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SHINFUSEKI: GO'S MODERN REVOLUTION?

Ian Rapley (ORCID-ID: 0000-0001-8439-1253)
Cardiff University
rapleyi@cardiff.ac.uk

Abstract. In the autumn of 1933, two young go players, Kitani Minoru and Go Seigen, launched a revolutionary change in the game's opening style. Initially controversial, shinfuseki as the style came to be known, attracted amateur and professional players alike and helped to reshape the way that the game was played. This has come to be seen as a modernist revolution, stressing speed, scale, and the center of the board over slower, more piecemeal approaches which had predominated. However, I argue that database analysis of the games which were played at the time, as well as textual analysis of contemporary writing, reveals a more complex trajectory. While shinfuseki can indeed be seen as a strategic part of a broader modernization of the game of go, interpreting it requires nuance. Firstly, Kitani and Go's innovations were built upon a foundation of other players' experiments: while 1933 was certainly seen at the time as a moment of dramatic change, it was one that had been some time in coming. Secondly, the aim of their experiments was cast not in terms of speed and scale and the center of the board (as has since tended to be the prevailing interpretation), but balance and harmony and by reference to an East Asian classic, the doctrine of the mean. Ultimately, the significance of 1933 as a turning point was less grounded in specific moves than in the emergence of a greater sense of freedom to experiment.

Keywords: Igo, Weiqi, Baduk, Japanese History, cultural history, modernity, Shōwa era, Board games, Board Games Studies, Digital Humanities

Games and Culture

The game of go (alternatively *igo* in Japanese, or *weiqi* in Chinese, and *baduk* in Korean) has a history in East Asia stretching far enough into the

past that its exact Chinese origins are obscure.[1] In technical terms, it is a two player, abstract, absolute information strategy game; the game is played over a square board with two sets of stones, conventionally colored black and white. Stones are placed on the board by each player in turn; the aim is to encircle areas of the board ("territory") with the winner the player whose territory is the largest.[2]

In Japan, the oldest extant board is held in the Shōsōin repository in Nara's Tōdaiji, and is documented in an inventory taken in 756 CE.[3] Gradually the game spread from the imperial court more widely, notably being embraced by warrior leaders during the warring states period (in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries). During the Tokugawa period (1601-1868 CE), the game received institutional support from the ruling shogunate. Four extended families of professional players received stipends from the government, and the heads and heirs of these families played in annual exhibition games in Edo castle, often in the presence of the shogun himself.[4] This family-based organizational structure, known as an *iemoto* system, was common to a number of cultural practices and artisanal crafts during the period; in many areas, such as the tea ceremony for example, it continues to the present day. The institutional support/professionalization facilitated by the system led to a high level of play. After the fall of the Tokugawa shogunate in 1869, go continued to be a popular pastime into the twentieth century, although as will be demonstrated its institutions and forms changed over time in response to currents in the wider culture and society.

The relationship between play, games, and culture has been one of scholarly interest since at least the 1949 publication of Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*.[5] Huizinga's claims that culture derives from play, rather than vice versa, is perhaps of less direct relevance to the study of games themselves, but subsequent scholars have developed more detailed

[1] See for example Fairbairn 2007. There is some ambiguity due to different names used for potentially different games, but it seems fairly sound to date the game at least to the Han dynasty (206 BCE - 220 CE) and potentially far further.

[2] Some differences to the game of chess, which might be more familiar to the reader: the board is bigger, most often 19 rows by 19 columns, stones are played on the meeting points of the lines, rather than in the empty squares between them, black moves first, rather than white, and finally, the game proceeds from an empty board to a full one, rather than from a full board towards an emptier one.

[3] Masakawa 1987: 2

[4] See Akita 2019 for a thorough analysis of the four families of Tokugawa era go.

[5] Huizinga 1949

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descriptions of the various forms that games can take, and their position in a society.[6] Central to the discipline of board games studies is the insight that games and their places within one or more societies are important cultural forms, and thus the study of their play, their themes, and their meanings can tell us about both the nature of games themselves, and the societies and cultures of which they form a part.

Specifically historical focus on board games can be traced back to a paradigm setting British Museum symposium run by Irving Finkel, the proceedings of which were published as *Ancient Boardgames in Perspective* (British Museum Press, 2007).[7] While this initial work focused on games in ancient cultures, over time early modern and modern games have also increasingly come under the spotlight.[8] The bulk of scholarly literature on the history of go in Japan is unsurprisingly in Japanese and has tended to focus more on the pre-twentieth century history of the game.[9] In English, there are a small number of academic works on go or weiqi (that is, the game in China) but notably also a much more substantial body of literature from within and written for the Western go playing community.[10]

This article looks at how a game changed in order to adapt to a changing social and cultural context. In particular, it focuses on the moment in 1933-34 when two young go players introduced a series of new approaches to the game's opening phase. This strategic development, known as shinfuseki (literally 'new openings'), was a cause célèbre at the time, and continues to be seen as a crucial moment of change in go's history. In examining shinfuseki and its reception, I argue that how a game is played – that is the moves and strategic options made by players – can be read as source material on the relationship between culture and game in much the same way as decoration, theme, terminology, and sociological context.[11]

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[6] See Caillois and Barash 2001 for an early and influential example.

[7] See also De Voogt 1995.

[8] In addition to the study of board games as history, there is a related theme of study, of history in games – that is the representation of historical topics and themes in games, whether they are board games, video games or other forms (see for example some of the work in Randl and Lasansky 2023).

[9] See for example, Masakawa 1987; Akita 2019; Kosaku 2013

[10] For example, see Berge-Becker 2024; Moskowitz 2013; Fairbairn 2007; Conor 2021 for scholarly work. John Fairbairn is the most active author of popular books and essays on Go in Western languages – this body of work is generally well sourced, meticulous, and wide ranging, covering the game in Japan and China from antiquity to the present day.

[11] See Spanos 2021 for a broad outline of different ways of using games as historical sources.

This article draws on research based upon primary sources, secondary literature in Japanese and, crucially, game records. Methodologically, it pairs the reading of conventional textual sources with database analysis of gameplay. In chess, a game record is a list of moves (perhaps with visual representations of the board at critical moments), but the most common form for go is in the form of a numbered diagram (see figure 1). Such game records exist at least as far back as 10th century China (although there are records of games which purport to have been played much earlier).[12]

There are two ways in which game records are used in this article. Firstly, the contextual and strategic comments accompanying individual game records have been used as conventional textual sources. By the mid twentieth century, published game records would typically include a number of comments about strategic options, errors, and potential alternative lines of play. Particularly significant games often also include some contextual information about the conditions in which the game was played, and perhaps some incidental information or even anecdotes.

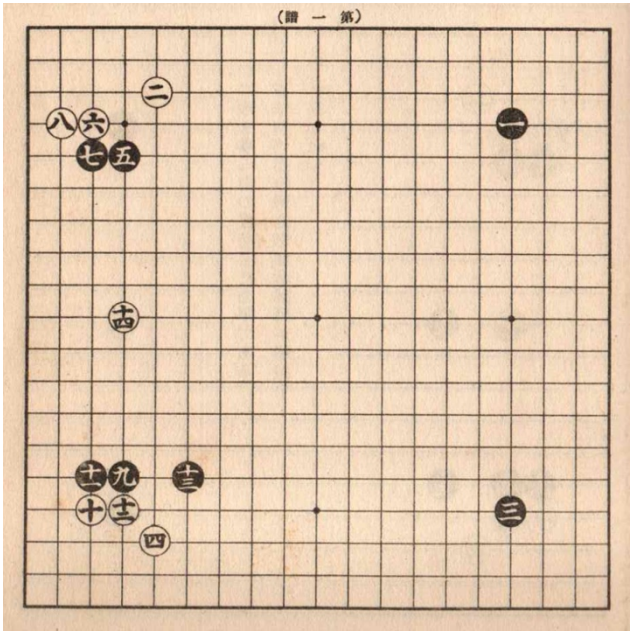

Figure 1 Game record from Igo Kamumei - Shinfusekihō (1934). For a full game, it is common to break the record up into diagrams covering fifty or sometimes a hundred moves.

[12] Lo & Wang 2004: 194.

However this paper pairs the reading of these intertextual commentaries with a more systematic analysis of the development of play. In doing so it makes use of the Games of Go on Disk (https://gogodonline.co.uk/) database of over 120,000 game records together with the digital capabilities of the Drago game reader and Kombilo search tool.[13] This form of database analysis permits games to be studied in relation to one another, charting the history of specific strategic styles – where and when a move originated, and how it subsequently was adopted (or abandoned). By combining commented game records and database search, playing style can be read in a way analogous to more usual textual sources – by reference to what players and contemporaries themselves thought and wrote, by tracing the development of new ideas across time through different games, and finally by making educated (if provisional) interpretations in the light of the historic record of play.

This analysis shows that, although the public and professional reception of the events in 1933/34 was of an unprecedented revolution in go theory and play, the new style was more incremental than it perhaps seemed at the time. Shinfuseki grew out of a range of prior experiments and strategic innovations, and indeed was tied to other developments such as changing expectations surrounding the norms and rules of the game, as well as the new ways in which go was presented to the wider public.

In placing shinfuseki within this wider setting of the game's institutional and social change, I argue that shinfuseki can be seen as the strategic dimension of a broader phase of ludic modernization. However, it is important to pay attention to specific historical details of this, and to recognize that later interpretations of the movement have tended to project ideas of what modernity means onto the past, rather than read what the players themselves meant by their experiments.

The Changing Face of Early Twentieth Century Go

The fall of the Tokugawa shogunate in 1868 meant an end to the government support for the game of go in Japan. Over the next two

[13] Games of Go on Disk, compiled by John Fairbairn in conjunction with T Mark Hall, is the most comprehensive collection of games that I am aware of. As a measure of how complete this collection is, during the conduct of this research, I have only found one (minor) game record mentioned in a separate source that is NOT included in the database. Credit for Drago (https://www.godrago.net/) is due to Gilles Arcas, and Kombilo (https://github.com/ugoertz/kombilo), Ulrich Görtz.

generations, the game's leaders struggled to find new institutional forms to enable the financial survival of the professional game. By the early twentieth century the professional go world was a mix of new structures and those held over from the Tokugawa period. Two of the four main go playing *iemoto* families, the Hayashi and the Yasui, folded into the most prestigious of them, the Hon'inbō, which continued. The fourth family, the Inoue, also remained extant, but it became marginalized as a result of its head's refusal to participate in the creation of new institutions.

In addition to financial support for the four families, the Tokugawa shogunate had placed emphasis on establishing the strongest active player. Where an individual could establish clear supremacy over their peers, they were awarded the title of Meijin, and an official position, known as the Godokoro, administering professional networks of go and shōgi.[14] (Where there was a close rivalry between two or more players that prevented the establishment of a clear winner, the title and office were left vacant.) After the fall of the shogunate, this was no longer an official position, but the title of Meijin was twice awarded by common agreement of the professional players – firstly to Hon'inbō Shūei (1852-1907) in 1906, and then to Hon'inbō Shūsai in 1914.

Although the Hon'inbō and the Inoue families continued to exist, they ceased to be the main organizing groups for professional go. A number of different bodies formed and reformed over the years after 1868, but the most important two were the Hōensha, founded in 1879 by Hon'inbō Shūhō, and its successor, the Nihon Kiin, founded in 1924, which remains today the central guild of professional go players in Japan.[15] Bringing together most of the professional players allowed the Hōensha first, and then the Nihon Kiin, to act to promote the game as a whole to the wider public and to potential benefactors. A number of politicians and business leaders who were keen amateur players formed a key locus of support for the game; they include Inukai Tsuyoshi and Hatoyama Ichirō, both prime ministers of Japan, and Ōkura Kishiichirō (1882-1963), an entrepreneur and the first patron of the Nihon Kiin.

[14] One measure of the supremacy of the Hon'inbō family is that seven of their heads were awarded the office of Meijin-Godokoro, in comparison with the Inoue's twice and the Yasui's once.

[15] In 1950, a breakaway group formed the Kansai Kiin to represent Go players from Western Japan. The two bodies still exist today.

As well as wealthy individuals, the new go organizations took advantage of the changing face of Japanese print media to find support for their game. Both the Hōensha and the Nion Kiin published their own magazines and textbooks, but they also increasingly sought sponsorship from newspapers and magazines, through ad hoc tournaments and one-off games, and columns covering problems, study tips, and news.

The Nihon Kiin organized its own games, the twice yearly Ōteai league which was used to determine promotion up the professional grading system, but the newspaper companies sponsored a wide range of other formats in order to provide content. These included thematic tournaments in which a number of selected players played off against one another in a tournament bracket, 'win and continue' games in which a chain of games were played with the winner staying on to play the next opponent, and *jūbango*, a historic format in which two players competed over a ten game series. While these newspaper games were by far the most common way in which go took advantage of the modern media environment, there were also radio games and one, in 1938, when the politician Hatoyama Ichirō in Japan played a German opponent in Berlin, with the moves transmitted by telegram and displayed on a diagram installed in front of the Mainichi Newspaper head office in Osaka.[16]

One final example of what we might think of as the modernization of go was a move to formalize the rules and playing conditions. Historically, the Meijin or in his absence, the heads of the *iemoto* houses, were used as arbiters when disagreements arose in games, but with their declining role this increasingly came to be seen as an inadequate method for resolving controversy. From the early 1930s an effort emerged to write a formal set of go rules that would put the game on a clearer footing and remove the need to rely upon commonly understood assumptions and the authority of senior players. The first effort was Yasunaga Hajime's 'Draft Go Constitution' (*Igo Kenpō Sōan*), published in July 1932; this was merely the first of a long running series of alternative proposals and round table discussions, culminating the adoption of official rules by the Nihon Kiin.[17] In addition to debates about

[16] Sugiura 2021: 13. A photo of the public board relaying the game is available on the Mainichi Photobank website: https://photobank.mainichi.co.jp/kiji_detail.php?id=P20000328dd1dd3phj277000

[17] The Igo Rūru Hakubutsukan website (https://go-en.com/igorule/index.html, Japanese language, accessed February 2025) provides a summary of major drafts of go rules. It is striking that the first draft rule sets sought to be short and elegantly concise whereas the

the formal rules of play, the 1930s was a period in which less formal norms surrounding how the game was played were also changing, as will be explored later on in this article.

Within this context of changing organizational structures and the adoption of new media approaches came a revolution in the style of opening play, known as shinfuseki. Two young players, Kitani Minoru (1909-1975) and Go Seigen (1914-2014), fresh from a study retreat in Nagano, unveiled their new ideas in the early rounds of the autumn 1933 Ōteai ranking tournament. By the end of the tournament, two months later, many of their peers had started to adopt the innovations, while others argued against them, and amateur players eagerly followed the debates or sought to introduce the new moves to their own play. The spring tournament of 1934 saw increasing experiment and even perhaps playfulness, with the shinfuseki style spreading. In later years, the term shinfuseki would take on a life of its own: commentators calling for or describing a shinfuseki – by which they meant a revolutionary rethinking – in the lumber industry, in cinema, in electricity generation, and more besides.[18]

Shinfuseki

The two main figures behind the creation of the new opening style were Kitani Minoru and Go Seigen. The two were both members of a younger generation of go professionals, Kitani twenty four and Go nineteen in 1933, and both were ranked five dan, that is, the precise midpoint of the nine grade professional ranking system.

Kitani was born in 1909 in Kobe, the eldest son of a barber.[19] Aged fourteen, he began studying under Kubomatsu Katsukiyō (1894-1941), a professional go player who was influential in Western Japan, gaining his shodan (one dan) ranking aged fifteen.[20] By contrast Go Seigen was Chinese, born in 1914 in Fujian province. Taught weiqi by his father, he rapidly became identified as a prodigy, and came to the attention of Japanese expatriates in Beijing. After a series of games with visiting Japanese

eventually adopted sets, for example the 1989 official Nihon Kiin rules (*Nihon Igo Kiyaku*) were forced to include lengthy indexes of anomalous positions and how to rule on them.

[18] For example, "Jidaigeki Fukkō no Shinfuseki", *Kinema Junpū*, 233 (May 1959): 68-73; "Sutārin kara Marenkofu he, Kuremurin no Shunfuseki", *Sekai Shūhō*, 34(9) March 1953: 14-19; Kichiji Asai, *Kokuyū Rinno Keiei no Shinfuseki*, Rinnno Kōsaikai,1954

[19] Hiratsuka-shi Hakubutsukan 1996: 2

[20] Hiratsuka-shi Hakubutsukan 1996: 53

professionals, one of them, Segoe Kensaku (1889-1972) one of the most senior figures in the Japanese professional go world, arranged for Go to move to Japan in 1928, where he was granted the initial rank of three dan.[21]

Both Kitani and Go were eye catching figures in the go world: young, charismatic, and highly successful, winning the majority of their games and rapidly rising through the ranks as a result. As such, they were regular opponents at the board, but also became close friends. Because of their high profiles, Kitani and Go attracted precisely the right sort of attention, and so were well represented in range of newspaper sponsored tourneys. In particular, in the spring of 1933 the two were playing in a *jūbango* ten game head to head series sponsored by the newspaper *Jiji Shinpō*. As mentioned above, the *jūbango* was a style of challenge that dated back to the Tokugawa period. Then, it had been used for matching players of similar strength against one another, either junior players on their way up the ranks, or on occasion to settle major disputes over supremacy among the very top players. In the twentieth century it come to be used as one of the popular formats for sponsored play; in later years Go Seigen would play and win a number of these series either side of the Second World War against a range of leading rivals, establishing him as the greatest player of the age.

At the start of summer 1933, Kitani and Go were playing the fifth of the ten game series. Kitani had plans to leave the heat of the capital and to visit his wife's hometown, in Jigokudani Onsen, Nagano once the game was done. He had already arranged for a go journalist and writer, Kōnohara Masahiro, to join him, so that the two could work on a book on opening strategy.[22] However, in the middle of a day's play, Kitani seized the chance to invite Go to come along also.[23] So it was that later that summer the two spent time sitting over a board in Kitani's in-laws' inn, thrashing out new ideas of opening play.

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[21] Mizuguchi 2003: 199

[22] A father and son pair both used the name 鴻原正広, although there is variation in how both family and personal names were read. The father, originally named Yoshitarō (1875-1922), was a Kansai based professional go player who was an early tutor of Kitani. He changed his name to Seikō in 1911. His son (dates uncertain) was a go writer who published a series of books in the mid twentieth century. Different sources read their family name as either Kōnohara or Kōhara. Hiratsuka-shi Hakubutsukan 1996: 16

[23] Mizuguchi 2003: 60

Back in Tokyo that autumn, the two put their new ideas into effect. Go Seigen had a bye in the first round of the Ōteai tournament (his opponent was sick), but Kitani played (and won) with his new style:

> "In the deep still atmosphere of the game room, broken only by the sound of go stones and fans, Hasegawa, playing 'the great prodigy' Kitani 5-dan, makes a surprised face. Looking down, has Kitani once again played one of his brilliances? Kitani has played three star point stones in a row in front of Hasegawa. Pausing on his way back from the toilet, Katō 7-dan comments ominously, 'This is the third time you've played this, you lost the first, and the second game was abandoned, right?' Kitani pulls a pained grin, but really he's not playing novelties – he is striving to understand the game and this is something quite admirable."[24]

In round two, Kitani repeated his opening from round one, while Go, playing against Kosugi Tei five dan (1898-1976), played what remains one of the signal games of the period, in which both sides deviated dramatically from conventional theory. By the end of the final round, Go was undefeated to win the league, Kitani had a six wins and one loss record (sufficient to secure his promotion to six dan), and a handful of other young professionals were adopting something resembling the new style.[25]

That winter, leading go writer Yasunaga Hajime (1901-1994) collaborated with Go and Kitani to rush out a book, *Igo Kakumei - Shinfusekihō* ("Go Revolution: the Shinfuseki Method"). This, released in January 1934, was a major hit, reportedly reprinted ten times, selling a hundred thousand copies, spawning a sequel *Shinfuseki Jissen* ("Real Shinfuseki Games"), and firmly establishing the idea of the shinfuseki revolution.

What was the New Opening Style?

To explain exactly what innovations the two young players came up with requires a slight detour into the nature of the game of go and how it is played. Firstly, the aim of the game is to surround space on the board. Whichever side controls the most points of territory at the end of the game

[24] *Kīdo Autumn Ōteai round 1 supplement*, October 1933: 53 (491).
[25] Nakayama 2014: 133

wins.[26] The sides of the board can be used to surround territory; thus means that it is most easily made in the corners (where there are two sides to help), or along the edge of the board (one side), rather than the center where all four walls surrounding a space need to be made up by stones placed by the controlling player. The result of this is that play typically begins in the four corners, develops along the sides, and then finally play moves out into the middle.

This hierarchy, corners – side – center, was established in antiquity, so the overwhelming majority of games began with moves in the corners. In early twentieth century Japan, the conventional places to play first in a corner were threefold: the 3-4 point (*komoku*, the most common), the 5-4 point (*takamoku*), and the 5-3 point (*mokuhazushi*).[27] (Positions on the board are usually counted as rows and columns from the nearest corner, so the very corner is the 1-1 point. For each corner there are two *komoku* points – the 3-4 and by symmetry the 4-3 point, and similarly for the points named *takamoku* and *mokuhazushi*, as indicated with the triangles on the diagrams below.)

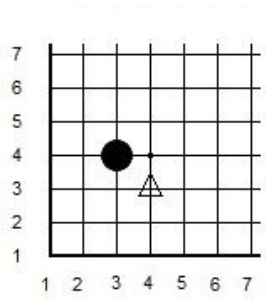

Figure 4 Komoku

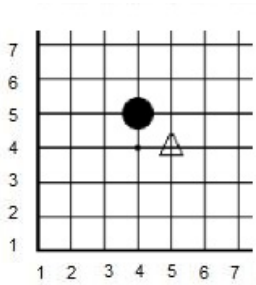

Figure 4 Takamoku

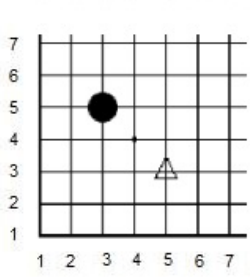

Figure 4 Mokuhazushi

[26] It is also possible to capture some of the opponent's stones under certain situations; these are then added to the total territory you have made. There are slightly different scoring methods at the end of the game in the Japanese and Chinese traditions, which can result in a minor difference in the score.

[27] Ancient forms of the game tended to start with a number of stones of both colors already placed on the board. One of the innovations of Japanese go was to remove these, allowing a greater range of opening play, particularly these forms build around the asymmetric points discussed here.

The subtitle of the 1934 shinfuseki book was *Hoshi, 3-3, Tengen*, referring to the "star point", that is, the 4-4 point; the 3-3 point; and *tengen*, the central point of the board (10-10, by the same notation).[28] Putting *tengen* aside for a moment, the first two were just a choice of a different place to open in a corner (most notably symmetrical points where the conventional ones were all asymmetrical):

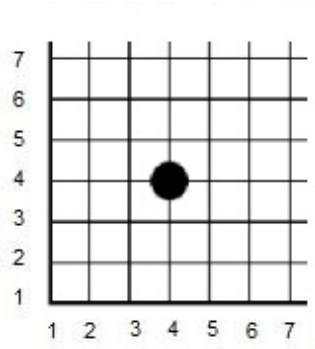

Figure 6 the 4-4 or star point

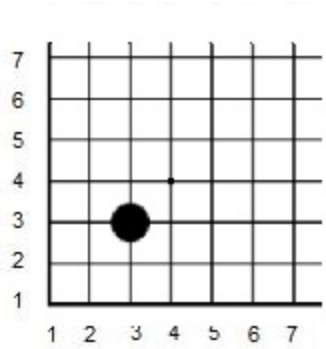

Figure 6 the 3-3 point

At its most simple, then, shinfuseki represented just a relaxation in the range of places to play first in a corner. The import of this might seem unclear, or even somewhat underwhelming but what made it a consequential innovation was the ways in which subsequent play would develop in order to make sense of these initial moves. The strategic consequences of the first moves could be quite large.

Interpreting a first move at *tengen*, the central point of the board, is more complex. Although a black opening play at *tengen* allows white to play first in any single corner, black will still have the opportunity to move first in 2 of the 4 corners. Consequently, despite lying at the very center of the board, playing at *tengen* does not necessarily represent an intention to focus on the middle at the expense of the corners but rather setting up a point that can project power across the board.

[28] The star points are nine points on the board (four 4,4 points, one in each corner, 10-4 points along the side, and then *tengen*, the 10-10 point in the center of the board) which are marked with a larger point than the simple conjunction of rows and columns. These make it easier to visually navigate the board, but also indicate the location of handicap stones, used to balance a game between two players of different strengths.

Go terminology distinguishes between *joseki* - established patterns of play in a single corner - and the *fuseki* - the early development of the board taken as a whole. What makes a full *fuseki* is the coordination of the initial choice of moves in the four corners into a harmonious and hopefully advantageous whole. The conventional style of *komoku*, *takamoku*, and *mokuhazushi* tended to be followed by small scale incremental development, really focusing on territory taken in the corners. As Hon'inbō Shūsai (not a fan of the new style, as will be seen) wrote, the old style was based on the principle of "shrinking the board and making it easy to read" – that is, breaking the whole up into smaller units which could be treated largely independently.[29] By dealing with the corner in a single symmetrical move, whether 4-4 or 3-3, or by starting at *tengen*, shinfuseki tended to a style which was less directionally focused, and which encouraged subsequent moves which focused on a more holistic consideration of the board as a single whole ("too wide, and with no fixed patterns" in Shūsai's view).

By way of example, Kitani's favored style in the autumn of 1933 and into the spring of 1934 was to play two star (4-4) points in parallel corners, and then to connect them with a third play equidistant along the side, which came to be known as a *sanrensei* ("three connected star [points]"). This led to less immediate control over the two corners, but a formation which coordinated well together. For his part, Go initially started off playing the 3-3 point in both corners (something his mentor Segoe later described as inconsistent with the other ideas of shinfuseki), but experimented more widely over time with a range of different variations. As the embrace of the freedom to depart from established precedent began to spread, particularly in 1934, players began to experiment more widely, trying the 5-5 point, or even openings that abandoned any real focus on the corner at all ("ultra shinfuseki" as it was termed by some).

[29] "Igo Shōgi Zadankai", *Bungei Shunshū*, 13(3), March 1935: 226

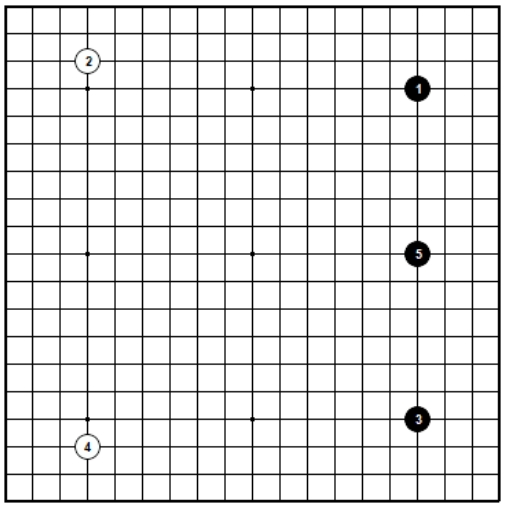

Figure 7 Kitani Minoru (Black) vs Katō Shin (1891-1952), 1 November 1934. Black's formation is the "sanrensei" – 4-4 point in two corners linked by the 10-4 point on the side. By contrast, White's first two moves are on conventional komoku points.

Old Against New: Hon'inbō Shūsai Versus Go Seigen

Alongside the autumn Ōteai tournament, the second major venue in which shinfuseki was played out was a game that also began in November 1933, played between Go Seigen and Hon'inbō Shūsai. Shūsai was the head of the Hon'inbō, the last remaining *iemoto* family, and the Meijin – recognized as the best player of the age. As such, he did not compete in the Ōteai or other regular tournaments, but played occasional one-off exhibitions, or teaching games. This game was sponsored by the newspaper the *Yomiuri Shinbun* and designed to celebrate its twenty thousandth issue. It was at the time very high profile, and indeed, even at a moment of historic significance, remains one of the most famous games of the twentieth century in its own right.[30]

There was a challenger's tournament over the spring/summer of 1933 to see who would get to play Shūsai in the autumn; Go Seigen's victory set up a match between the young Chinese tyro and the Meijin-Hon'inbō, the living embodiment of the deepest traditions of the game. It was a contest which could scarcely have been more perfect for the *Yomiuri Shinbun*. The

[30] "Kyōdaishi no Hashimoto-san ni Katsu", *Yomiuri Shinbun*, 21 July 2009.

newspaper promoted it relentlessly, talking of a historic match, the greatest game of the Shōwa era, and a "great grudge match" (*daikessen*, 大血戦), running a contest to see who readers thought would win. The more than eight thousand readers who sent an entry split roughly five to three in favor of Shūsai.[31]

Go Seigen did not disappoint, launching an opening that had never been seen before, and could even be read as an act of disrespect his opponent's status as the game's spiritual custodian. Go's first move was at the 3-3 point, Shūsai played a *komoku* in one of the other corners; Go played the 4-4 point in the corner diagonally opposite his first move; Shūsai took a *komoku* in the fourth corner; and then Go played his third move at *tengen* (see fig. 8). Go had played all three of the signature shinfuseki points. This contrast roused the Yomiuri coverage to even greater levels of excitement, speculating how the Meijin would respond to the "unexpected, unexpected and again unexpected, preposterous moves."[32] One of Shūsai's pupils later recalled: "It was a battle of tradition against the new, an international between Japan against China. Particularly when Go played 3-3, 4-4, and *tengen* in rapid succession, provoking the Meijin, to all of us pupils it was truly unpleasant, simple grandstanding."[33]

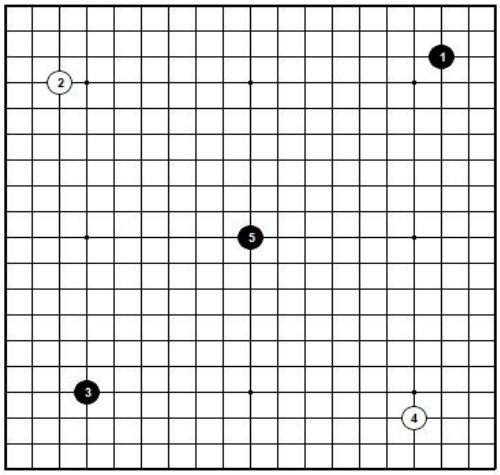

Figure 8 Opening moves of the Yomiuri Game between Go Seigen and Hon'inbō Shūsai. Go's moves 1, 3, & 5 are at 3-3, 4-4, and Tengen respectively, the three moves most closely associated with the shinfuseki style.

[31] "Shimekiri ato Isshūkan", *Yomiuri Shinbun*, 10 September 1933.
[32] Naoki, S, "Igai, Igai, mata Igai Tohō mo nai Te", *Yomiuri Shinbun* , 19 October 1933: 7.
[33] Hayashi 1968: 155

The game was played over fourteen sessions spanning the period 16 October to the 29 January. Each player was allocated twenty four hours of thinking time. While Go Seigen held black, and hence the first mover's advantage, Shūsai retained established privileges of multi-day games. Specifically, Shūsai was the one who determined when play would end for the day; this allowed him to pause the game at moments of particular difficulty, taking his research away from the board (& off the clock), potentially even to discuss the position with his coterie of pupils. In later years the rules were changed (at least in part as a result of this match) so that play would last for a pre-determined length of time, and a system of "sealed moves" (*fujite*) was established wherein the player of the last move of the day would place it in an envelope, to be revealed only at the start of the next session. This was not merely a theoretical advantage – the sessions featured very uneven amounts of play. Most strikingly, on 4 December, only two moves were played – reportedly, Shūsai played move 108 (which he had prepared during the weeklong recess since the last meeting), Go responded after two minutes, and then Shūsai thought for two hours before suspending play again without response.[34] The 15th January saw only four (moves 156 to 159), Shūsai stopping play rather than play move 160.[35]

Move 160, when it came on the resumption of the game on 22 January, is the most famous move of the game. Go was shaping to make a reasonably large amount of central territory in the bottom left corner of the board, roughly growing out of the *tengen* and 4-4 stones he had played in the opening. Where a normal means of limiting the size of this area would be an incremental move from the nearest white stones on the edge of this space, move 160 was an unexpected jump into the center, revealing a weakness in Go's position which forced him to abandon more of the territory than had seemed to be the case.

In the postwar period Go Seigen's mentor, Segoe Kensaku, told a journalist an open secret within the ranks of senior players: move 160 had allegedly been the discovery, not of Shūsai himself, but of one of his pupils, Maeda Nobuaki (1907-1975). Revealing this in 1948 cost Segoe his management position within the Nihon Kiin, but the claim remained contested: Takahashi Toshimitsu (1906-unknown), Shūsai's brother in law and one of his pupils, wrote an account of the situation in 1956 defending

[34] Mizuguchi 2003: 71
[35] Hon'inbō 1981, vol.6: 229

Shūsai, arguing that although Maeda did indeed discover the move when the pupils were studying the position, Shūsai himself was not present. Takahashi argued that no one really knew whether Shūsai had already seen the move himself, or even whether Maeda conveyed it to him.[36]

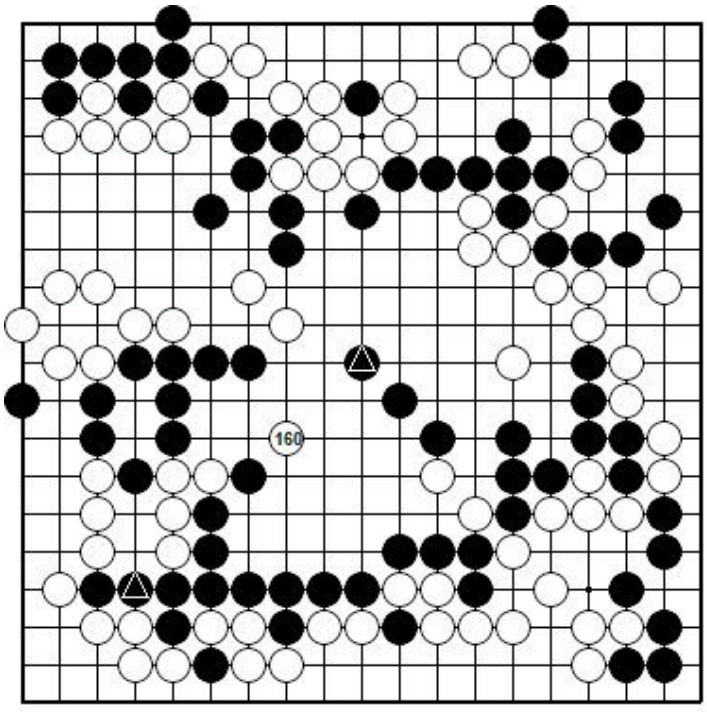

Figure 9 Move 160 of the Yomiuri Match. Go Seigen's opening moves at 4-4 and Tengen are marked with triangles.

While Nakayama suggests that this prerogative of senior players was unexceptional at the time, I think it represents another dimension of the contemporaneous move towards more formal rules-based play and away from a custom based system. In later years, Go Seigen recalled a slightly strange intervention by his patron, Okura Kishiichirō, in the week before move 160 was played, suggestive that there was a sense that something potentially controversial was afoot, that old certainties about how the game should be played were no longer unquestioned.[37]

[36] Takahashi, "Hon'inbō Hiwa", *Kīdō*, April 1956, quoted in Nakayama 2014: 54-56.
[37] Nakayama 2014: 157

For his part, before his death Shūsai wrote of the move:

> "I had a mere two hours of time left: I couldn't waste even a minute. I took some ten minutes over this precious opportunity; I was able to regain my composure. Nothing bothered me – not my opponent Go Seigen, not whether I would win or lose – I removed myself from it all as if I were watching another's game; as I looked at the board, in a moment it came into my mind: move 160."[38]

After move 160, progress was rapid, taking only two further sessions to complete the remaining ninety two moves. Shūsai won by two points.

Revisiting the Origins of Shinfuseki

Go aficionado and Nobel prize winner Kawabata Yasunari wrote that "as with all acts of creation, there is something of myth about the events of the creation of shinfuseki."[39] There is no doubt that the autumn of 1933 was the moment in which the new style exploded into the go playing consciousness, both among the professional players and the wider public, nor indeed that this became a wider phenomenon which raised the game's profile nationwide. However, retracing the gameplay and publication history either side of this moment reveals that, perhaps unsurprisingly, there were precursors to the explosion of autumn 1933 which have often tended to be downplayed in retelling the story. The simplest way to chart these is to recognize that all three of the signature opening moves of shinfuseki – 3-3, 4-4, and *tengen* – had prior histories of play. Database analysis of the play across the early years of the twentieth century helps to demonstrate when these new moves emerged, who played them, and then how they were adopted more widely.

The most straightforward demonstration of this was Go Seigen's own play. He had started to experiment with the 3-3 point in particular at the start of 1933, and was essentially playing shinfuseki style opening moves for the whole of the year, even writing a series of articles in the Nihon Kiin magazine *Kīdō* about his aims and expectations. Go played exclusively either 3-3 or 4-4 as the first move in the corners against Kitani in all four matches of their *Jiji Shinpō* sponsored ten game series that were published before the

[38] Hon'inbō Shūsai 1937: 151
[39] Kawabata 1991: 89

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two men travelled to Jigokudani Onsen. By contrast, tracing Kitani's games of 1933 suggests that his first attempts at a new style did inded come in the autumn, firstly two games in newspaper sponsored "win and continue" tournaments, and then the Ōteai league, when attention really picked up. Tracing this history of Go-Kitani contests, then, suggests the possibility that it was Kitani's exposure to Go's new style over the course of the spring/summer 1933 that inspired him, and then it was then his adoption of a new playing style, alongside Go, which proved the tipping point among the other professionals.

Although the 3-3 point seems to have essentially never have been played before 1933, both the 4-4 point and *tengen* longer track records. A generation earlier, Shūsai's predecessor as Meijin, Hon'inbō Shūei, had made regular use of the 4-4 point to open play in a corner. As the preeminent player of his generation, he played the majority of his games with the white stones - playing second. In later years a system of *komi* developed in which the white player was granted a number of points to offset the first mover advantage of black, but this was not consistently used until the post-war period. Prior to this, playing white in an unadjusted game represented a disadvantage which had to be overcome. Shūei's innovation was the use of the 4-4 move as white, typically in the fourth corner. My reading of this move is that the intent was to handle the corner rapidly, with a single move, as white needed to develop swiftly in order to try to catch up the initial disadvantage.

By 1933, this use of the 4-4 point - by white, in order to rapidly dispense with a corner – had been integrated into standard professional play. In first four rounds of the spring 1933 Ōteai games (that is, before the shinfuseki revolution), for example, players holding white opened a corner at 4-4 in roughly a quarter of the games. By contrast, the 4-4 point played by black was still a much rarer phenomenon. Go Seigen, at this point still the lone figure really experimenting with his opening, played his first move at the 4-4 point in three games of the spring Ōteai, but otherwise black opening at the 4-4 point tended to be restricted to odd games where one or more corner remained unoccupied until comparatively late in the game (for example a game in round two of the spring Ōteai between Hasegawa Akira (1900-1965) and Onoda Chiyōtarō (1896-1944), in which the final corner remained unplayed until black took it with the 4-4 point on move 47, when the opening was already transitioning into the middle game).

Similarly, there was a prior history of *tengen* as a first move. This was a less systematic, but older, tradition. Games in which black started at the central point had been recorded as early as the 1670s, with infrequent occurrences thereafter. The most significant example was a game in 1670 between Yasui Sanchi II (1639-1715, known outside the go world as Shibukawa Shunkai) and Hon'inbō Dōsaku (1645-1702) in one of the "castle games" – games played annually in Edo castle in the presence of the Shogun (or his representative). Both the advocates of shinfuseki and its opponents were attuned to this history. The book *Igo Kakumei* flagged Yasui's game as an example of failing to develop the fuller game in harmony with the opening moves, arguing that while it was a game with move one at *tengen*, it was not a game played in a true *tengen* style. By contrast, Hon'inbō Shūsai sniffily pointed to this and other *tengen* games and Shūei's innovation of the 4-4 point with white as evidence that there was little truly new about shinfuseki, and what there was, was owed to Shūei and others rather than the two young upstarts.[40]

More recently than the castle game of 1672, Kubomatsu Katsukiyō, the strongest player from the Osaka/Kyoto region and an early mentor of Kitani Minoru, wrote a series of articles in *Kidō* in 1930, studying *tengen* as an opening move. He fell short of arguing for its adoption, but noted that its lack of use by contemporary players was less a result of clear flaws in the strategy, and more a precautionary approach to the endless variations that it represented (contrasting it explicitly with the exhaustively researched corner openings at *komoku*).[41]

This history of *tengen* play is illustrative of the relationship between the modern precursors to shinfuseki and the moment of late 1933 itself. While Kubomatsu was interested in the opening, he did not really experiment with it himself.[42] Kosugi Tei played it once in the spring Ōteai of 1929, and Go Seigen played it somewhat infamously in the same year, in his first game

[40] Hon'inbō 1937: 155 et seq., 170.

[41] Kubomatsu Katsukiyō, "Tengen no Kenkyū", *Kidō*, January 1930: 102.

[42] John Fairbairn makes mention of Kubomatsu opening with *tengen* in 1929 ("Kubomatsu's Central Thesis", *Mindzine*, 19 June 2000, via archive.org, https://web.archive.org/web/20090519144116/http://www.msoworld.com/mindzine/news/orient/go/history/kubomatsu.html) but the game is not in the GoGoD Database, nor have I been able to find mention of it elsewhere. There is one 1929 *tengen* game in the database, played by Kosugi Tei. Kubomatsu does not seem to discuss playing *tengen* himself in his 1930 *Kidō* series on the historic instances of the move.

against Kitani Minoru.[43] So to summarize, Kubomatsu was intrigued by the idea, and engaged with its pre-Shōwa history, but essentially it wasn't being played to a significant degree by him or anyone else. Then in 1934, inspired by the shinfuseki moment, Kubomatsu decided to try *tengen* out after all. He played it first in a radio match of January/February 1934, and then used it in all of his games holding black in the spring Ōteai league. A couple of other professionals from Western Japan, Sometani Kazuo (1912-1980) and Suzuki Kenshō (1915-1985), also played it on a number of occasions in those 1934 Ōteai matches.

The three histories of 3-3, 4-4, and *tengen*, reveal a picture of a go scene in which the pressure towards opening innovation was growing, and thus in which the events of 1933 represented less a development born out of nowhere at Go and Kitani's summer retreat, and more the final breaking of storm clouds which had been building for some time.

The readiness of other professionals to adopt new approaches to the opening can be seen in the speed with which players other than Kitani and Go started to experiment. By 1934 this was clear, but even in the autumn of 1933 other players were jumping on board. As mentioned above, Go Seigen's game in round two of the 1933 Autumn Ōteai against Kosugi Tei is one of the most famous shinfuseki games, remarkable because both players adopted very unorthodox openings (Kosugi with twin 3-3 points & then *tengen*, Go with two 4-4 points, developing into an extended, expansive and innovative game).[44] It was the first game that Go had played in the autumn, while Kitani had only played one game in the Ōteai, so the evidence of their new ideas was very limited, and yet Kosugi, holding black so moving first, launched into a new opening of his own. This was not a

[43] Infamous because Go exploited a strategy which is depreciated in most go circles. He opened with *tengen* and then played "mirror go", copying Kitani's white moves with symmetrical black moves on the other side of the board until move 65, when he finally broke the symmetry. This somewhat game breaking approach is known in Japanese as *Taikō-Go* after a possibly apocryphal story that it was used by the warlord *Taikō* Toyotomi Hideyoshi in a game against the founder of the Hon'inbō family, Sansa. Go Seigen is said to have used it against Kitani as a result of nervousness.

[44] This game became known as the "sixteen soldiers game" ("*jūroku musashi no ikkyoku*") – the name refers to an old Japanese boardgame unrelated to Go. John Fairbairn suggested that the name is a oblique reference to Shinfuseki as *musashi* can be creatively be read as 無三四 – no 3-4 [*komoku*] points. Certainly there is nothing particular about the sixteenth move of the game to necessitate it to be the point singled out as the epitome of the opening style.

game of new versus old, but two players, both experimenting at the same time.

For Versus Against: Interpreting Shinfuseki

A survey of top players in March 1934 saw almost all keen to stress that it was too early to tell whether the new style was an improvement on the old or not, and many also arguing that Kitani and Go's dramatic winning records were more a measure of their personal prowess than it was the final word on the new approach.[45] Some of the leading players were cautiously positive ("it's a revolution, in a good sense" – Hayashi Yūtarō 6 dan (1900-1983)), whereas some others were more resistant. Chief amongst those in the latter camp was Hon'inbō Shūsai, who expressed a desire that players not simply be attracted to what is new.

As a moment of great significance in go's modern history, the story of shinfuseki has been told again and again (not least by Kitani and Go themselves), so unpicking the ideas behind the initial experiments and subsequent interpretations and even misreadings is a tricky task. In the years following 1933, the precise meaning of the shinfuseki style have come to be seen as emphasizing pace, scale and the center of the board but reading what was written at the time reveals some slight differences in interpretation.[46] Go Seigen found himself forced to challenge others' understandings of what was meant by shinfuseki:

> Interviewer: The common understanding is that the traditional approach stressed the corners, shinfuseki puts emphasis on the middle—
>
> Go Seigen: Not really. It doesn't stress the middle. The aim is to develop the corner without bias and play so that all stones work together.[47]

This idea of coordination between all stones, and a lack of directional bias was the chief justification offered by Go and Kitani in 1933/34 for their

[45] "Shinfusekihō Hi Ka?, *Kīdō*, March 1934: 4-14

[46] For example, the Japanese Wikipedia entry for shinfuseki says it was a style which stressed 'the center [of the board] and speed' (https://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E6%96%B0%E5%B8%83%E7%9F%B3, accessed April 15 2025).

[47] Kurosaki 1940: 240

innovation. In the introduction to the key book of the shinfuseki revolution, *Igo Kakumei – Shinfusekihō*, they argued that the asymmetry of the conventional 3-4, 5-4, and 5-3 points gave them an inherent directional bias which violated the principles of correct play, and the balance of a 4-4 or 3-3 point was therefore correct. In making this argument for the balanced and harmonious coordination of opening play, they made reference to the East Asian classic, the doctrine of the mean.[48]

While *Igo Kakumei – Shinfusekihō*, published in early 1934, represents a contemporaneous articulation of the aims and motivations of shinfuseki, published under the name of its main protagonists, care must be taken in interpreting it. The bulk of the work appears to have been written by the third named author, Yasunaga Hajime. Yasunaga was the editor of the Nihon Kiin's house magazine *Kidō*, a prolific go journalist, and the self-styled "strongest amateur player in Japan." Although he was a firm advocate of the new opening style, he had strong ties to Hon'inbō Shūsai (to the extent that Yasunaga was a sometime participant in the gatherings of Shūsai's pupils that took place during the Yomiuri Game against Go Seigen).[49]

As the key impetus behind the publication of *Igo Kakumei* and its sequel, as well as his role writing for *Kidō* and in other generalist magazines, Yasunaga played a significant role in shaping the public (and professional) perception of developments in go through the middle of the twentieth century more generally, as well as the shinfuseki movement specifically. However the book needs to be read not as the manifesto of shinfuseki, but as something closer to a post hoc attempt to explain it.

There is a very close parallel in the approaches of the pro-shinfuseki book *Igo Kakumei* and the main work arguing against shinfuseki, *Datō-Shinfusekihō*. ('Overcoming Shinfuseki'). This latter was written by two of Hon'inbō Shūsai's pupils, and carried an introduction by Shūsai himself. Both books were closely engaged with the history of opening play in the Tokugawa and Meiji periods. Moreover, the bulk of both books outlined their arguments with very similar schematic analysis of the board, lines of influence, and different ranks higher or lower on the board.

[48] Kitani, Go, and Yasunaga 1934: 2. The interest in the doctrine of the mean would appear to be largely the influence of Go Seigen, who showed more interest in East Asian philosophy than Kitani. Nakayama 2014: 131

[49] Nakayama 2014: 154

Where they disagreed, of course, was in the implications of their analysis, and their interpretation of the trajectory of go theory. In particular, on the question of history and the new, Yasunaga argued that the game had become hamstrung by a belief in the power of precedence and a suspicion of new ideas,[50] whereas by contrast, Shūsai expressed a concern that the modern era was one infatuated with novelty.[51] While Yasunaga argued that twentieth century communications media now permitted a more efficient sharing of ideas, both Shūsai and his pupils took aim at 'journalism' as one key culprit behind the cult of the new (presumably a fairly transparent criticism of Yasunaga).

Others have pointed to other reasons in order to understand why the shinfuseki moment occurred when it did, looking to the identity of its progenitors. Go Seigen and Kitani Minoru both turned five dan in 1933. As mentioned, this was the midpoint of the nine dan professional grading system, and so marked a turning point in that an increasing proportion of their games would be played with the white stones, rather than black. Thus they needed to develop a style to overcome the first mover advantage that came with the black stones. (And thinking about this also led them to change the ways in which they played when holding black, most obviously illustrated in the shift from playing the 4-4 point with white to playing it with black.)[52]

One final factor in the timing of shinfuseki is the suggestion that Go and Kitani were of the first generation that was finally sufficiently removed from the legacy of the Tokugawa period and the *iemoto* system's respect for seniority to feel able to innovate freely.[53] In other cultural practices, the heads of the *iemoto* families continue to hold a powerful grasp over their arts and the scope for innovation. As Kristin Surak says of the tea ceremony: "*Iemoto* are living embodiments of the tea ceremony… very few practitioners would dare to make tea in a way not sanctioned by them".[54] Thus it is striking that in the game of go in the 1930s, innovation could come from below. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore whether this was a product of the game's changing institutional structures, or perhaps the

[50] Kitani, Go, and Yasunaga 1934: 13
[51] Murashima and Takahashi 1936: 10-12
[52] Mizuguchi 2003: 64-65.
[53] Mizuguchi 2003: 57-58
[54] Surak 2012: 91

function of the more objective metric offered by games' win/loss outcomes than other cultural practices, but ultimately Go and Kitani were the seeds around which crystalized the growing sense of a need for new approaches, whereas Shūsai remained the leading voice against the style which emerged.

Conclusion

In 1938, Hon'inbō Shūsai played his final professional game. As with the *Yomiuri Shinbun* game against Go Seigen, he held white stones and there was no *komi* to offset black's first move advantage. This time his opponent was Kitani Minoru, by then ranked seven dan. Again the game lasted over several sessions, but Kitani had insisted on the introduction of a sealed move system to prevent the sort of advantage that Shūsai had benefitted from against Go Seigen five years earlier. In 1936, Shūsai had formally transferred the Hon'inbō title over to the Nihon Kiin, rather than seek to nominate a successor. After he died, the Nihon Kiin converted the Hon'inbō name from a hereditary position to the title of a competition, which continues to be competed for today. As a result of this the Tokugawa era *iemoto* system ended in go.[55]

This game was the inspiration for Kawabata Yasunari's novel, *Meijin*, which he worked on recursively in the 1940s and 1950s.[56] For Kawabata it was a story of transition from one age to another, the end of a go scene in which the Hon'inbō embodied all the values of a traditional Japanese cultural form, and the triumph of one organized along more prosaic lines.

For the purposes of this paper, what is most striking about the game is that Kitani Minoru, one of the fathers of the shinfuseki revolution, played moves one and three at the 3-4 points, *komoku* – the very moves that he and Go Seigen had rejected five years earlier.

[55] Strictly speaking, there was still one extant *iemoto* head – Inoue Egeta Inseki. By the Shōwa period, the Inoue house was located in the Kansai region, and largely withdrawn from the Nihon Kiin centred professional scene. After Egeta's death in 1961, there was a succession struggle in which his widow and one of Egeta's pupils, Tsuda Yoshitaka (1896-1983), eventually went to court to decide who had the right to determine succession. Although Tsuda won the right to call himself the seventeenth head of the Inoue family, he was not widely recognized, and no successor emerged after his death in 1983.

[56] In English translation, the book exists as in single canonical form, Edward Seidensticker's *The Master of Go*, but in the original Japanese, the book appeared in at least two different versions.

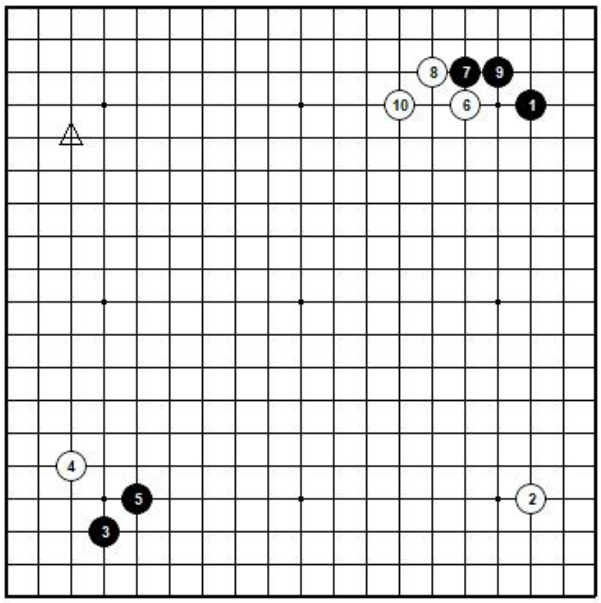

Figure 10 The opening of Hon'inbō Shūsai vs Kitani Minoru, 1938. Kitani, holding black played his first two moves at komoku (1 & 3). Shūsai played 2 at komoku in the third corner. The fourth corner was eventually played at the triangle square, a mokuhazushi (5-3).

In the 1934 survey of leading professionals, Go Seigen's mentor Segoe Kensaku, one of the game's elder statesmen and instinctively cautious regarding his protégé's innovations, had imagined a future in which the insights of old and new openings might come together. In the years either side of the Second World War, this is essentially what happened. The most extreme experiments of the shinfuseki era – the 5-5 point, for example – proved a temporary effervescence, and *tengen* as an opening move went back to being at most an occasional experiment. However, the 3-3 and especially 4-4 points were integrated into regular opening play, and although Go and Kitani had argued that the conventional opening moves of *komoku*, *mokuhazushi* and *takamoku*, were counter to fundamental principles, they never went away.

Rather, in subsequent decades all of these moves were combined and a series of other new approaches, akin to Kitani's favorite three star point formations, became popular, focusing on developing broad, board-

encompassing strategies. In the end, the most lasting effect of the shinfuseki revolution was less the specific moves advocated by Kitani and Go in the autumn 1933, but more the sense of freedom to experiment in the opening with new moves and new formations, unencumbered by the weight of historic precedent. This, rather than one or other specific opening move, was the most significant strategic element of the game's modernization.

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