Book Review
The most difficult problem ever —
Igo Hatsuyoron 120

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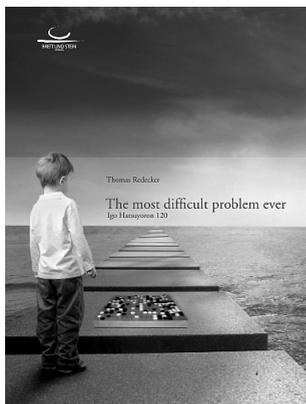
Authors: Thomas Redecker, with Joachim Meinhardt and Harry Fearnley

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A Gloriously Implausible Empty Triangle

The Hatsuyoron is a collection of Go Problems created early in the 18th century as reading exercises for top professionals. It might seem that a book devoted entirely to just one of these problems would be rather too high level for an amateur audience.

However this is mainly the work of two German kyu players, and the relatively modest playing strength of the authors leads us to discover the point of this book, and indeed of the original source. These problems were designed to push forward the frontiers of Go technique by presenting the most difficult problems that people could actually solve. The authors have succeeded, by years of painstaking analysis, in discovering some new moves overlooked by professional analysts, and they argue persuasively that several of these should be included in the best line for both sides.

The authors have produced the nearest thing you are likely to meet to a complete analysis of a middle-game Go position. We are not treated to the full analysis of all the failed lines in the book, but to a pretty thorough panorama of the most promising lines. The book is unusual in being bilingual in English and German.

So what is the problem about, and why is it so difficult? The central theme is a bizarre type of semeai (capturing race) called hanezeki, which features a group of stones in atari such that it is bad (locally) to capture them. The composer of the problem has tried to construct a position such that the 'poisoned' group of stones is as large as possible without their capture winning the game. Those who have enjoyed the late Nakayama's 'Treasure Chest Enigma' will remember the problem he quotes from the same

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[1] www.brett-und-stein.de.
There is a website devoted to the problem at www.dgob.de/dgoz/trmdpe/.
See also senseis.xmp.net/?TheMostDifficultProblemEver.

source, where a struggling group of stones wanders all across the board capturing big lumps of stones without ever finding a second eye. This one is in the same spirit.

The feature that makes problem 120 so hard to manage is that it comes down to a position where one side (White, the victim) must choose which of two large capturing races to win. Depending on which of these lines is chosen, small details of order of forcing plays from earlier may gain or lose a few points. And after the decision there is still an endgame to play out, the result of which is close in several lines.

The original 1713 book was produced without solutions and early published editions took the wise decision of omitting this problem. It was unearthed and studied by some Japanese professionals in the 1970s and an account appears in Go World 29 (1982). Their solution arrives at a two-point win for Black. The discovery of some small improvements in White's play later caused Black's two point margin to evaporate, and the search for better ways for Black eventually led Thomas Redecker to discover his gloriously implausible empty triangle — a move which loses half an eye, attacks no stones and gains no liberties, but

rescues Black's position. It is worth having this book just to marvel at the possibility that such moves exist.

As to the title, this is certainly an extremely rich and bizarre Go position, and certainly very difficult indeed to solve, but the authors have shown that is it humanly possible. I am unconvinced that an ordinary game position around move 100 with no special tactical features would actually lend itself to being completely solved in this way.

And to the question of what strength of Go player it is suitable for, I would be surprised if anyone weaker than about 15k would be able to follow the sequences, but for players stronger than this it is a question of willpower and perseverance rather than actual playing strength.

The book is not an easy read, but it does show what it feels like to know everything about a Go position, and in that feeling lies the possibility of leading your own Go, at whatever level, to move a little closer to complete enlightenment. Players who like to dream about the game of Go and its ultimate possibilities will have a space on their bookshelf for this slim (144 page) volume.

The review copy was kindly provided by Brett und Stein Verlag.