

Akari and Cultural Characteristics of Japanese Go Game

Guo Qiandu

*Beijing National Day School, Beijing, China, 100039
guoqiandu@126.com*

Abstract: *Akari is a Go-related novel written by Nobel Prize Winner Yasunari Kawabata. The book portrays a reputed game in Japanese Go history. In the novel, the author combines the real and the fiction, blending the characteristics of Japanese Go culture into the depiction of opponents, games, and Go principles.*

Keywords: *Akari; Go; cultural elements*

1. Introduction

Akari is not only Kawabata Yasunari's masterpiece, but also his favorite work. The text describes a well-known game between two players, Dazhu and Hideya (Akari). This farewell competition lasted for half a year, including the three months that cut off the game when the Akari had a health condition. Eventually, Akari lost the game. More than a year after the competition, Akari passed away because of disease. The author was dispatched as a journalist to witness the game. In the novel, he combines the real and the fiction, blending the characteristics of Japanese Go culture in the depiction of opponents, games, and Go principles.

2. Akari and the spirit of Japanese Go culture

Under the writing and description of Yasunari, Akari was a master in Go: "Akari may not have the best health condition in his body, but he was a true warrior on the chessboard, and had the sense of bravery whenever on the arena. In the farewell competition, he was already suffering from the devils of disease, but he bore it and fight with immense strength on the chessboard. For Akari, in order to accomplish an outstanding art piece, one must put all their efforts no matter the consequences." Akari's firm and persistent attitude fits in with the personality in Japanese warriors, and this tight connection between Go culture and personal aspiration is one of the characteristics of Japanese Go culture. In the novel *Akari*, Yasunari embodied plenty of psychological descriptions aside from the progress of the game, along with the temperament of the Akari and human fates related to Go, this intellectual sport. "In the eras of Mingzhi, Dazheng, and Zhaohe, Akari's fantastic feats brought Go its prosperity at the present. His prominent merit made him the representative character of Go. A celebrity like this should take the farewell competition as an event that adds color to his amazing journey in the Go world. People should honor and respect his every move until the end of the game, in which consists of the considerate behaviors from posterity, the virtue of warriors, and the high spirit of fine art." Akari is the guardian of Go spirit, his portrait corresponds to Yasunari's special understanding of Japanese Go culture: "There is close relationship between liberal and martial arts in Japan, as well as the principles of religion. Go is the best symbol of this association."

3. Akari: Go Games and Virtue of Japanese Go culture

Hideya Honinbo is named "undefeatable celebrity." The important thing towards Akari was to keep winning towards the end of the farewell competition. However, he did not care much about winning and losing but obtained the traditional morality of Japanese Go culture. On the rules of the game, he followed the new rules to count the chess pieces and while playing the game, such as the "Time Limit" rule and "Closed Type" rule. "Closed Type" rule refers to the forbidding of walking around the room while the game is on. If players are allowed to get out of their seats in the middle of a match and watch others play, they might give advice to other players unconsciously. That would be unfair to the

opponent. The “Time Limit” rule sets a fixed time for each game. A normal game would be 10 hours long, but the farewell game could last 40 hours. Those two rules keep the dignity of the result, but are deprived of the gracefulness of Go itself, and respect towards the elders. Just like the author stated in *Akari*, “Everything is constrained in a few rules. The essence of Go is lost, the tradition of respecting elder generations sheds away like leaves fall down a tree, and interpersonal identity could not be respected. The last game of *Akari* suffered from the torture of modern rationality. As for the virtue of Go, the merits of Japan and eastern countries do not exist anymore, and everything must depend on those stubborn doctrines which limit the Go world. Whether a player got a higher level depends solely on his or her total credits and ranking. All the player has to do is to win. This strategy is the priority to all rules, which makes the fun and humorous part of Go fade away, shrinking under the pressure of the game result.” *Akari* compliments the last virtuous characteristic of Japanese Go culture and expresses Yasunari’s pursuit for the “beauty” inside Go. In the game between *Akari* and Dazhu, the author tends to favor the traditional side instead of modern rationality. In the text, *Akari* spent so much time and effort but lost the game. This suggests the traditional beauty of Go sheds towards “nothingness”, which could in turn give Go game a characteristic of “beauty of death and nothingness.”

4. *Akari* Go morals and Japanese tradition

Beginning from 4th-6th century, when Go was spread to Japan from China, it got prospered really quickly. “In the peace era of Japan (794-1192), Go was popular among royal society. As one of the four accomplishments in ancient China (including Chinese zither, calligraphy, traditional Chinese painting, and Go), Go is one of the most important skills that people in the royal families would have to master.” In Japan, Go was not only people’s entertainment, but also contains deep thoughts and culture. “Japan is an island country, its culture consists of great variability and combination from different nations. The culture from Siberia, religion from India, thoughts from China and so on converge in Japan to communicate with each other. Combined with local Japanese culture, those different beliefs form the unique Japanese culture. Putting elements that seem to be contradicting to each other improves the prosperity and co-existence of various cultures. Xxx, this is Go.”

Akari describes the morality of Go in a way that contains *Akari*’s firm and determined attitudes towards games, his utter respect and obedience to traditional Go culture, the respect and tolerance of precedents of Go towards the representative of this game. That is “the Chrysanthemum spirit” of Japanese. The book also contains players’ bravery inside the games, the silent fighting between competitors. That is “the Sword spirit” of Japanese. The author greatly admires the virtue of Go, and therefore opened up the spiritual world between him and the readers in the book. Through the novel, we learned about the grand spirit in Go and the author’s deep feelings about the morals of this intellectual game.

When Japan was in Genroku era (1688-1704), presided over by Honinbo Taoism and established the rank system. From 1 dan to 9 dan, the players had the practical standard to determine their level. Someone who had the level of 9 dan would be named “*Akari*”. Throughout Go history in Japan, there were 10 “*Akaris*” from 1603 to 1940. Honinbo Hideya was the last “*Akari*”. The game between Hideya and Dazhu represented the transition from traditional to modern form of Go in Japan, which revealed a huge progress in strategies and techniques of Go. However, following Hideya’s death and Yasunari Kawabata’s concern about the shedding of conventional culture of Go, it is inferred that the author paid attention to the characteristics of Japanese Go culture. In face, no matter how the contemporary era develops or changes, “The Chrysanthemum and the Sword” are inserted in conventional Go culture inside the nation.

5. Conclusion

To wrap up, *Akari* reflects the author’s unique and special understanding of Go culture in Japan and entrusts his pursuit for traditional beauty and pity of this piece of beauty fading away. We could sense the intergration of Go and Japanese Bushido, the beauty and pity in Go game, and the elegant beauty in Go game in *Akari*.

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