewpoint, and there could be no doubt as to what it was. Remarkably, all these shifts in the worldview are to be effected through two Go games Xie An is said to have played, which bookend the entire episode.

When the good tidings of victory arrived, Xie An was playing Go:

*A report came from the frontiers, and Xie An learned that the [Former] Qin army had been defeated. As he was playing Go with guests at the time, he folded the report back up and placed it on the bed. Betraying no air of joy, he went on with the game as before. The guests pressed him, and slowly Xie An made his reply: “So the kids had just destroyed the barbarians.”*²⁵

SX, one of *TJ*’s sources, contains a similar account. Xie An’s “cultivated capacity” is on grand display on this momentous occasion. But now, has Xie An *suppressed* his emotions, or is he so detached from worldly affairs that he *has no emotion to show*? That is a question of crucial importance for historians, for at the bottom of it, one needs to decide whether Xie An viewed his Confucian duties or his personal *fengliu* as paramount.

Xie An’s Go playing could be interpreted either way, and *SX* does not explain further; its narrative simply ends there. The ambiguity, one cannot help but speculate, is deliberate. A roughly contemporaneous work of history, *Xu Jinyangqiu [XJ]*, however, adds a detail immediately afterward:

*The guests having gone back [after the game], Xie An’s heart was so joyful that he broke the sole of his shoe over the threshold as he went back into his rooms; he did not feel it.*²⁶

Once Xie An’s lack of emotion is shown as a façade, the Go game suddenly suggests itself as a symbol of “wise governance of a kingly state,” and Xie An is on terra firma. Not surprisingly, both *JS* and *TJ* include this additional detail with minimal editing.

This editorial process covers a centuries-long arc of time, but there can be no doubt that it is deliberate. Another Go game, also in connection to the Battle of River Fei, makes this even clearer. It is said to have been played shortly after the news of the Former Qin invasion had reached the Jin capital:

At that time, the entire capital was shocked and terrified by the massiveness of [Former] Qin’s [invading] army. Xie Xuan went to Xie An to inquire about strategies. Xie An kept a placid visage, and replied, “There have been other plans already.” He was silent after that. Xie Xuan did not dare to ask again . . .

*Xie An then had chariots prepared for a day of festivities at his countryside properties, and gathered family and friends alike. He played Go with Xie Xuan, and wagered a villa on the game. Normally, Xie An’s Go skills were inferior to that of Xie Xuan. On that day, however, Xie Xuan had fear in his heart, and could not prevail on the Go board even on equal terms. After the game, Xie An toured the country and climbed hills, and didn’t return until the night.*²⁷

To the omniscient historian, the Go game is an evocation to Xie An’s masterful strategy, as well as his confidence and vision, and inspires admiration—it recalls the poem by Ban Gu and illustrates Xie An’s favorite lines from the *Book of Poetry*. For Xie Xuan and the rest of the dramatis personae in



Woman Playing Go. Painting on silk. Unearthed at the Astana Cemetery in Xinjiang, China.

Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/qt53frl>.

Xie An's victory on the Go board against a stronger opponent also foreshadows Jin's triumph with a much smaller army against the formidable enemy juggernaut.

the narrative itself, however, it is Xie An's ostensible otherworldly fengliu that meets the eye, and that creates tension and suspense. The Go game, therefore, serves as literary double entendre of the highest caliber: not only does it render a highly effective depiction of Xie An's character, but it also greatly enhances the drama-like quality of the narrative.

This superbly wrought passage in *TJ*, too, is again the end result of a series of adroit editing. It came about in several revealing stages. *SX* does not mention this game at all. *XJ* describes the day of festivities and the game, but adds that Xie An made war plans *after* his return; perhaps the Go game is only Xie An's fengliu after all, though he does come around to perform his duties eventually. *JS* adopts this and inserts a further detail on Xie An's triumph at Go even with inferior skills; Go starts to reflect leadership quality and strategy in the immanent world. More than that, Xie An's victory on the Go board against a stronger opponent also foreshadows Jin's triumph with a much smaller army against the formidable enemy juggernaut. Finally, Sima Guang mostly copies *JS*, but *deletes* any mention of war preparations—an exquisite editorial move that makes Sima's narrative suggest that Xie An's battle plans had already been in place *before* the day of festivities. From the affable façade of Daoist fengliu, a confident, strategic, and—above all—*dutiful* Confucian paragon has been painstakingly chiseled out. The official historians, and especially Sima, have succeeded outstandingly, though perhaps they have done so partially against Xie An's will.

In the metaphorical river of Chinese civilization, the complementary worldviews presented by Confucianism and Daoism have now mingled, separated again, and created spectacular cataracts periodically. May this little essay on Go whet the reader's appetite to learn more about Chinese culture and engage it as an integrated whole. There can be no doubt that such a reader will be richly rewarded. ■

NOTES

1. Go is the transliteration of the Japanese pronunciation for *qi*. It is the term commonly adopted by players of the game in the West.
2. See "How Does Go Work?" on page 37 in this issue for further details.
3. *The Analects of Confucius*, 12.11. A copy of *The Analects of Confucius* in both Chinese and English may be viewed at <http://www.acmuller.net/con-dao/analects.html>. Note: In this article, all translations of source quotes are by the author from the original Chinese. This is chiefly due to the fact that many quotes are from sources that have never been translated into English before.
4. *The Analects of Confucius*, 12.19.
5. This idea is explained in the Confucian classic *Daxue* and later abbreviated to a formulaic expression.
6. *The Analects of Confucius*, 14.38.
7. *Daodejing*, chapter 8. The complete *Daodejing* may be viewed at *The Chinese Text Project* at <https://ctext.org/dao-de-jing>
8. *Zhuangzi*, chapter 5. For suggested resources on the *Zhuangzi*, see page 60 of Ashton Ng's "The Busy Teacher's Handbook to Teaching the *Zhuangzi*" later in this issue.
9. *Ibid.*, chapter 6.
10. *The Analects of Confucius*, 17.22.
11. *Mencius*, 6A9. For digital copies of *Mencius*, see the University of Pennsylvania Library's Online Books at <https://tinyurl.com/y8llb9ag>.
12. *Huainanzi*, 17.85. A copy of the *Huainanzi* is available at *The Chinese Text Project* at <https://ctext.org/huainanzi> and for a popular English translation, see *The Huainanzi* by Liu An, eds. and trans. John S. Major et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).
13. In ancient China, four stones, two black and two white, are set on specific positions on the board before playing begins.
14. According to Chen Yinke, qingtian was an outgrowth of *qingyi* from the Han dynasty, which was a type of debate on political appointments. See his *Lecture Notes on the History of Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties* (in Chinese), article 3.
15. The philosophers themselves call it *Xuanxue*, "Study of the Profound (or the Mysterious)."
16. See *Shishuo Xinyu*, 4.18, and *Jin Shu*, book 49. The *Shishuo Xinyu* may be viewed online at *The Chinese Text Project* at <https://ctext.org/shi-shuo-xin-yu> and ebook copies of the *Jin Shu* are available through Amazon and Barnes and Noble.
17. This practice is known as *geyi*.
18. The quote is from *Daodejing*, chapter 48. For its use in the Buddhist context, see Fung Yu-lan (Feng Youlan), *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, volume 2, chapter 7. A 1952 translation of this work by Chinese history scholar Derk Bodde is still available in print from Princeton University Press.
19. A Western Go player may recognize the transliteration from the Japanese *ranka*. On "roaming through the infinite," see the *Zhuangzi*, chapter 1.
20. This work was translated by Richard Mather in 1976 as *A New Account of Tales of the World* and is still available in print today through University of Minnesota Press.
21. *Shishuo Xinyu*, 25.27.
22. *Shishuo Xinyu*, 4.25.
23. Three of these sixteen kingdoms called themselves Qin. For this reason, historians refer to them and the Former, Latter, and Western Qin.
24. Until Kublai Khan in the late thirteenth century.
25. *Zizhi Tongjian*, book 105. A copy in Chinese was published by Yunnan People's Publishing House in 2011 and is available at Amazon and Barnes and Noble.
26. The *Xu Jinyangqiu* is no longer extant. Some fragments were collated in the Qing dynasty. The quote here may be found online as item 82 at *The Chinese Text Project* at <https://tinyurl.com/y83kebne>.
27. *Zizhi Tongjian*, book 105.

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How Does GO Work?

By Ze-Li Dou

Leonard Bernstein once said that in the *Eroica Symphony*, Beethoven had created a masterpiece of enormous beauty and complexity out of simple, even trivial, musical ideas. Something similar can be said of Go. The number of possible Go games in the first fifty moves already exceeds the number of hydrogen atoms in the universe, though a typical game lasts more than 200 plays. Yet the underlying ideas of Go are disarmingly simple—capture and connection.

Diagram 1 shows a black stone on the Go board. The horizontal line the stone occupies leads to two other intersections to the left and right, and the vertical line leads to two more, above and below. The stone is said to have four liberties for this reason. In Diagram 2, three of the liberties have been filled by white stones. When all liberties are taken away, the black stone is captured and taken off the board (Diagram 3).

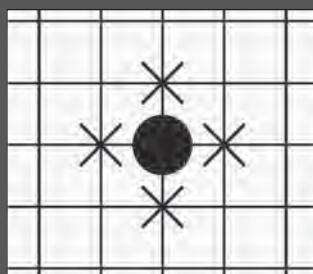


Diagram 1. The black stone has four liberties.

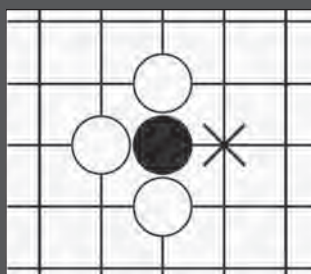


Diagram 2. The black stone has one liberty left.

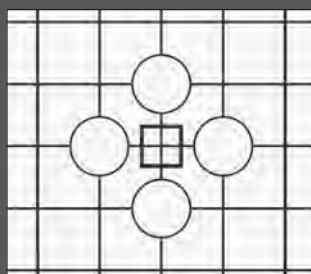


Diagram 3. The black stone in Diagram 1 and Diagram 2 is captured.

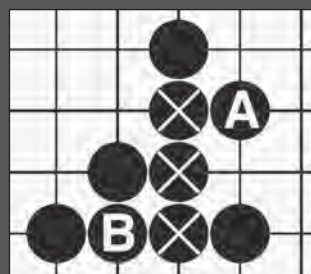


Diagram 4. The group of black stones is connected. A path from A to B via immediately connected pairs is marked.

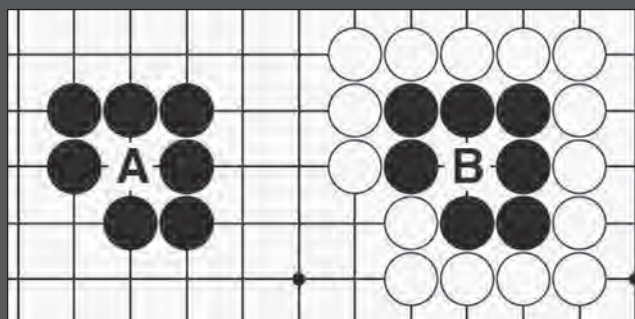


Diagram 5. A: Permissible for black but forbidden to white; B: Forbidden to black but permissible for white.

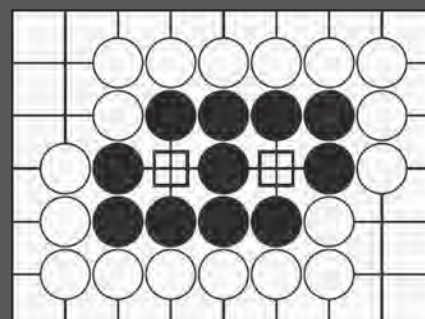


Diagram 6. The black group is permanently alive, because neither of the two points marked with squares is permissible for white.

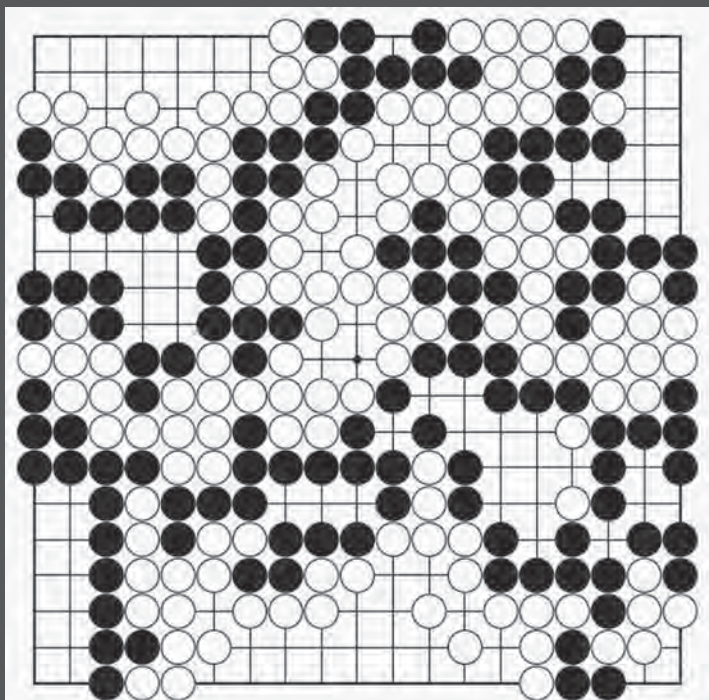


Diagram 7. A completed game. All diagrams created by the author.

Two adjacent stones of the same color on the same horizontal or vertical line are said to be immediately connected. A group of two or more stones are connected if any two stones of the group can be linked via a path of immediately connected pairs (Diagram 4). Stones in a connected group share liberties—none of the stones can be captured unless all are captured in one fell swoop.

Placing a stone where it would have no liberties at all is forbidden—no suicide!—unless in so doing one captures enemy stone(s) (Diagram 5).

Therefore, the connected group shown in Diagram 6 can never be captured, for only one stone can be played at each turn, and there are two forbidden points. Such groups are permanently alive.

There are two small variations on the theme of capture known as *ko* and *seki*, and also a fiat called *komi* designed to balance out the advantage of playing first. These are omitted here.

A Go game ends when all points on the board are occupied by permanently alive groups. The player who has occupied more than half the board is then declared the victor.

Diagram 7 shows the final position of a game played by the author. The boundaries of black and white territories are fairly easy to discern even for nonplayers, though careful counting is needed to determine the winning side. After all the rules are accounted for, white wins by 2.5 points.