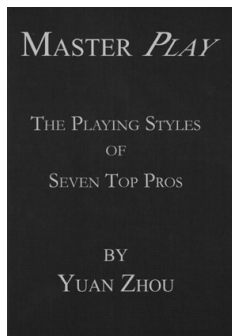


BOOK REVIEW

MASTER PLAY: THE PLAYING STYLES OF SEVEN TOP PROS

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Author: Yuan Zhou

Publisher: Slate and Shell¹

ISBN: 1-932001-50-6

'The Playing Styles of Seven Top Pros' is the latest addition to Yuan Zhou's Master Play series, which now numbers six books (all of commented professional games). I've enjoyed the other books in the series, but they all struck me as being somewhat on the short side; I was excited to see that this latest book is more than twice as long as any of the others, with its fourteen games spanning 269 pages.

The commentary is lighter than in the other Master Play books — I think the games took me an average of about an hour to play through. Nonetheless, there's plenty in here, and the length feels about right — the book is satisfying without being exhausting. Slate and Shell are selling it for \$24, which makes it significantly more expensive than the other works in the

series; however, you are undoubtedly getting more for your money.

The seven top pros included in the book are Sakata Eio, Takagawa Kaku, Fujisawa Shuko, Rin Kaiho, Nie Weiping, Ma Xiaochun, and Cho Hunhyun. Zhou provides brief biographical information for each in turn, along with a pair of particularly representative games.

His book illustrates how very personal Go is, and how widely professional styles can range. We discover, for example, the 'honte' style of Takagawa, which led Hashimoto Uтарo to declare that playing him was "like drinking warm water". Ma Xiaochun's psychological Go is tailored to each opponent; a move which is good against Nie Weiping "naturally" would not be played "against a player like Kato Masao". Deserving of a special mention is the 'double-waisted' Go of Rin Kaiho (this is a term borrowed from sumo, meaning 'very hard to defeat'); 3-0 behind in a best-of-7 Meijin title match against Ishida Yoshio, he manages to eke out a half-point win in a dramatic game (Ishida was just one ko threat short), before going on to win the title. As might be expected, the games abound with impressive tesujis, ingenious plans, and examples of terrifyingly deep reading.

Something that I've always liked about the Master Play books is that

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they favour simplicity. The moves are explained according to basic, straightforward principles, with little focus on the most mind-numbingly complex sequences. I'm usually happy to be tricked into believing that top-level Go isn't utterly beyond my understanding. However, over the course of these fourteen games, I actually began to grow slightly frustrated by Zhou's approach. In general, he focuses on one particular stylistic aspect for each professional (whole-board thinking, honte moves, keeping the opponent uncomfortable, flexibility...).

Of course, there are advantages to this method. The comments are clear and easy to follow, and I did close the book with a sense that several basic principles had been even more deeply drummed into me. However, the commentary occasionally feels somewhat forced. Many questions are left unanswered, and at times it seems like this is simply because they do not pertain to Zhou's overall message for the game. Moreover, few variations are provided for complex sequences. Zhou is not aiming to help the reader to understand all of the ins and outs of a game, but rather to use certain features to make a broader point.

As in earlier books, Zhou has reviewed these games in conversation with a 4k (Bill Cobb). Occasionally his questions, along with Cobb's answers, are included (they mark useful moments for the reader to pause and consider the game). I get the impression that Zhou pitches his commentary very effectively to his audience, and I would definitely recommend this book for players around Cobb's strength — and, indeed, for any player in the region

of 10k-1k. I imagine that the clear, straightforward approach will appeal particularly to weaker players who have little experience of pro games: this book is a gentle introduction! Of course, stronger players will also benefit from studying the games. However, I suspect that dan players will not learn a huge amount from Zhou's commentary. He does an excellent job of making the games accessible to Single-Digit Kyus (SDKs), but this inevitably entails leaving out some higher-level nuances.

Finally, although in general the book is reasonably well-presented, it could have benefited from more thorough proof-reading. There are multiple typing errors — I spent longer than I'd care to admit trying to find the definition of 'athesente'! Moreover, being a pedant, I get a little annoyed about careless inconsistencies such as the (clearly unintentional) use of varying fonts in the contents page. However, the diagrams themselves are accurate — I didn't come across any mistakes that make Zhou's points unclear. Furthermore, there's a certain warmth and enthusiasm in Zhou's tone that shines through despite the occasional errors: he succeeds in recreating much of the drama and excitement of the games.

Overall, I've enjoyed this book a lot, and have certainly learned from it. For players outside the SDK range, there may be more useful ways to spend \$24. However, this is one of those books that reminds you of how exquisite Go can be; there's a lot to be said for that.

The Review copy was kindly provided by Slate and Shell.