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How To Play Chinese Mahjong

INTRODUCTION

Mahjong, with its colorful tiles and fascinating rituals, is undeniably one of China's favorite pastimes. It is often played by families and friends in marathon sessions that can start in the evening and last until sunrise the next day—and sometimes longer. Chinese Mahjong equipment is simpler than its Western counterpart: racks are rarely used, and there are no Joker tiles.

There are, however, many regional variations with unique rules and complex scoring methods. Cantonese, Shanghainese, Taiwanese, and Fukienese are just a few of the many variations on the basic game. In this manual, we will get you started quickly with beginner-friendly Cantonese-style rules for gameplay and a simplified scoring system based on the Mahjong Competition Rules (MCR) fan list. We will also provide a simple guide to scoring and direct you to books and websites that can help you add sophistication and advanced strategy to your game.

In the version taught in this manual, Chinese Mahjong is played with four players seated around a table, with one player designated as the dealer for the current hand. Tiles are shuffled, dice are rolled, seats and the dealer are determined, the walls are built and broken, and the tiles are dealt. The first player to complete a winning hand—typically 14 tiles arranged as four sets and one pair—and declare "Mahjong" ends that hand. The winning hand is then scored, and chips or money are exchanged.

In playing mahjong, you will constantly have to make strategic decisions. Some decisions will make you want to jump for joy, and some will make you wish you had chosen differently. Is it preferable to discard a tile and gain an advantage? Or would it be more prudent to stay with a decent hand? You'll feel the exhilaration of winning a hand as well as regret for not having been bold enough to make a different choice. Like poker, you will learn a lot about your opponents as you play mahjong and adjust your strategy according to their strengths and weaknesses.

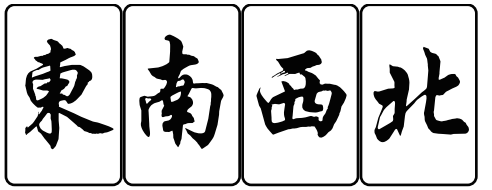
IDENTIFY YOUR TILES

Your Chinese mahjong set includes 144 playable tiles. It may also include several blank spare tiles in case some tiles are lost; these spare tiles are not used in playing the game.

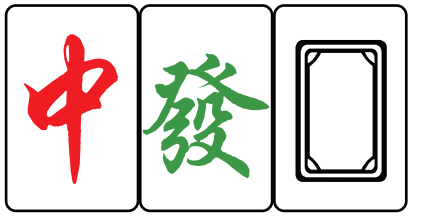
The 144 playable tiles are divided into three groups with their subgroups:

1. HONORS (28 tiles)

Winds (风牌，fēngpái) (16 tiles - 4 of each)

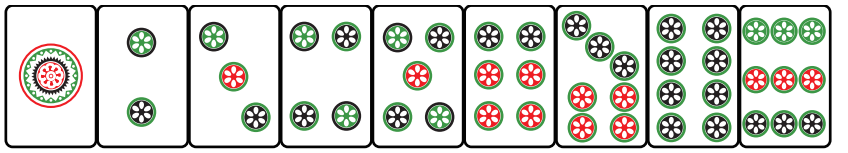


Dragons (三元牌，sānyuánpái) (12 tiles - 4 of each)

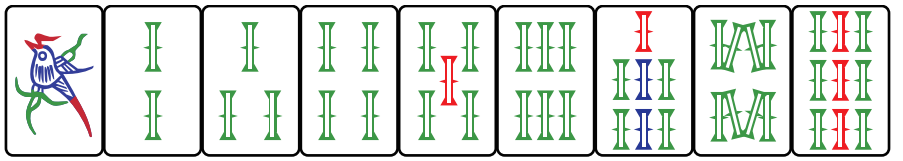


2. SUITS (108 tiles)

Circles or Dots (筒子牌，tǒngzǐpái) (36 tiles - 4 of each)



Bamboos or Bams (索子牌，suǒzǐpái) (36 tiles - 4 of each)



Characters or Craks (万子牌，wànzipái) (36 tiles - 4 of each)

3. FLOWER and SEASON TILES (花牌，huāpái) (8 tiles)

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

If a player draws a Flower or Season tile, they must immediately expose it, set it aside, and draw a replacement tile from the Dead Wall. If this occurs during your turn, draw the replacement tile immediately, then discard one tile as normal.

There are two advantages to having Flower and Season tiles:

1. Under MCR-based scoring, each Flower or Season tile 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 tiles. Other groups score them as bonuses instead. Agree on this rule before you begin playing.

SPARE BLANK TILES

Your set may contain several blank tiles. These are spares in case you misplace other tiles in your set. They are not used in playing the game.

IDENTIFY ALL THE OTHER PLAYING PIECES

1. DICE

Your set may include two or three dice. The procedures in this manual use two dice for selecting the dealer and breaking the wall. Seating arrangements are determined separately using Wind indicators or Wind tiles. If your set includes a third die, set it aside unless your group has agreed on a house rule that uses it.

2. INDICATORS

Indicators with the Chinese characters "north", "south", "east", and "west" are used to help the players choose and remember who sits where. Like racks, they are preferred by some players but not mandatory. Indicators may vary from set to set, but there are two basic types:

A. Coin Indicators

B. Spinning Indicators

GET STARTED PLAYING!

Chinese Mahjong can be easily divided into eight stages:

- Seating Arrangements (方位, fāngwèi)
- Choose the Dealer (打庄, dǎzhuāng)
- Shuffle and Build the Walls (叠牌, diépái)
- Break the Wall (开牌, kāipái)
- Arrange the Tiles (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 Stage 8 (scoring). There are also variations in the number of tiles used and in rituals involving the exchange of tiles.

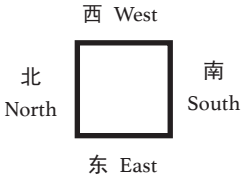
Mahjong is unique in that there are no hard and fast rules for play, and if mahjong players are coming together from different places, they must first agree on the rules. Some say that this is what gives mahjong its special charm.

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.

- **Seating Arrangements (方位, fāngwèi)**

Seating arrangements are important to Chinese mahjong players for two reasons. First of all, 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 tiles 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.

This is what a mahjong seating arrangement looks like:



Note that the seating arrangement is not organized like a Western map. It follows the Chinese order "East-South-West-North."

If you have coin-style Wind indicators, place them face down and mix them. Each player randomly selects one indicator to determine their seat.

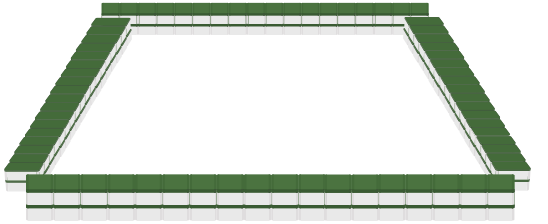
If no coin indicators are available, take one tile representing each of the four Winds, place the four tiles face down, and shuffle them. Each player then draws one tile to determine their seat.

- **Choose the Dealer (打庄, dǎzhuāng)**

The player seated in "East" starts as the dealer. If you skipped step 1 and randomly sat down around the table, then there are a couple of easy ways to determine the "East" seat.

The simple way is for each player to roll the dice in turn. The player with the highest total becomes the dealer and now occupies the "East" seat.

The second, and more traditional Chinese way to do this, is for one chosen player (i.e. the host/hostess) to roll the dice and then, starting with that player, count around the circle in a counter-clockwise direction until the dice total is reached. The last player counted becomes the dealer and is now "East".



- **Shuffle and Build the Walls (叠牌, diépái)**

If you are playing with all 144 playable tiles, place them face down in the center of the table and shuffle them as loudly and vigorously as possible.

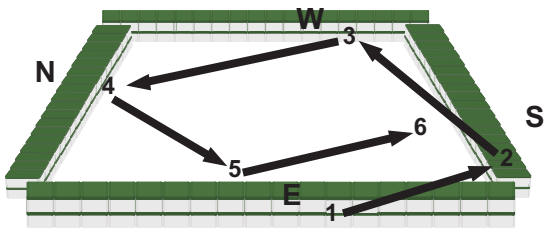
Then, each player builds a wall 18 stacks long and two tiles high, for a total of 36 tiles per wall. The wall diagram above shows this 144-tile setup.

If playing without the eight Flower and Season tiles, as explained on page 3, use 136 tiles instead. In that case, each player builds a wall 17 stacks long and two tiles high, for a total of 34 tiles per wall.

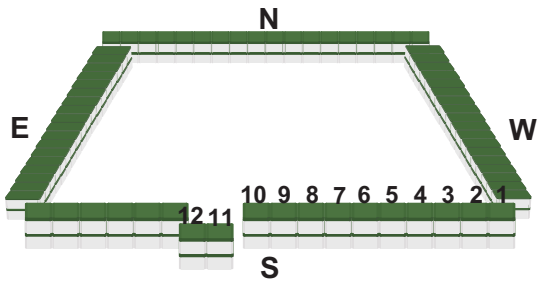
• **Break the Wall (开牌, kāipái)**

First, to determine which side to start breaking the wall, the dealer (East) rolls the dice and, beginning with the dealer, counts players around the table in a counter-clockwise direction until the dice total is reached. This is the side where the wall break will begin.

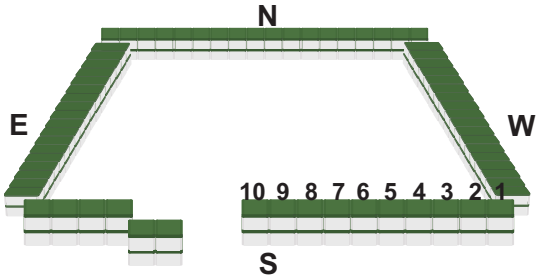
The player sitting on the chosen side for the wall break then rolls the dice and adds the total from their roll to the dealer's roll to determine where to start breaking the wall. Starting from the right side of the chosen player's wall, count the stacks of tiles from right to left until the combined total is reached. The wall is broken at this location, and the dealer takes the next four tiles to the left (two from the top row and two from the bottom row) as their first four tiles. The tiles to the left of the break are the Live Wall (where players draw tiles). A small reserved section near the break is the Dead Wall (on the right side of the break), used for replacement tiles for Kongs and Flowers/Seasons. Before starting, agree on how many stacks form the Dead Wall; a common beginner approach is to reserve 7 stacks / 14 tiles.



Example: If the dealer rolls a 2 and 4, the dealer counts off a total of 6 in a counter-clockwise direction starting from the dealer. The chosen side will be South. Diagram note: In the next two wall diagrams, the table view is rotated so that the South wall appears at the bottom. The seat order has not changed.



Example (continued): The South player then rolls a 1 and 3 for a total of 4, which they then add to the previous dealer roll of 6 for a grand total of 10. 10 stacks of tiles are counted off on the South wall starting from right to left. The dealer then takes the 11th and 12th stacks.



The next player to the dealer's right continues from where the dealer stopped and takes the next four tiles. Continuing counter-clockwise, each player takes four tiles in turn. Repeat this process until every player has 12 tiles.

Note: Players take turns counter-clockwise (i.e., to the player on your right when seated East–South–West–North). Tiles are drawn from the Live Wall starting at the break and continuing along the wall in order.

Next, the dealer takes an additional two tiles, giving them a total of 14 tiles. Every other player, in turn, takes one tile, giving each other player a total of 13 tiles. There are two ways the dealer can take their two tiles. They can either take two tiles immediately and then every player after them takes their one tile. Or they can take one tile first, every other player takes their one tile, and then the dealer takes their second tile.

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

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

• **Arrange the Tiles (做牌 , zuòpái)**

Now the strategizing begins. Arrange the tiles in your hand—in a rack, if you use one—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 tiles with the obvious matches on the left and the tiles that you'd like to discard on the right. 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 tiles, and try to guess what they're trying to do.

- **CHOW (吃牌, chīpái)**

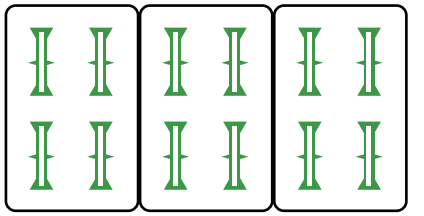
A chow is three consecutively numbered tiles from the same suit. Example:

There are two kinds of chows:

1. A concealed chow is formed entirely from tiles you draw from the wall 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 tile. 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)**

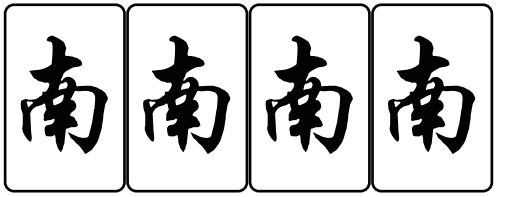
A pung is three identical tiles. Example:



There are two kinds of pungs:

1. A concealed pung is formed entirely from tiles you draw from the wall 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 tile, and reveal the completed pung for all players to see. Then discard one tile. 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 tiles. When you form a kong, you must declare it and set it in front of you. For a concealed kong, place the four tiles face down as a set. For a melded kong formed from another player's discard, place all four tiles face up. For an added kong, add the fourth matching tile 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 tile from the Dead Wall. Then continue your turn normally and discard one tile. 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 tiles.

Play in Turns

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

Play continues in a counter-clockwise 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 tile from the Live Wall.

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 tile from the Dead Wall. The claimer then discards one tile, and play resumes with the player to the claimer's right.

If no one claims East's discard, then South would take their turn by drawing a tile from the Live Wall, and then discarding a tile face up in the center of the table. Play then continues counter-clockwise around the table to the West, then North, then back to the 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 tile 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 chart below if your group allows these hands.

A player can draw the winning tile from the Live Wall 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 tile, 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 tiles. Each declared kong adds one extra physical tile because a kong contains four tiles while still counting as one set.

If no one has declared Mahjong when the drawable tiles in the Live Wall run 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 manual, 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 tiles—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. For casual play, your group may choose a different minimum; agree on it before you start. Each Flower or Season tile 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 tiles.)

For the simplified casual payment system used in this manual, if Mahjong is declared by claiming another player's discard, only the player who discarded the winning tile pays the winner. If Mahjong is achieved by self-draw, all three other players pay the winner. Agree on the 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 tiles remained in the Live Wall, 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.

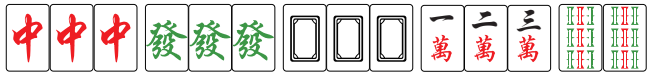
SCORING EXAMPLES

- **88 Fan (八十八番)**

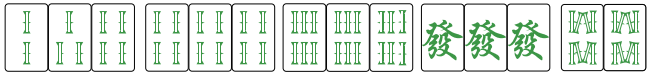
Big Four Winds
大四喜

Four pungs or kongs: one set each of East, South, West, and North.

Big Three Dragons
大三元



All Green
绿一色



Only uses green tiles: 2, 3, 4, 6, 8 Bams and 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 tile from 1 to 9 in the same suit.

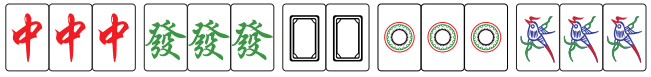
Thirteen Orphans
十三幺

- **64 Fan (六十四番)**

All Terminals
清幺九

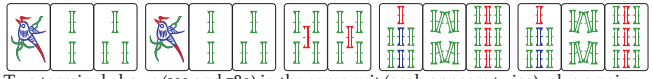
Little Four Winds
小四喜

Little Three Dragons
小三元



All Honors
字一色

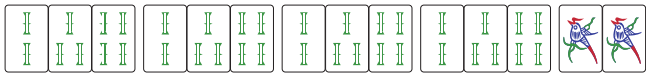
Pure Terminal Chows
一色双龙会



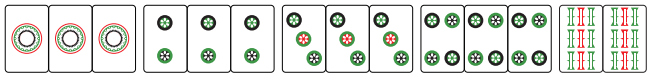
Two terminal chows (123 and 789) in the same suit (each appears twice), plus a pair of 5 in that suit.

• 48 Fan (四十八番)

Quadruple Chow
一色四同顺



Four Pure Shifted Pungs
一色四节高



• 32 Fan (三十二番)

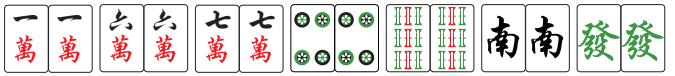
Four Pure Shifted Chows
一色四步高

Three Kongs
三杠

All Terminals and Honors
混么九

• 24 Fan (二十四番)

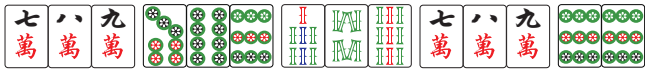
Seven Pairs
七对



Greater Honors and Knitted Tiles
七星不靠

Full Flush
清一色

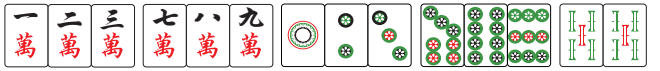
Upper Tiles
全大



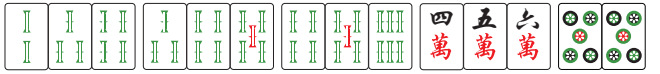
• 16 Fan (十六番)

Pure Straight
清龙

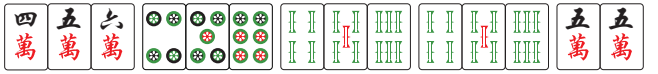
Three-Suited Terminal Chows 三色双龙会



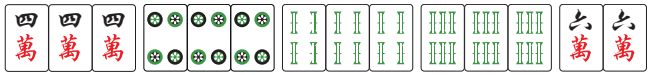
Pure Shifted Chows
一色三步高



All Fives
全带五

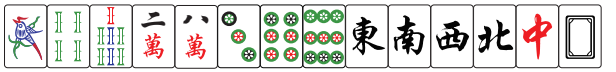


Triple Pung
三同刻

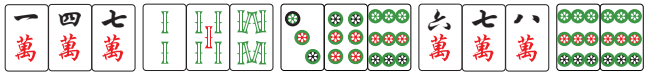


• 12 Fan (十二番)

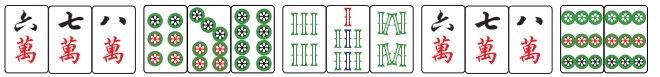
Lesser Honors and Knitted Tiles
全不靠



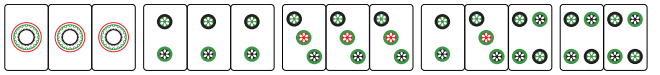
Knitted Straight
组合龙



Upper Four
大于五



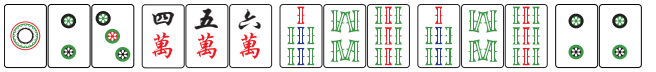
Lower Four
小于五



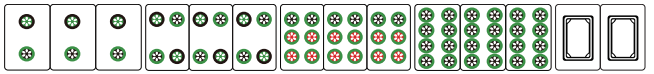
Big Three Winds
三风刻

• 8 Fan (八番)

Mixed Straight
花龙



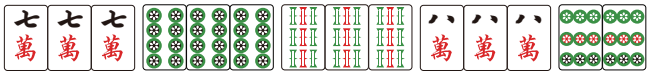
Reversible Tiles
推不倒



Uses only tiles 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

Mixed Shifted Pungs
三色三节高

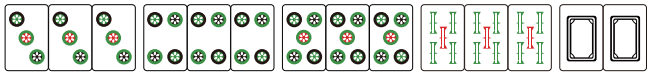


Chicken Hand
鸡和

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

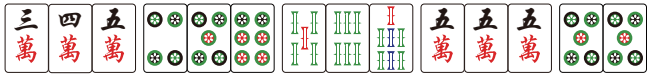
• 6 Fan (六番)

All Pungs
碰碰和



Half Flush
混一色

Mixed Shifted Chows
三色三步高



All Types
五门齐

• 4 Fan (四番)

Outside Hand
全带幺

Two Melded Kongs
双明杠

• 2 Fan (二番)

Dragon Pung
箭刻

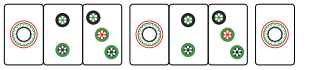
Prevalent Wind (table wind)
圈风刻

Seat Wind (player wind)
门风刻

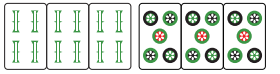
All Chows
平和

Four chows and a pair of suited tiles; no honor tiles. Terminal tiles 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



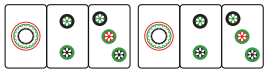
Two Concealed Pungs
双暗刻



Concealed Kong
暗杠

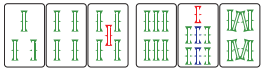
• 1 Fan (一番)

Pure Double Chow
一般高

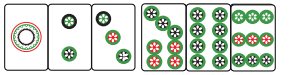


Mixed Double Chow
喜相逢

Short Straight
连六

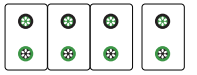


Two Terminal Chows
老少副

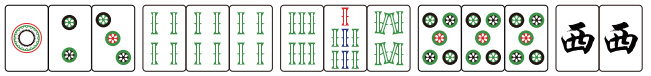


Pung of Terminals or Honors
幺九刻

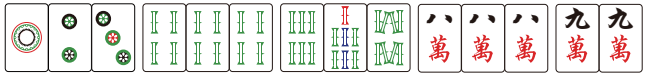
Melded Kong
明杠



One Voided Suit
缺一门



No Honors
无字



Flower or Season Tiles
花牌

RECOMMENDED READING AND RESOURCES

Books

Mahjong: House Rules from Across the Asian Diaspora - Nicole Wong.
Hardie Grant Books, 2025. ISBN 1958417637
A modern, illustrated guide to mahjong that explores house rules and mahjong culture across the Asian diaspora.

The Complete Book of Mah Jongg: An Illustrated Guide to the Asian, American and International Styles of Play - Amy Lo.
Tuttle Publishing, 2016. ISBN 0804845301
An introductory, easy-to-follow guide with 150+ full-color photos and illustrations covering Chinese, Cantonese ("old rules"), Shanghai, American, 16-tile (Taiwanese), and 12-tile play, plus tactics and strategy.

Mah-Jongg: From Shanghai to Miami Beach - Christina Cavallaro and Anita Luu. Chronicle Books, 2005. ISBN 0-8118-4733-0
Another wonderful and useful book that contains detailed descriptions of both the Chinese and American game, as well as delicious recipes, mahjong history, and mahjong equipment.

Websites

The electronic version of this rule book can also be found at:

https://manuals.ymimports.com/chinese-mahjong-en

The Mahjong Project - a modern guide and resource hub for learning mahjong:

https://www.themahjongproject.com/

Wikipedia.org contains a detailed entry on mahjong, as well as links to other great sites.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahjong

A detailed website on Mahjong knowledge and lore:

https://www.sloperama.com/mjfaq.html

Mahjong Care instructions:

https://www.sloperama.com/majexchange/cleaning.htm

https://riichireporter.com/cleaning-your-mahjong-tiles

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www.ymimports.com

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