

# THE FUTURE OF RENJU

By Ando Meritee, 1997

Let's discuss about very serious matters concerning the future of renju.

It is really hard to impress all my feelings and thoughts about that, so the article will not be written in a best way.

We must admit that there has been a quite big progress in renju during last 10-15 years. The game has grown up, at least with present rules. And it is all thanks to hundreds of active renju fans who investigate openings every day. But everything has its limits. The number of playable openings is reducing every day. From time to time somebody finds a victory in position which was considered unclear until then. Renju used to be a game which required creativity, now it has become a game which needs knowledge, mostly about opening theory. You can become a good player only if You learn all the opening theory. Otherwise You will be beaten even if You are talented person and like creative play with a lot of combinations. As the game has become so theoretical, it is not so fun anymore, people do not enjoy it as much as the used to do 5-6 years ago. In generally, people wouldn't play any game or take part in any sport competition if they knew the final result in advance. Only if they do not know the end of the game, they can prove their skills and creativity. Otherwise it is senseless.

The question is - **What do we expect from renju?** We must choose between two directions - **creativity** or **theoretical know-how**. Many people have already realised that renju has turning too much into "theoretical" game. But they really do not want this to happen. They still want to enjoy their creative play. But there are less and less possibilities to try something new and unusual because playing something unusual will mostly lead to loss.

A few years ago there were the first signs of dissatisfaction about renju rules. Looking at opening statistics of the tournaments we could see that only a few openings were played - mostly i10, i11, sometimes i12, i1, i9, i5, i8. But even many of these openings should not be played at all as theoretical investigations have proved that they are too good for black (95% black win, maybe). Such openings are i10, i12, i9, i8. And high-level renjuplayers know that. This is why You do not see them playing these openings any more in serious tournaments. So it was i11, i1, i5 left. But we even know the situation there. White usually wins in i5 and i1, therefore i11 gives a draw. Of course, these calculations are made, presuming that good players are playing (it is based on my experience and tournament statistics).

There are also direct openings but people don't need to learn so much. Every time, when they are player no.2, they put 2nd move diagonally and expect 3rd move, knowing that if it will not be i11, the opponent will be in big trouble. But if players are no.1, they will set up the only direct opening what they know. A renjuplayer needed to know 13 indirect openings and 1 direct opening. This time was really awful. So people started to think about alternative possibilities of opening rules...

In August 1996, the opening rules were changed. According to new rules, which were copied from Japan, the only difference is that the player no.1 will make 2nd move (white stone) instead of player no.2. Now people have to be ready to play any of 26 openings. This

was really happy and relaxing moment for players who favoured creative play. The tournament statistics changed - players with black didn't win as much games as they used to be. Everything seemed to be balanced. But not for a long...

Active renju players turned immediately their "hungry faces" (myself too, of course) towards direct openings as they had already investigated everything in indirect openings. By today direct openings are rapidly approaching to the same situation as indirect openings. Openings d1, d2, d4, d5, d6, d7, d10, d12, d13 already can not be played. Black win in d11 can be considered as a miracle, though it happens sometimes. 9d shares his destiny with i11. Right now, d3 and d8 give possibilities for both sides. But don't worry, soon we will make clearance even there. Saying very radical, only i11, d3, d8, d9 can be played. (Maybe I am wrong about d11). Only 4 from 26! Even in these 4 openings we have very little left for creativity.

In my opinion the changing of the rules in 1996 was only a temporary solution. But it was definitely necessary to show people the growth of creativity using new rules. This change could be called like a middle-step in a way to really new renju rules. I say, we need to change rules in future. Present rules may stand maybe 3-5 years and after this many players will loose interest, because they do not get what they look for.

Perhaps it is time to start think about alternative ways for opening rules. It is even hard to start suggesting anything knowing that it would cause huge resistance from many people.

There can be many simple changes of rules which would make renju as a game what we just need - we have to start thinking across the board, start using our brains again.

My suggestion for future rules: Everything will remain the same as present rules, except first three moves are not limited, they can be put anywhere on the board. The possibility to change the color will remain, of course. One good thing is that we do not need to put two 5th moves any more, because the new rules make renju positions too different from present positions. The rule of alternative 5th moves was related to the rule that black plays first move in the middle. According to the new rules black can play elsewhere than in the middle. The result is - a lot of interesting positions which really demand both players to think hard. The importance of theory will be minimal. Even if people wanted to investigate everything as they used to do it would be too complicated - instead of 26 openings there are thousands of openings. I and some other people have tested this opening rule for many times. The first blitz tournament according to new rules was played in Karepa in August, 1996. I think it was quite successful and I hope it will be another one in this year in Karepa.

No matter which will be the new rules, there will be many people resisting all this. There are many people who have learned so much theory during years and they would want to use this against other players and beat them as a contribution for wasted time while learning theory. It would be big sacrifice to drop all the present know-how and return to the brain-work. In generally, all renju books, databases would become worthless. More exact - it becomes only a very little part in the new renju theory. So, quite normal, resistance is expected also from the people who make books and databases. Another thing: it has been a long time tradition that black puts first move in the middle, and all tradition-lovers are afraid of changing this. But I must remind that first move was played in the middle already when the game was very young, with no opening regulations. So it was obvious that black wanted to play in a best way which made them play in the middle. This time nobody knew that with no regulations the black wins, especially if he puts the first move in the middle. We know it now and we

are looking for equality and balance in the game, so what could be the reason to follow that very old tradition.

It is really hard to explain all this in one time. I must wait and see what other people say about this. Then I can continue with arguments. I really want to hear people's opinion - both supporters and opponents.

However, such serious change will need a lot of research, test tournaments and single matches in order to prove its efficiency. It may take many years. It may also be that there will never be any changing of rules and boring life goes on. Let's see...

## **Juri Tarannikov comments:**

Translated by Ando Meritee.

*(Meritee: "I do apologise if there are some inaccurations with translating")*

I agree with general directions of ideas offered by Meritee and I want to talk only about details. Most questionable is suggestion about changing the rule of 5th alternative moves. Thesis "the easier rules the better" is not justified because it's impossible to obtain both simpleness and pithness in a same time. I note that if to be consistent till the end, then together with rule of 5th alternative moves we must also change the rule of forbidden moves (fouls). The changing rule of 5th alternative moves will disable a big number of pithy positions. For example, from 26 allowed openings there are much more acceptable openings with two 5th moves than with one 5th move. I am not sure that the situation will change if we can put the first three moves free (without restrictions). In fact, this point will cause most trouble among the small group of renjuplayers who will lose the possibility with even being player no1 to play known positions. I would make more harmonic (in my opinion) suggestion: **The player no1 puts first three moves anywhere on the board with declaring how many 5th alternative moves must be made - one or two.** This approach allows to maintain and combain in one game all so-far-invented-theory with both main and alternative variants, making also possible a big number of new positions. We can go even more forward, allowing to declare 3, 4, 5, etc. alternative 5th moves, that makes possible to put even the openings which have been considered too strong for black. But I think it would be too revolutionary step.

Another weak point of the offered rules (and also present rules) is that for player no1 it is still enough to know only one opening. According to the present and offered rules, it would be enough to learn for example not to lose with any color in d3 and play against any strongest player. Even more, the situation becomes more complicated. In home analysing the players will dig deep in different exotic variants and it is quite possible that there will be found openings where the balance will come after long series of "the-only-moves" which is impossible to find across the board. By the moment the player will set up the opening, he will know everything in there and will practically have victory in his pocket. How to fight with this? We must think carefully here. It is possible to offer, for example, following procedure. **The player no1 puts the opening. Another player chooses color. But if player**

**no2 has problems with choosing color or thinks that player no1 has studied this opening too much at home, he can refuse to play this opening and put opening of his own instead. Now player no1 must either choose color or put opening (of course, not repeating previous offers). And so on.** We can add the top-limit for number of offerings. But in the other hand, we may also retain it unlimited. According to this rule playing with any color we must be ready for any opening. Of course, I do not push towards that procedure, it's just one of the possibilities. If anyone finds something better, please tell about this.

## **Mihail Kozhin comments:**

Translated by Ando Meritee.

*(Meritee: "I do apologise if there are some inaccurations with translating")*

I obtained certain opinion while reading about the rules offered by Ando. More exactly, about the same rules I thought two years ago. We must point out three main things.

First thing. Undoubtful advantage of these rules - enormous growth of playable variants. The variants will be divided into three groups. The first group - "the central openings" (i1, i5, d3), where is possible equality of sides without 5th alternative moves (including variants with 3rd move outside 5x5 area). The second group - "the moved openings", where similar victories do not succeed because of difference in location with some lines comparing with theoretical position. And finally, the third and the most interesting group - "the edge openings", where the chances of both sides equalize because of placement of three stones relating to board edges. From the first aspect ensues another. Is it advantage or disadvantage - it needs discussing. With eliminating the rule of 5th alternative moves the influence of present theory will be radically reduced. Even more, it seems extremely difficult , almost unreal, to create new similar theory because of enormous growth of three-move-structure. From first two aspects follows the third one. The main disadvantage of these rules is big advantage of the player who sets up the opening as he has a lot of possibilities to calculate all possible developments in advance, but for the player who must choose color almost every variant seems *terra incognita*. Nevertheless, I think that such disbalance can be contributed in difference of time given for players: player no2 will receive 1½-2 times more thinking time in order to get the better orientation in the position.

As I know, A.Mihailov has also one idea for opening rules, which is much more radical: **the first 5 moves can be put free, change of color.** (As he says, they are rules for 100 years!) By the way, among all radical possibilities this rule would include all present theory. I can imagine that even present theory does not exhaust itself at least during 4-5 years. But then there can be successful solution: **Player no1 puts one black stone in the center, another black and white stone freely somewhere, another player can change color, then player as black must offer two alternative 5th moves.** Sooner or later the rule with unrestricted first three moves becomes inevitable, but we must approach to this softly, evolutionarily.

## Aldis Reims comments:

It's very nice that somebody really cares about future of our game. And from Ando's article I got a real feeling that he worries about our game. It's very good, though my opinion is quite different from Ando's...

**I agree that question is - what do we expect from renju?** Ando offers a choice between "creativity" and "theoretical know-how". OK, let's analyze today's situation or situation of "theoretical know-how". Sometimes, especially before 1996 year's rule change I also thought that we are in a big trouble, but today's situation is changed. And it will be definitely enough for some 4-5 years. Thoughts that there are no way and everything is known usually appears after long home analyzes, but in real life very, very often even in most obvious situations we can't find good decisions. The world's strongest players lose winning situations etc. I mean we have a sport game, where even after 2-3 years of analyzing will be much space for unclarity, especially in live tournaments. Very serious problems I can imagine just for correspondence (or e-mail) tournaments.

Ando is right that after some years we will have a lot of very doubtful situations, where first player will meet some problems. But look on today's chess! I think it's quite balanced and serious game with a lot of theory, history, money background etc. And in chess today black player in 80-90% games have to sit in deep defence and usually he hasn't even any smallest chance to make any active move during all the game! And smallest mistake lead to white victory! In renju we'll probably have the same situation, when there will be a number of quite even positions (I11, I1, I5,D3,D8,D11) and number of more doubtful situations and of course first player will have to sit under a big pressure to keep a draw and very often in the end of game even to win, because with our level of professionalism nobody will be able to know theory so well to remember everything. I can agree that some players will be stronger and for them it won't be so interesting (like Nakamura, Meritee, for example), but I can't imagine that with today's level or even level after some 4-5 years renju will lose interest.

As solution of today's problems Ando offers way of "creative" renju. I agree that today's situation could lead to some problems after 4-5 years and it will be necessary to change something, but Ando's way is an absolut extremity. It seems like communist revolution in 1917 in Russia, when everything was destroyed, because there were some problems...

As I already used chess as some kind of example I can continue with it. People very often say that there are three equal and important parts in chess - science, sport and art. Even with today's creativitie's (art) problems, I think that also in renju we have these parts, but with Ando's rules we'll get instead of all that just something like gambling or roulette. Of course, it all will look funny and maybe even little bit interesting, but nothing more. We will definitely lose a moment of science and serious home preparing and if we want renju to be as a serious game it's absolutely unacceptable. It will be anything except a serious game.

We will get just some kind of unknown renju and from one kind of problem, but as I'm sure not so terrible we'll get into another situation and I'm afraid that there will be more

players who won't want to play with new rules than today. Of course, it's just my opinion and maybe I'm wrong.

What about myself, then I'm quite sure that I won't play with such "new" rules. Please don't take it as an argument it's just my point of view.

One more very important and serious problem from which I'm afraid very much is that we can get soon a company (or even Federation!) of new wave players, who will agree only to play with Meritee's style rules and in such way we will get again a "two (or even more) renju situation" like it was with infantile russian gomoku. So I offer to discuss all it inside R.I.F. and play just under R.I.F. rules, however I understand very well that R.I.F. today is quite inert and reluctant organization.

I'm sure that there aren't true white or black colours in our life. Practically everything is some kind of gray and the best way very often are some kind of middle way. I understand it in such way - we will have to change something, but just little and to keep all things we have built already - theory, games bases etc., but to give a new field for further development for game's theory. We must just to give a fresh breath to our game - to spread a number of opening variations.

And finally my offer. I'm not sure that it's good enough and I'm not sure will it work at all, but it's just an idea. Only change for rules is that black can make their first move in centre OR in one of the nearest points. It means instead of one initial position we'll get 3 situations with direct and indirect shift of first move. Gains of all that COULD BE:

1. Because of extremely high importance from "shifts" we will get probably quite a big number of new openings. Because directly shifted I9 maybe isn't at all I9 without shift.

2. We will keep all our previous knowledge not as a small part, but as a very big and important part.

3. It will be possible to choose for first player (who is in worst situation) where to put first stone and to put game in "new way" or to play something well-known and to get all possible problems.

These are my ideas for first moment, but I'm absolutely sure that we must to try to solve this problem in the way I offered, WITHOUT BIG BANG.

