



Above: A Starbucks outlet in Putuo District has become a gathering place for local amateur go players.

Left: A group of go lovers are seen on January 29 at the Starbucks outlet in downtown Shanghai. — All photos by Dong Jun

Local go players share board strategies at Starbucks outlet

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One Starbucks outlet in downtown Shanghai caught many off guard after informal gatherings of local amateur go players were posted online and went viral.

Every Monday, Thursday, and Saturday afternoon, dozens of amateur go players congregate to share their board game strategies.

The informal meeting began some years ago when Shanghai amateur go player Han Jun, who lives close by, discovered a community bakery to organize casual go sessions with friends and fellow go players.

The participants formed a WeChat group, and as word spread via social media, others joined in.

Han normally brings over a dozen boards, and when social media posts became popular, there were more than one-third more go players at the gathering than on regular workdays.

Around 40 people turned up on Monday, many of them students and retirees, and Han said more people, up to 60, can be seen on weekends.

Regardless of their age or occupation,

they appear to have an implicit agreement to pursue the simple delight of playing in a relaxed environment. Nobody has to pay a membership fee or make any kind of commitment.

“They don’t have any obligation as long as they feel the place and atmosphere are comfortable, and I don’t have any mandatory requirements either,” Han said.

In a popular online video broadcast in early January that attracted 1 million views and over 2,000 comments, many suggested that coffee shops emulate the habit of having chess-playing sessions to attract board game players.

“Starbucks staff here are largely tolerant, and we have nothing more to ask for, while most of the participants do order some coffee drinks or desserts over the long hours here,” he said.

Some argue that the gatherings disrupt the normal business environment and keep non-participants away, and that go players should limit gatherings to specific salons or clubs.

Starbucks did not respond to the issue. But it seems business in this outlet is not quite disturbed as most go-playing customers had a cup of Starbucks



A local retiree in his 80s was spotted playing with a youngster.

coffee besides their go boards on Monday, while some non-participants were seen simply buying their drinks and sitting quietly.

Matching go players of different levels with one another appears to be quite easy for Han.

Wang, in his 80s, said he was looking for a good location and a counterpart who could match his ability, so he decided to come and try his luck after a friend recommended the coffee shop.

After a brief talk with Han, he sat at a corner table with a much younger

counterpart and started playing.

Shanghai retiree surnamed Li, who has been following the go-playing culture for more than 50 years, said that the group must locate a good site not only in terms of decoration style, correct size, and easy location but also an ideal environment.

The Game of go symbolizes many characteristics of Chinese civilization, but it also fits nicely with the relaxed and welcoming attitude here at the coffee shop, Li explained.

“For many retirees, it’s not easy to find a fairly decent place, and a like-minded group is even harder to come by.”

Despite widespread public participation and several professional training institutions, there is still significant room for promotion to increase awareness of go among all age groups, he added.

Many people point out that it is difficult for go players of different rankings to match one another; therefore, the face-to-face connection is what motivates many individuals to seek out counterparts, whether they are familiar with one another or not.