Learn to Play CHINESE MAHJONG (Playing Cards Edition)

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Introduction

Chinese Mahjong is a four-player game of skill, strategy, and chance. This playing-card edition follows beginner-friendly Cantonese-style rules and a simplified scoring system based on the Mahjong Competition Rules (MCR) fan list, adapted for use with Chinese Mahjong playing cards instead of tiles.

The goal of the game is to be the first player to complete a winning hand — 14 cards arranged as four sets and one pair — and declare "Mahjong!"

There are many regional variations of Chinese Mahjong (Cantonese, Shanghainese, Taiwanese, Fukienese, and more), each with its own rules and scoring methods. This guide teaches one beginner-friendly version; if your group comes together from different traditions, agree on house rules before you start.

What's Included

This Chinese Mahjong Playing Cards set includes:

- **144 Chinese Mahjong playing cards,** representing:
- Suits (Dots, Bams, Craks)
- Winds (East, South, West, North)
- Dragons (Red, Green, White)
- Flowers and Seasons

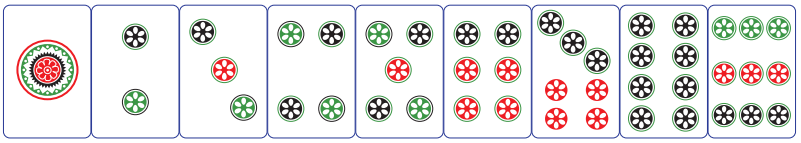
No dice, racks, wind indicators, or betting coins/sticks are included. Just shuffle and deal.

Card Set Overview

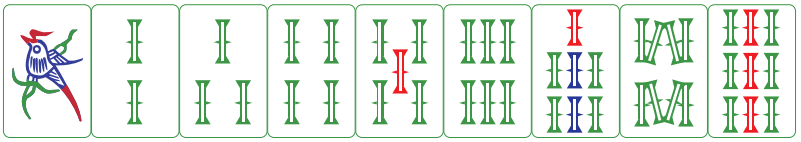
The 144 cards are divided into three groups with their subgroups:

Suits (108 cards)

- Circles or Dots (筒子牌, tǒngzǐpái) — 36 cards, 4 of each, numbered 1–9



- Bamboos or Bams (索子牌, suǒzǐpái) — 36 cards, 4 of each, numbered 1–9



- Characters or Craks (万子牌, wànzipái) — 36 cards, 4 of each, numbered 1–9

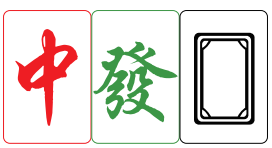


Honors (28 cards)

- Winds (风牌, fēngpái) — 16 cards, 4 of each: East, South, West, North



- Dragons (三元牌, sānyuánpái) — 12 cards, 4 of each: Red, Green, White



Flowers and Season Cards (花牌, huāpái) (8 cards)

Many Chinese players choose to play without Flower and Season cards. In this case, it becomes a 136-card game. If you're learning the game for the first time, you may want to leave them out too. Flower and Season cards are used as follows:



If a player draws a Flower or Season card, they must immediately expose it, set it aside, and draw a replacement card from the Reserve (see *Shuffle* and *Deal*, below). If this occurs during your turn, draw the replacement card immediately, then discard one card as normal.

There are two advantages to having Flower and Season cards:

1. Under MCR-based scoring, each Flower or Season card adds 1 fan to the final score after the hand otherwise qualifies to win. Flower and Season fan do not count toward the 8-fan MCR minimum.
2. Some house rules award an immediate win of the current hand if a player collects all eight Flower and Season cards. Other groups score them as bonuses instead. Agree on this rule before you begin playing.

Number of Players

- 4 players, seated around a table.

Scoring Reference

Chinese Mahjong scoring in this guide follows the MCR fan list (1 to 88 fan). Unlike some mahjong variants, the complete scoring reference — the full list of patterns and examples — is included later in this same guide (see Scoring, below), so no separate scorecard is required. Refer to it to:

- Confirm a hand's fan value
- Check the 8-fan MCR minimum for winning hands
- Confirm any scoring/payout rules used by your group

Get Started Playing!

Chinese Mahjong Playing Cards can be easily divided into six stages:

- Determine Seats and the Dealer (方位, fāngwèi / 打庄, dǎzhuāng)
- Shuffle and Deal (叠牌, diépái)
- Arrange Your Cards (做牌, zuòpái)
- Play in Turns
- Call Mahjong! (和牌, húpái)
- Scoring (算牌, suànpái)

Most of the variations in mahjong games across China involve Stage 1 (seating arrangements) and the last stage (scoring). There are also variations in the number of cards used.

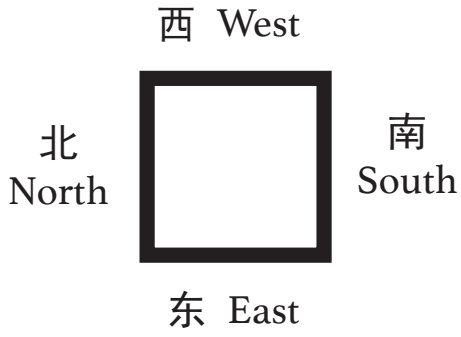
Mahjong is unique in that there are no hard and fast rules for play, and if mahjong players are coming together from different places, they must first agree on the rules. Some say that this is what gives mahjong its special charm.

One important thing to agree on is scoring (more on that later) and whether you will be using scoring chips or money. If you use chips, assign a point value to each type of chip and give every player the same starting total, for example 1,000 points. If you play for money, agree in advance on the starting amount and the units to be used.

Determine Seats and the Dealer (方位, fāngwèi / 打庄, dǎzhuāng)

Seating arrangements are important to Chinese mahjong players for two reasons. First, where you sit can mean good or bad feng shui (a system of Chinese geomancy based on compass direction and the placement of household objects). Second, it would be all too easy for two players to collaborate by deliberately discarding favorable cards that the other player could claim (more on that later), so it's a good idea to determine seats randomly and change them between games. Beginners can skip this stage and simply sit anywhere.

Note that Chinese mahjong seating is not organized like a Western map. It follows the Chinese order "East–South–West–North," proceeding counterclockwise around the table.



This card edition includes no dice or Wind indicators, so seats and the first dealer are determined differently than in the tile version.

The simple way: choose one player to be East (the dealer) for the first game. For casual play, choose East at random, and let the other three players sit wherever they like.

For a more traditional approach: shuffle the full deck, then have each player draw one card and reveal it. Compare the drawn cards as follows: honor cards outrank suit cards, with Dragons ranking above Winds; among suit cards, higher numbers outrank lower numbers, regardless of suit. Whoever draws the highest-ranking card becomes the dealer and takes the "East" seat. The remaining three players seat themselves in the other three positions in any order, and play proceeds counterclockwise from East: East, South, West, North.

If two or more players tie for the highest card, only those players draw again to break the tie. Once seats and the dealer are settled, gather all the drawn cards back into the deck before continuing to the next stage.

Shuffle and Deal (疊牌, diépái)

> *Note: Chinese Mahjong is traditionally played with a physical wall of tiles that's built and then broken at a point determined by dice rolls — a ritual with its own charm, but one that requires tiles. This card edition replaces that ritual with a simple shuffle and deal, so you can play anywhere a full*

tile set isn't practical.

If you are playing with all 144 cards, shuffle them thoroughly and form a single face-down stock in the center of the table.

Starting with the dealer (East) and continuing counterclockwise, deal 13 cards to each player, then deal one additional card to the dealer, so the dealer holds 14 cards and every other player holds 13.

If playing without the eight Flower and Season cards, as explained above, use 136 cards instead, and deal the same way.

After dealing, set aside the next **14 cards** from the top of the remaining stock, face down, without looking at them. This is the **Reserve.** Cards in the Reserve are drawn only as replacement cards — for Flower/Season cards and Kongs, as explained below — never as a normal turn draw. The remaining cards form the **Draw Pile**, used for normal turn draws.

Before the dealer makes the first discard, each player checks the cards they were dealt. If a player has a Flower or Season card, they must immediately expose it, set it aside, and draw a replacement card from the Reserve. If the replacement is also a Flower or Season card, expose it and draw another replacement. Repeat until the player has received a non-Flower, non-Season replacement card. After all initial Flower and Season cards have been replaced, the dealer discards one card to begin the hand.

During play, if a player draws a Flower or Season card, they handle it the same way: expose it, set it aside, and draw a replacement card from the Reserve before continuing the turn. Flower and Season cards are used for scoring later.

Arrange Your Cards (做牌, **zuòpái**)

Now the strategizing begins. Arrange the cards in your hand — most players like to fan them so only they can see their faces — in a logical

order as you begin building a winning MAHJONG HAND.

The goal of mahjong is to build a winning MAHJONG HAND, usually made of four sets and one pair. Each set may be a CHOW, PUNG, or KONG, and sets may be concealed or exposed.

> *Note: Start by arranging your cards with the obvious matches on one side and the cards you'd like to discard on the other. You may change your mind later, but this is a good place to start. Watch the other players closely as they arrange and discard their cards, and try to guess what they're trying to do.*

CHOW (吃牌, chīpái)

A chow is three consecutively numbered cards from the same suit.

There are two kinds of chows:

1. A concealed chow is formed entirely from cards you draw from the Draw Pile and is kept hidden in your hand.
2. An exposed chow is formed by claiming the most recent discard from the player to your left — the player who acted immediately before you. To claim a chow, declare "chow" out loud, take that discard, and reveal the completed chow for all players to see. Then discard one card. Play resumes with the player to your right.



> *Note: You can claim a discard for a chow only from the player to your left.*

PUNG (碰牌, pèngpái)

A pung is three identical cards.

There are two kinds of pungs:

1. **A concealed pung** is formed entirely from cards you draw from the Draw Pile and is kept hidden in your hand.
2. An **exposed pung** is formed by claiming a discard from any player. To claim a pung, declare "pung" out loud immediately — before the next player draws or claims the discard — take the discarded card, and reveal the completed pung for all players to see. Then discard one card. Play resumes with the player to your right.



Note: You can claim a discard for a pung from any player.

KONG (杠, gàng)

A kong is four identical cards. When you form a kong, you must declare it and set it in front of you.

- For a **concealed kong**, place the four cards face down as a set.
- For a **melded kong** formed from another player's discard, place all four cards face up.
- For an **added kong**, add the fourth matching card to an already exposed pung and keep the kong face up.

For scoring purposes, both a kong formed from a discard and an added kong are melded kongs.

After declaring any kong, draw one replacement card from the Reserve. Then continue your turn normally and discard one card. Play continues to the right with the next player.



Note: You may claim an exposed (melded) kong using another player's most recent discard, but you must declare "kong" immediately — before the next player draws or claims the discard. Concealed and added kongs are made only from your own cards.

Play in Turns

Play starts with the dealer (East). The dealer ends their turn by discarding a card face up into the center of the table. Remember, the dealer started with 14 cards, so now they will be down to 13 cards, the same as all the other players.

Play continues in a counterclockwise direction, with South being the next to take a turn. South may either 1) claim East's discard if it completes a winning hand, chow, pung, or kong, or 2) draw a card from the Draw Pile.

> *Note: If West or North can use East's discard to form a pung or kong, that player may immediately declare "pung" or "kong" and claim the discard. The claimer acts at once, so South is skipped. The claimer takes the discard and exposes the completed pung or kong. If a kong was declared, the claimer draws one replacement card from the Reserve. The claimer then discards one card, and play resumes with the player to the claimer's right.*

If no one claims East's discard, South takes their turn by drawing a card from the Draw Pile, then discarding a card face up in the center of the table. Play then continues counterclockwise around the table to West, then North, then back to East again.

This process continues as each player tries to improve their hand, regularly calling out "pung," "chow," and "kong." Caution must be used here: since each card you discard is seen by the other players, it won't be long before they figure out what kind of hand you are trying to build.

> *Note: If multiple players want to claim a discard, the discard goes to the player with the highest priority based on the following:*

1. *Declaring Mahjong (explained in the next section)*
2. *Pung or Kong*
3. *Chow*

Call Mahjong — Winning the Hand (和牌, húpái)

A standard winning Mahjong hand consists of four sets — chows, pungs, or kongs — and one pair. Some special winning hands, such as Seven Pairs, do not follow this structure; use the scoring reference below if your group allows these hands.

A player can draw the winning card from the Draw Pile during their turn. In that case, they declare "Mahjong" and reveal their complete hand. A player can also win using another player's discard. In that case, they declare "Mahjong," claim the discarded card, and reveal their complete hand. Once Mahjong is declared, the current hand is over and it is time to score the winner's hand.

A standard winning hand normally contains 14 physical cards. Each declared kong adds one extra physical card because a kong contains four cards while still counting as one set.



If no one has declared Mahjong when the Draw Pile runs out, the current hand ends in a draw with no winner.

Scoring (算牌, suànpái)

There are many ways to score the winner's hand.

In the scoring system used for the examples in this guide, the value of the winning player's hand is determined by the number of fan (番, fān) it earns. According to the MCR fan list used for these scoring examples, patterns range from 1 fan up to 88 fan. Chicken Hand (鸡和, jīhú) — a winning hand that would otherwise earn 0 fan, excluding Flower cards — is worth 8 fan under MCR.

Under MCR, a winning hand must reach at least 8 fan from non-Flower scoring patterns to be valid. Flower and Season fan are added after the hand qualifies, and do not count toward that minimum. For casual play, your group may choose a different minimum; agree on it before you start.

Each Flower or Season card then adds 1 extra fan to the winning player's score. (Optional house rule: some groups award 1 fan if the winning player has no Flower or Season cards.)

For the simplified casual payment system used in this guide, if Mahjong is declared by claiming another player's discard, only the player who discarded the winning card pays the winner. If Mahjong is achieved by self-draw, all three other players pay the winner. Agree on payment values before play; for example, your group may use 1 fan = 1 chip.

There are many, many variations to the rules of scoring. Scoring is where regional variations and traditions among families and friends come into play. So make up some rules and traditions of your own, have fun, and always be open to new ways to play!

Finishing the Game

Once the winner has been paid, a new hand can begin. If the dealer won the hand, or the hand ended in a draw because no drawable cards remained in the Draw Pile, the dealer remains the same for the next hand. Otherwise, the player to the right of the dealer becomes the new dealer.

A full game of Mahjong consists of 4 rounds. Each round includes one complete dealer rotation: East, then South, West, and North. A full game therefore contains a minimum of 16 hands. The total may be higher if the dealer wins and remains dealer for multiple hands before passing the deal to the next player.

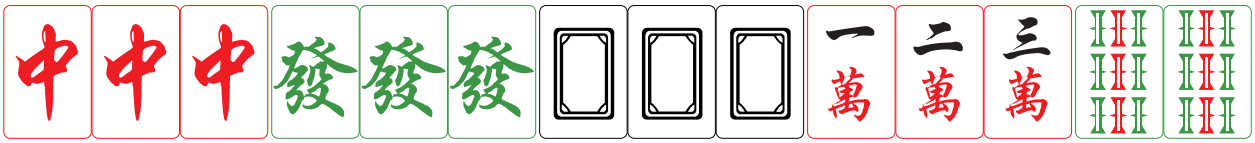
Scoring Examples

88 Fan (八十八番)

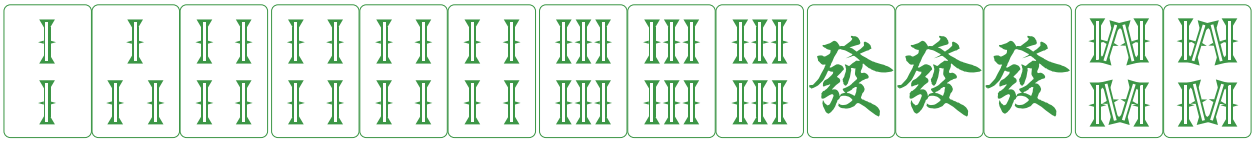
Big Four Winds 大四喜 — Four pungs or kongs: one set each of East, South, West, and North.



Big Three Dragons 大三元 — Three pungs or kongs: one set each of Red, Green, and White Dragon.



All Green 绿一色 — Only uses green cards: 2, 3, 4, 6, 8 of Bams and the Green Dragon.



Nine Gates 九莲宝灯 — One suit only: 1-1-1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-9-9, plus any one additional card from 1 to 9 in the same suit.



Thirteen Orphans 十三幺 — One of each terminal (1 and 9) in every suit, one of each Wind, one of each Dragon, plus one duplicate of any of these fourteen types, forming the pair.

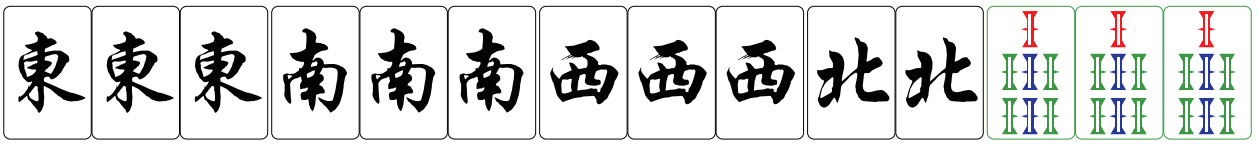


64 Fan (六十四番)

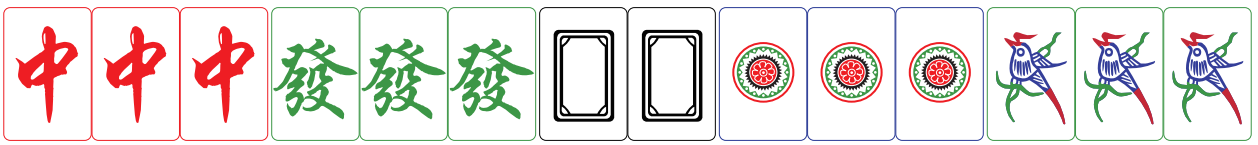
All Terminals 清幺九 — Every set and the pair use only 1s and 9s, in pungs or kongs only (no chows, no honors).



Little Four Winds 小四喜 — Three pungs or kongs of three different Winds, plus a pair of the fourth Wind.



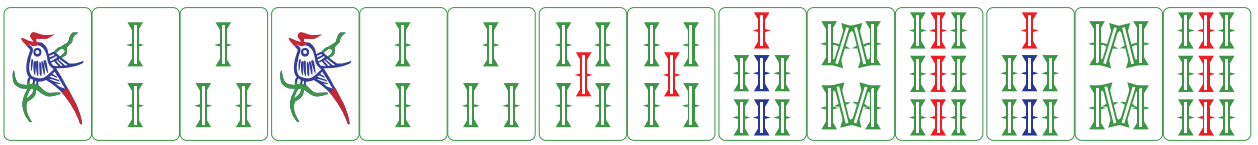
Little Three Dragons 小三元 — Two pungs or kongs of two different Dragons, plus a pair of the third Dragon.



All Honors 字一色 — Every set and the pair are made entirely of Wind and Dragon cards — no suit cards at all.

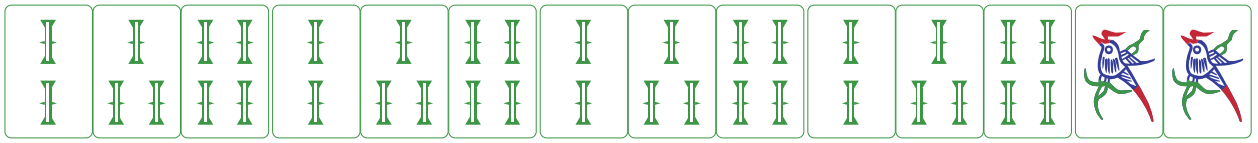


Pure Terminal Chows 一色双龙会 — Two terminal chows (123 and 789) in the same suit (each appears twice), plus a pair of 5 in that suit.

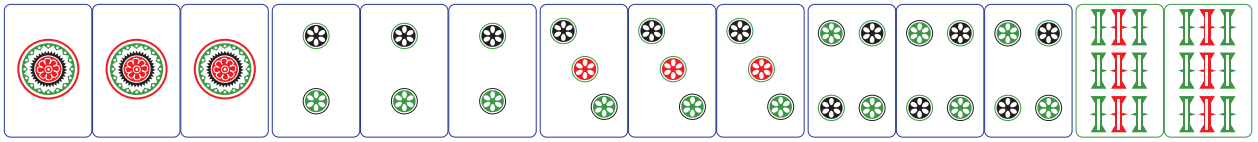


48 Fan (四十八番)

Quadruple Chow 一色四同顺 — Four identical chows in one suit (the same three-card run, repeated four times).



Four Pure Shifted Pungs 一色四节高 — Four pungs in one suit, with consecutive numbers (for example, pungs of 2, 3, 4, and 5).



32 Fan (三十二番)

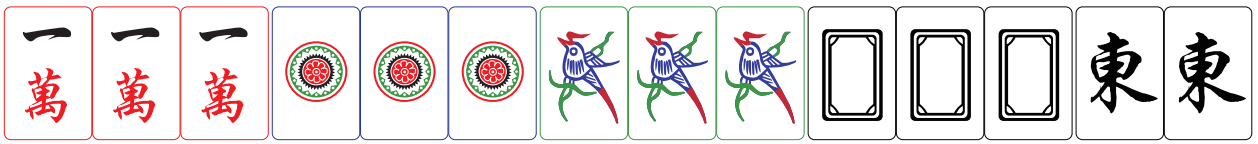
Four Pure Shifted Chows 一色四步高 — Four chows in one suit, each shifted up by one card from the last (for example, 2-3-4, 3-4-5, 4-5-6, 5-6-7).



Three Kongs 三杠 — Any three kongs (concealed or melded) in the same hand.

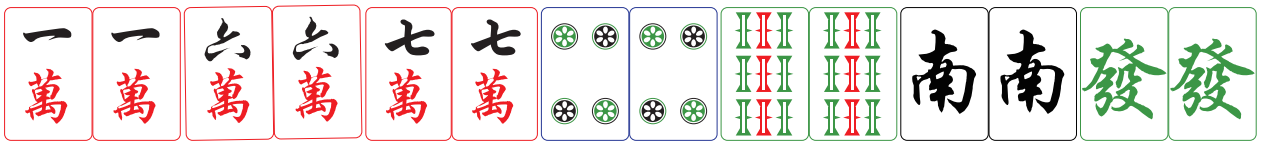


All Terminals and Honors 混幺九 — Every set and the pair use only terminal (1 or 9) cards and/or honor cards — no 2 through 8 cards.

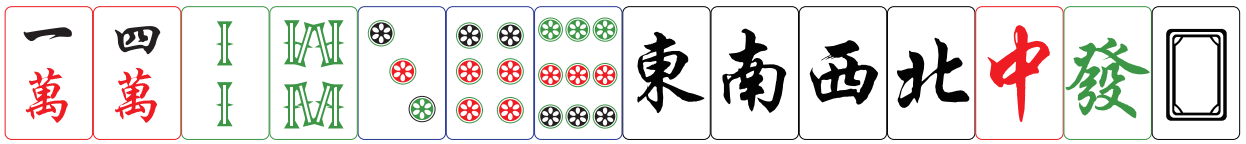


24 Fan (二十四番)

Seven Pairs 七对 — Seven different pairs, with no other set types — a special hand structure of its own.



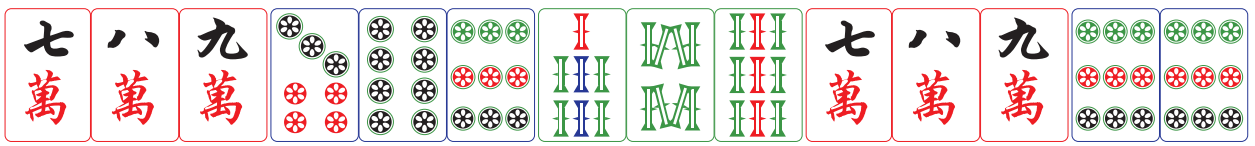
Greater Honors and Knitted Tiles 七星不靠 — An advanced special hand combining all seven honor types (Winds and Dragons) with a knitted sequence of non-matching numbers across the three suits, and no ordinary sets or pair; consult a full MCR reference for the exact composition.



Full Flush 清一色 — A complete hand using only one suit — no honor cards.



Upper Tiles 全大 — Every card in the hand is a 7, 8, or 9 — no honor cards.

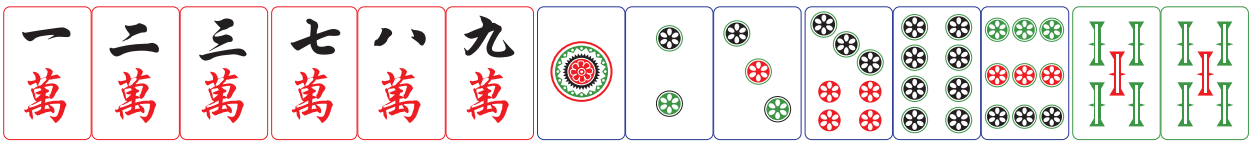


16 Fan (十六番)

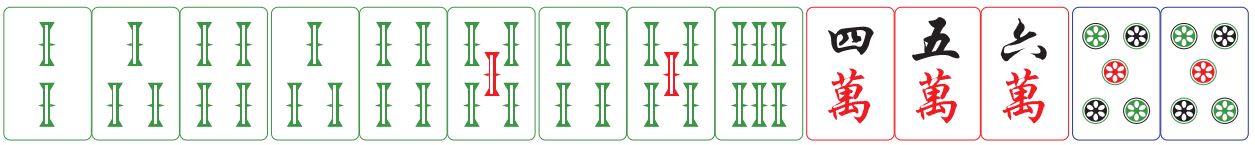
Pure Straight 清龙 — A run of 1 through 9 in a single suit, formed as three consecutive chows (1-2-3, 4-5-6, 7-8-9).



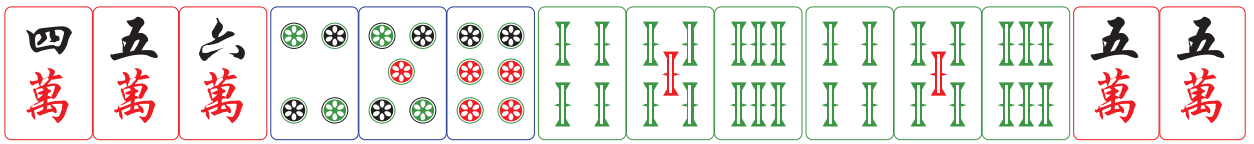
Three-Suited Terminal Chows 三色双龙会 — Terminal chows (1-2-3 and 7-8-9) formed twice, using two different suits so that all three suits are represented, plus a pair; an advanced variant of Pure Terminal Chows above.



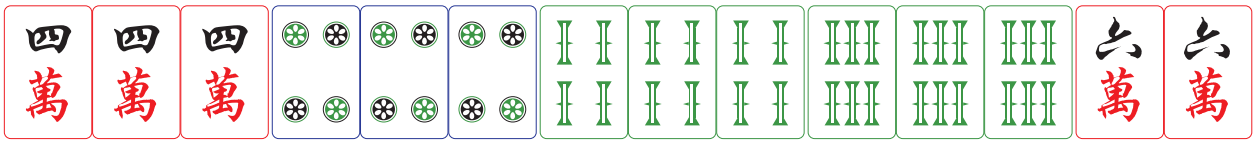
Pure Shifted Chows 一色三步高 — Three chows in one suit, each shifted up by one card from the last (for example, 1-2-3, 2-3-4, 3-4-5).



All Fives 全带五 — Every set and the pair includes a 5.

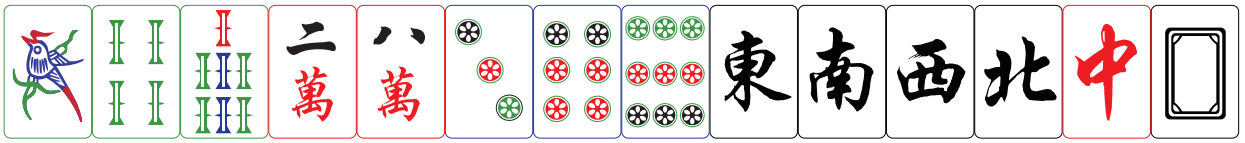


Triple Pung 三同刻 — Three pungs of the same number, one in each of the three suits.

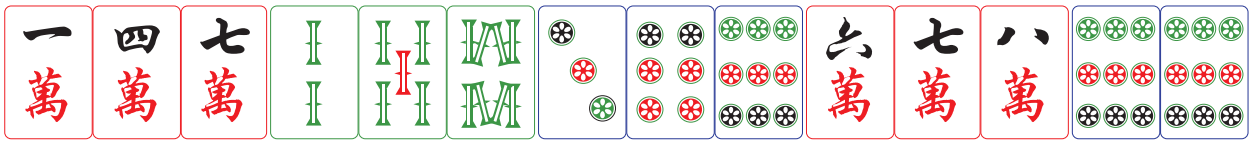


12 Fan (十二番)

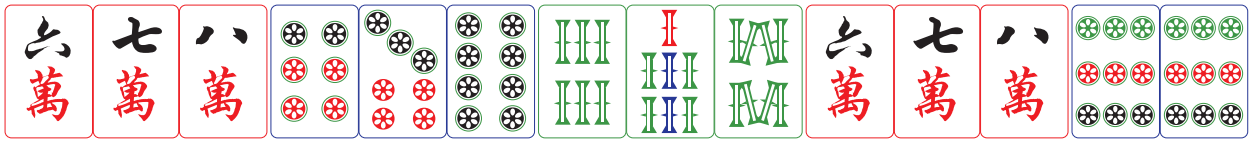
Lesser Honors and Knitted Tiles 全不靠 — A special 14-card hand of unmatched numbers across all three suits combined with honor cards, forming no ordinary sets or pair; consult a full MCR reference for the exact composition.



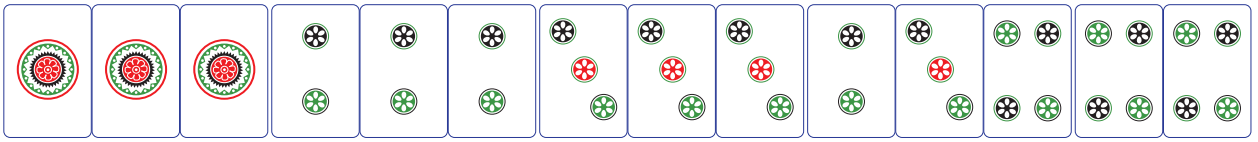
Knitted Straight 组合龙 — A 1-through-9 straight split evenly across all three suits in an interleaved pattern (for example, 1-4-7 in one suit, 2-5-8 in another, and 3-6-9 in the third).



Upper Four 大于五 — Every card in the hand is a 6, 7, 8, or 9.



Lower Four 小于五 — Every card in the hand is a 1, 2, 3, or 4.

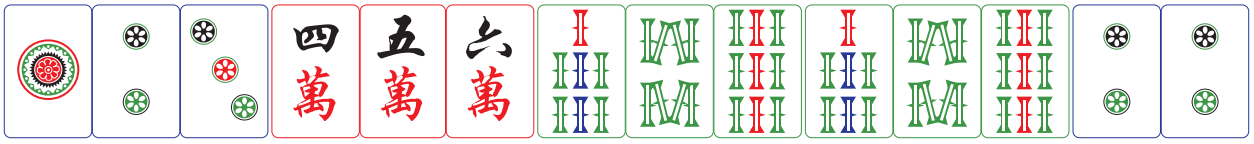


Big Three Winds 三风刻 — Three pungs of three different Winds.

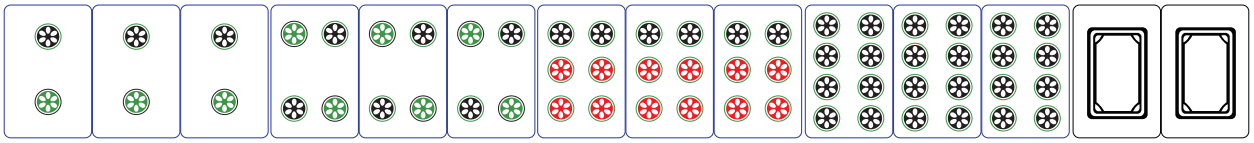


8 Fan (八番)

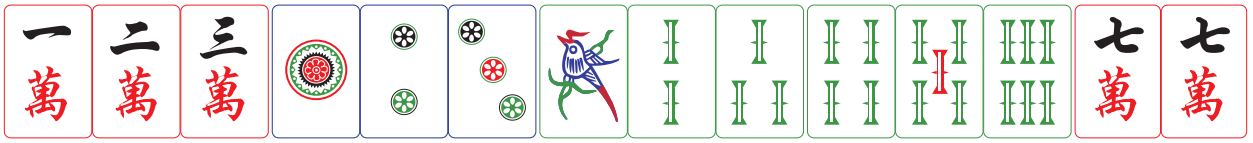
Mixed Straight 花龙 — A run of 1 through 9 formed as three chows, one in each of the three different suits (for example, 1-2-3 of one suit, 4-5-6 of another, 7-8-9 of the third).



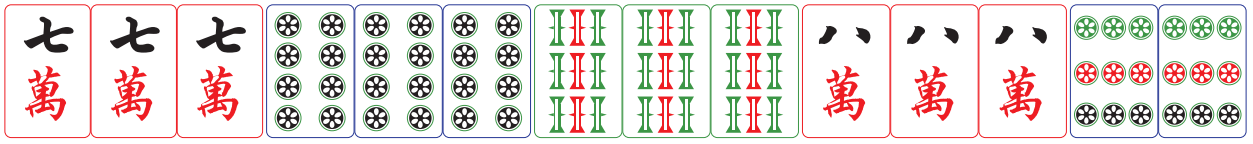
Reversible Tiles 推不倒 — Uses only cards whose printed design reads the same upside down: 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, or 9 of Dots, 5 of Bams, or White Dragon.



Mixed Triple Chow 三色三同顺 — The same three-card chow formed once in each of the three suits (for example, 1-2-3 of Craks, 1-2-3 of Bams, and 1-2-3 of Dots).



Mixed Shifted Pungs 三色三节高 — Three pungs of consecutive numbers, one number in each of the three suits (for example, a pung of 7s in one suit and a pung of 8s in another).

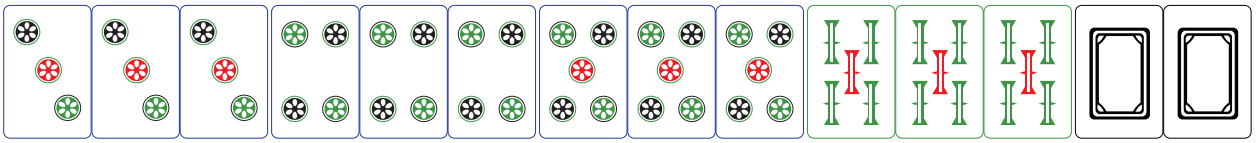


Chicken Hand 鸡和 — A legal winning hand that does not qualify for any other scoring pattern. Under the MCR fan list, Chicken Hand is worth 8 fan.



6 Fan (六番)

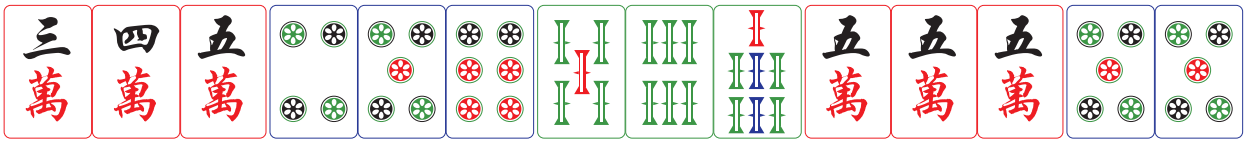
All Pungs 碰碰和 — A hand made entirely of pungs and/or kongs, plus a pair — no chows.



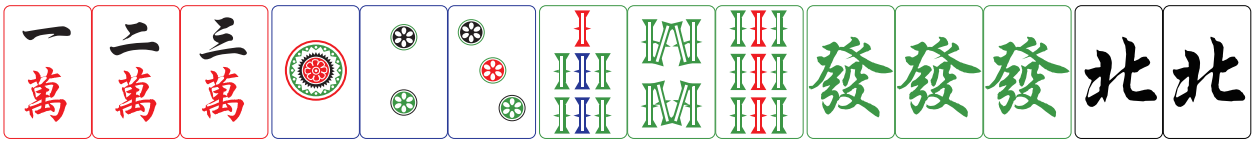
Half Flush 混一色 — A hand using only one suit, plus honor cards — no other suits.



Mixed Shifted Chows 三色三步高 — Three chows in three different suits, with each chow's starting number one higher than the last (for example, 2-3-4 in one suit, 3-4-5 in another, and 4-5-6 in the third).



All Types 五门齐 — The hand includes all five card types — Craks, Bams, Dots, Winds, and Dragons — each represented at least once.

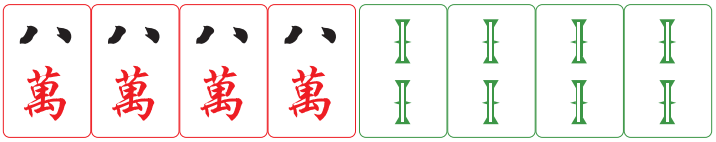


4 Fan (四番)

Outside Hand 全带幺 — Every set and the pair includes at least one terminal (1 or 9) card or honor card.



Two Melded Kongs 双明杠 — Two melded (exposed) kongs in the same hand.



2 Fan (二番)

Dragon Pung 箭刻 — A pung or kong of any Dragon.



Prevalent Wind (table wind) 圈风刻 — A pung or kong matching the current round's prevailing Wind.



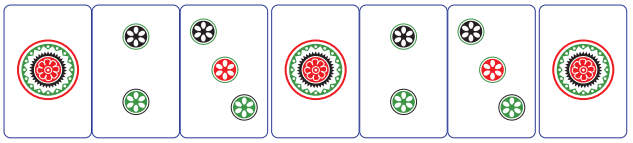
Seat Wind (player wind) 门风刻 — A pung or kong matching your own seat Wind.



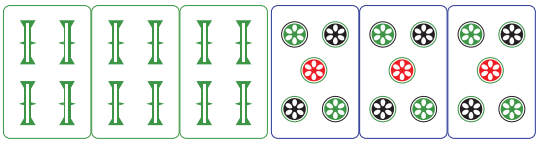
All Chows 平和 — Four chows and a pair of suited cards; no honor cards. Terminal cards may appear as part of a chow. This pattern is worth 2 fan; the complete example hand may score additional fan from other patterns.



Tile Hog 四归一 — Holding all four copies of the same card without declaring a kong — for example, a pung of three plus the fourth copy as a single card.



Two Concealed Pungs 双暗刻 — Two concealed pungs in the same hand.

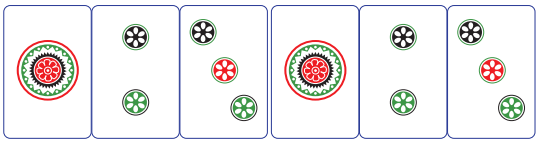


Concealed Kong 暗杠 — A kong formed entirely from your own hand, kept concealed until the hand ends.

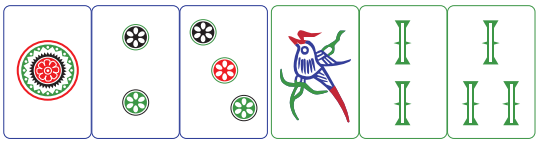


1 Fan (一番)

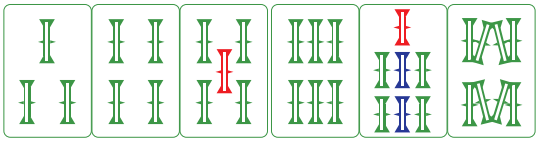
Pure Double Chow 一般高 — Two identical chows in the same suit.



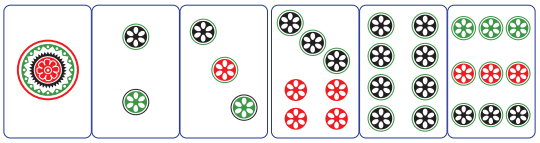
Mixed Double Chow 喜相逢 — Two chows with the same numbers but in different suits.



Short Straight 连六 — Two chows in the same suit that together form six consecutive numbers (for example, 1-2-3 and 4-5-6).



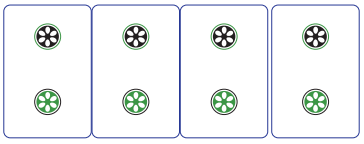
Two Terminal Chows 老少副 — Two chows in the same suit: one 1-2-3 and one 7-8-9.



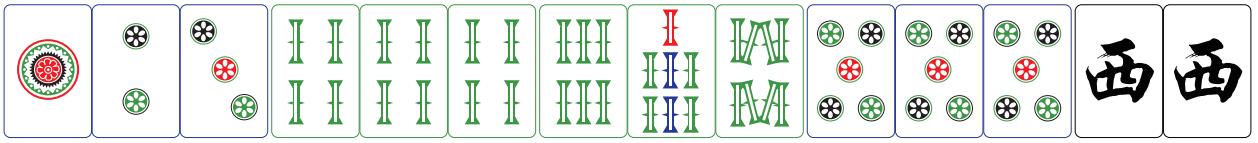
Pung of Terminals or Honors 幺九刻 — A pung or kong of a terminal (1 or 9) card, a Wind, or a Dragon.



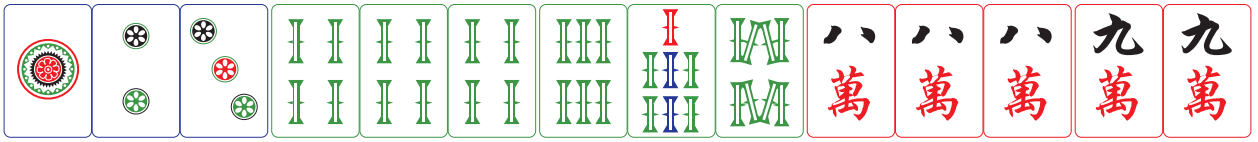
Melded Kong 明杠 — An exposed kong, formed from a claimed discard or by adding a fourth matching card to an existing pung.



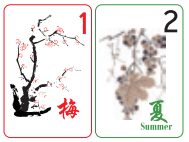
One Voided Suit 缺一门 — The hand uses only two of the three suits — one suit is missing entirely (honor cards are unaffected).



No Honors 无字 — The hand contains no Wind or Dragon cards at all.



Flower or Season Cards 花牌 — Each exposed Flower or Season card adds 1 fan, as explained in Card Set Overview, above.



A Note on House Rules

There are countless regional and family variations on Chinese Mahjong scoring and play. Feel free to agree on your own house rules before you start — and most importantly, have fun!

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Version 0-4

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