Introduction: The scope of shape

What is shape?

Strong go players have in their armoury many set patterns of play. While shape (Japanese *katachi*) could mean any pattern that regularly occurs on the go board, it is useful to restrict the idea somewhat. The most immediately valuable shape ideas are those revealing the position of *vital points*. A vital point is a key location. If you occupy it, that by itself will give you a good result, not by some magic, but because of the nature of the position.

This is very important in practical play: from the point of view of reading, playing the vital point is only looking one play deep! Strong players are able to play well without much apparent thought, simply by concentrating on correct shape (which is not to say that deep reading has no part in go).

To start out, there is a small collection of go proverbs that help one to recognise those vital points of shape. (See the proverb index on p.216.) They are heuristics, not rigorous rules, and so are best studied with their exceptions: the meta-proverb says 'beware of applying proverbs blindly'.

How do *joseki* and *tesuji* relate to shape?

In learning the basic tactics of go, one at an early stage identifies cutting points as crucial. Some time after that, the study of *tesuji* problems shows that major tactical gains may result from certain standard plays, in particular those taking advantage of lack of liberties. Good shape plays may be less extreme or dramatic than those handled under the heading of *tesuji*, and yet still offer important advantages. Opportunities to play *tesuji* occur only a few times in a game between well-matched players, but good shape is constantly required.

Before studying shape, most players will encounter a few set openings, called in Japanese *joseki*. *Joseki* are standard sequences, including the conventional corner openings. They are patterns that have been evaluated by consensus of professionals.

A given *joseki* sequence steers a way though many possible variations, some of which are discarded as obvious tactical failures. Normally many further variations are rejected as poor shape: some of the players' stones are

inefficient or redundant, one of the groups created has inadequate eye shape or is difficult to develop further, and so on.

Objectives of this book

To explain which points are vital in given shapes.

To show how good shape is achieved, and bad shape exploited, in fighting contexts.

To integrate shape proverbs into your knowledge of go.

To look behind the proverbs to another level of more explicit mechanism, to provide supporting material, and to explain exceptions.

To break down the barrier between *tesuji* and *joseki* points of view, connecting pure intuitions with learned knowledge.

To demystify many common *tesuji*.

To help the reader to visualise how and where a *tesuji* might happen in the future, a requirement for a *dan* player.

To discuss the choice of variation at a point in a *joseki*, when tactical reasons alone aren't a sufficient guide.

To address as we go along questions about *suji*, or correct style, covering some of the content of the many texts on '*kata* and *suji*' in the Japanese literature.

To contribute to the local, critical theory of go, by attempting a systematic listing of possibilities in a pattern, with criteria for choosing amongst them.

To develop an ingrained respect in the reader for the principles of good shape (for example: connect but remain light and flexible, don't fill in your own liberties without very good reason, develop rapidly but also take into account eye shape).

To provide a reference on shape (there are an index of shapes and a proverb index at the end, to help you refer to particular patterns).

To show in action the comparative method of go study.

What should I study at my level?

From 10 *kyu* to 5 *kyu* levels, you should probably concentrate on recognising standard shapes as they come up in your own games, or play through professional games looking for them. It may be hard to understand why mistakes in shape are bad play, until you have also studied the basic shape concepts. In particular the study of *joseki* at this point may appear to be unrewarding, plain and simple memorisation.

Problem solving, first of all about basic life-and-death and then more general tactics under the heading of *tesuji*, is likely to seem more attractive to the player interested in progressing beyond 10 *kyu*. After solving enough problems from the go literature, you should begin to find the vital points in formations. This book can serve as a reference for these standard shapes.

The extended *joseki* example studied in this Introduction is suitable for players about 5 *kyu* and stronger. You can use it as a diagnostic test for what you already know. If you don't initially get much out of it you should probably read some of the simpler sections first (see below).

The approach of this book

Books on *joseki* are arranged by variation; books on *tesuji* are organised in one of two ways: by underlying shape, or by function (as in the *Fujisawa Shuko Tesuji Dictionary*, the current standard work). None of these structures makes for readability, but they are suitable for reference works. We normally adopt a combination of shape and function approaches.

Studying this book

Some people will read this work through as a book (if you are of *dan* level you might enjoy this); perhaps alternating with a book on *tesuji*. There are five main parts, each starting on a fresh area, within which the chapters generally increase in difficulty. The parts, too, become harder as the book progresses. Each chapter is broken down into short sections dealing with a specific topic. There are also three problem sets, the third being much harder than the others.

Otherwise you may find it helpful to study one of these shape 'courses'. You can use these section lists as our indications of difficulty.

First reading (10 *kyu* course):

1.1, 1.2, 1.3. 2.1 to 2.5. 3.1, 3.4, 3.5B, G and M. 4.1, 4.2, 4.4, 4.5, 4.6. 5.1, 5.3, 5.4. Problem Set 1 first half. 7.1, 7.4, 7.5, 7.6. Problem Set 2 first six problems. 11.1. 13.1, 13.2, 13.4.

Second Reading (5 *kyu* course):

Introduction. 1.4, 1.5. 2.6. 3.2, 3.3. 4.3, 4.7, 4.8, 4.9. 5.2, 5.5, 5.6. 6.1, 6.3. Rest of Problem Set 1. 7.2, 7.3, 7.7, 7.8. 8.1, 8.2, 8.3. 9.1. Rest of Problem Set 2. Chapter 10. 11.2, 11.4. 12.4. 13.3, 13.7. 14.1, 14.2.

Third Reading:

3.5. 6.2, 6.4. 8.4, 8.5. 9.2, 9.3. 11.3, 11.5. Chapter 12. 13.5, 13.6. Chapters 14 and 15. Problem Set 3.

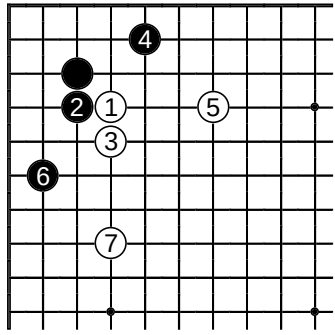
References

This book could usefully be read in parallel with *Tesuji* by James Davies (Kiseido), *Get Strong at Tesuji* by Richard Bozulich (Kiseido, this book has many examples on correct *suji*), *Tesuji and Anti-Suji of Go* by Eio Sakata (Yutopian), and *Proverbs*, Max Golem translator (Yutopian). For a general introduction to go read *Teach Yourself Go* by Charles Matthews (Hodder & Stoughton/NTC) which provides enough background to begin this book. We refer in the text to ideas of Bruce Wilcox; *EZGO – Oriental Strategy in a Nutshell* (Ki Press, ISBN 0-9652235-4-X), written with Sue Wilcox, is a representative book.

An example treated *joseki*-style

The rest of this Introduction works over a single opening pattern. This approach is typical of *joseki* books: you take a single corner opening and discuss a number of variations. You can read on to get a feel for the overall scope of shape ideas, and examples of some basic proverbs, in the context of decision-making. There's therefore the disadvantage of no single conclusion or main point. That partly explains why this isn't the way adopted in most of the rest of the book. Generally we take one pattern and look at it in various contexts. Then there is some basis for comparative reasoning, and a bit more dogmatism.

♦ Cross-references are given to the main text, in case at some point you wish to follow them up, and a number of proverbs are highlighted like ***this***.



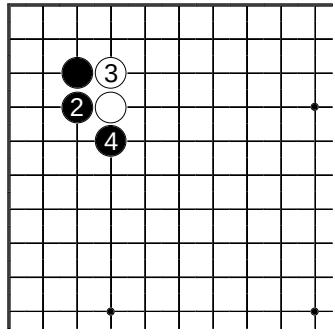
This is a regular sequence in a corner occupied first by Black, at the 3-3 point. It is relatively simple: Black's control of the corner is not contested, while White plays to avoid making a weak group. The White group then exerts influence in the centre.

It is decided early on that Black has the corner, and after that both players can be said to be 'making shape'.

Behind even such an ordinary development there may lie dozens of variations. We shall look at quite a number in the remainder of this introduction, as a way of surveying the facets of the idea of shape.

♦ Other related 3-3 patterns are to be found in 1.4, 1.5, 3.1 and 3.3.

Immediate loss of good shape

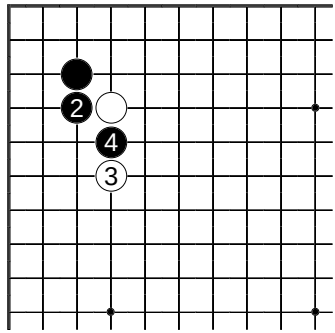


To begin with a fundamental example, White's choice of 3 here is bad shape. With 4 Black applies the proverb ***play* hane *at the head of two stones***. After that White cannot get a good result in this part of the board.

If you commonly allow this to happen to your stones, you can probably make an instant improvement by avoiding this sort of result.

♦ This and related proverbs are studied in Chapter 4.

Playing for light shape

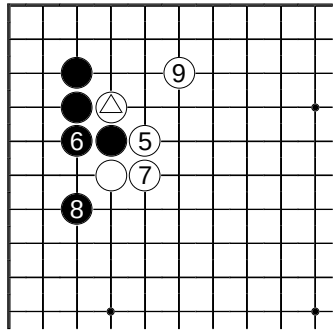


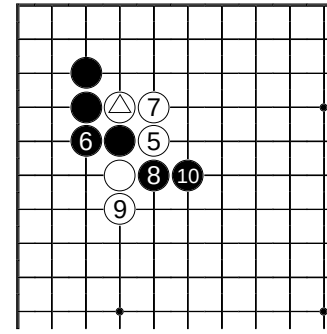
There is another recognised possibility for White 3. White can make the one-point jump played in this diagram. White must understand the purpose of this move. When Black plays 4 as shown, White will not be able to connect the two stones solidly. Therefore White 3 is a so-called *light* shape.

The main reason to prefer light shape (2.6) is that it makes defensive tasks easier. A characteristic mistake of amateur players is to make *heavy* shape: to develop groups without sufficient regard to their future defensive requirements.

This problem manifests itself in various ways: reluctance to sacrifice stones, even those without any great strategic significance; a greedy attitude to invasions, not admitting that the opponent deserves at least some territory; reduction plays that are too deep, and which have to struggle for life; too many solid connections and groups underdeveloped because of unreasonable fear of later cuts or invasions.

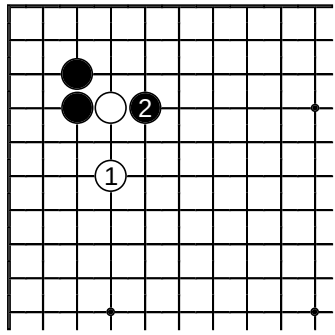
Strong players are keen on sacrificing stones. They can do that successfully, for several reasons: understanding of which stones can be sacrificed, and which are essential; good technique to get the most out of a sacrifice; accurate judgement of the resulting position; and a sharp eye for later use of stones given up.

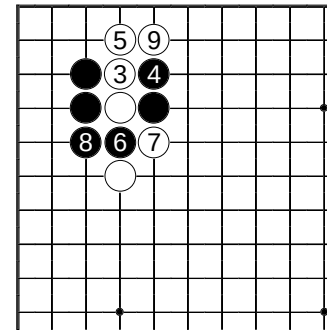




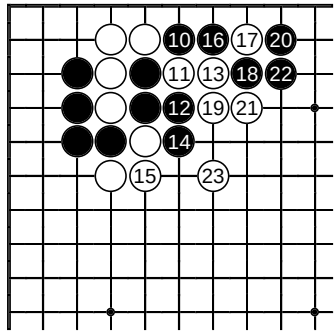
Normally White plays on 5 and 7 the outside, as in the left-hand diagram, and treats the marked white stone as a potential sacrifice. If White tried harder to save it, as in the right-hand diagram, White would immediately be involved in a difficult fight when Black cuts with 8.

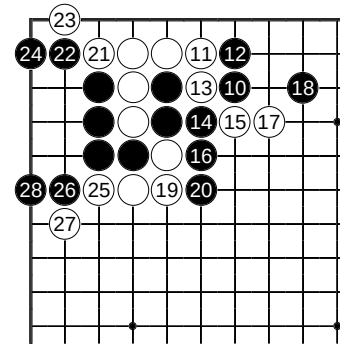
Tactics for playing close





Another possibility for Black, the clamp play 2 **(left)**, is not always a reliable, strong shape. **(Right)** White can try 3 and 5. What now for Black?

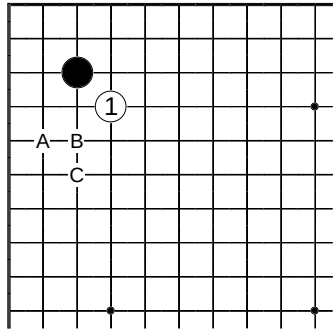




Black 10 in the left-hand diagram runs into immediate trouble. It is really too close. White 23 nets Black. It would be better to jump back **(right)**. There the fight is more complex, but it seems White's plan is unreasonable.

♦More about the clamp on pp.29, 31, 62.

What are my options?

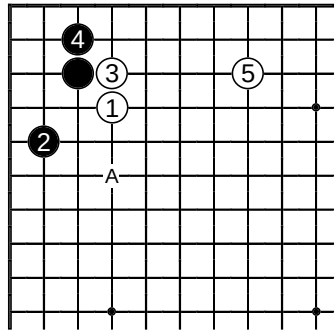


Turning back now, what choice did Black have in answering White's 'shoulder hit' play at 1? What about A, B or C instead?

These are examples of plays that are rarely considered in books. Two of them are quite bad, one of them has appeared in a top level match played by a master of the 3-3 point.

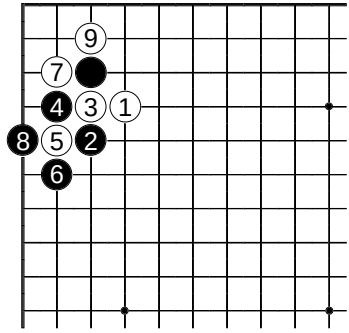
It would be an enormous task to list imaginable variants in *joseki*, or even reasonable questions to ask. One can be sure only that the plays current in professional games at a particular era have been carefully considered.

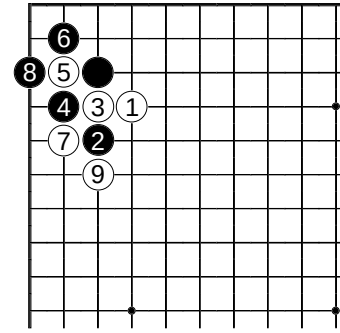
The orthodox extension



Black 2 is from professional play, though not very common. This development can be expected. White 5 ***extends three from a two-stone wall***, in line with the proverb; it might also sometimes be played at A. This was Sakata 9 *dan*'s play, seen in the 1969 Judan title match against Otake. In that context White 5 wasn't possible.

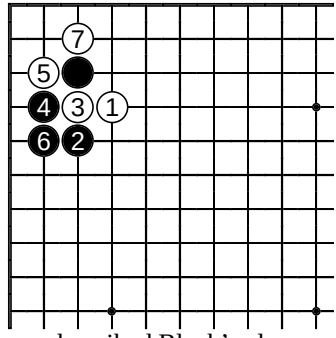
Capturing a cutting stone





Choice B is bad shape. White can create two cutting points with 3. Black has no choice about playing 4, to avoid being cut cleanly in two.

White can now cut on either side, depending on the overall position. **(Left)** White can take the corner. **(Right)** With a favourable ladder White can also play for the outside. Both results are good, given that Black started here.



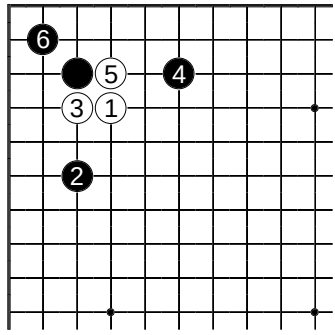
Black does well to obey the proverb ***capture the cutting stone***. If Black 6 connects as shown here, the result is worse shape than capturing the stone and giving up the outside.

A single stone capture, often called *ponnuki*, may be of high value. It may build eye shape, or influence; and is normally easy to develop in more than one direction.

We have described Black's play as mistaken. So it is. Giving up the corner is a serious loss, and White's good shape is too costly.

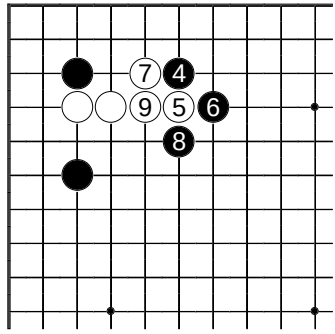
♦ The box in 1.2 discusses the proverbial value (30 points) of the *ponnuki*.

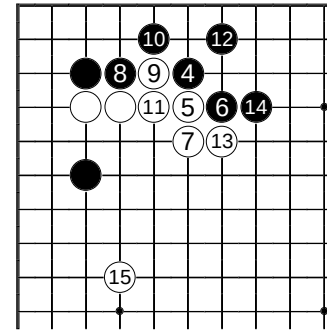
A tricky use of symmetry



Answer C is in fact an outright trick play. It aims at this situation, in which Black 6 gains life in the corner (a case of the proverb ***preserve symmetry***).

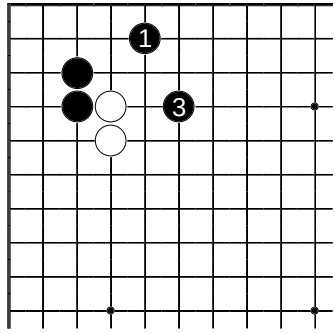
Now White cannot prevent Black's life or connection out. Black's hope is that White will get into trouble on the outside.

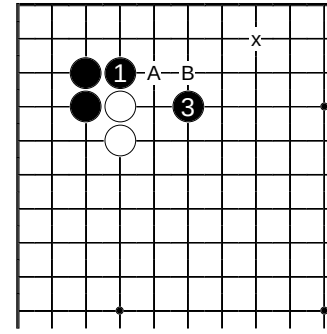




The *attach-block* shape **(left)** is good, in this case, if White wishes to play for territory. White can eventually take the corner, but must take great care about being shut in. Another way for White to deal with this trick play is to apply the *attach-extend* shape with 5 and 7 **(right)**, and pincer with 15. However White 13 is *pushing from behind*, which is generally poor style; and Black's stone on the left side could fight back hard, at some later time.

A discussion about the future





You can't force the opponent to answer. The shape Black makes on the left with 1 and 3, when White ignores 1, is better than the shape on the right. There is an actual weak point 'x' one can see, related to White possibly playing A, which Black would like to answer solidly at B.