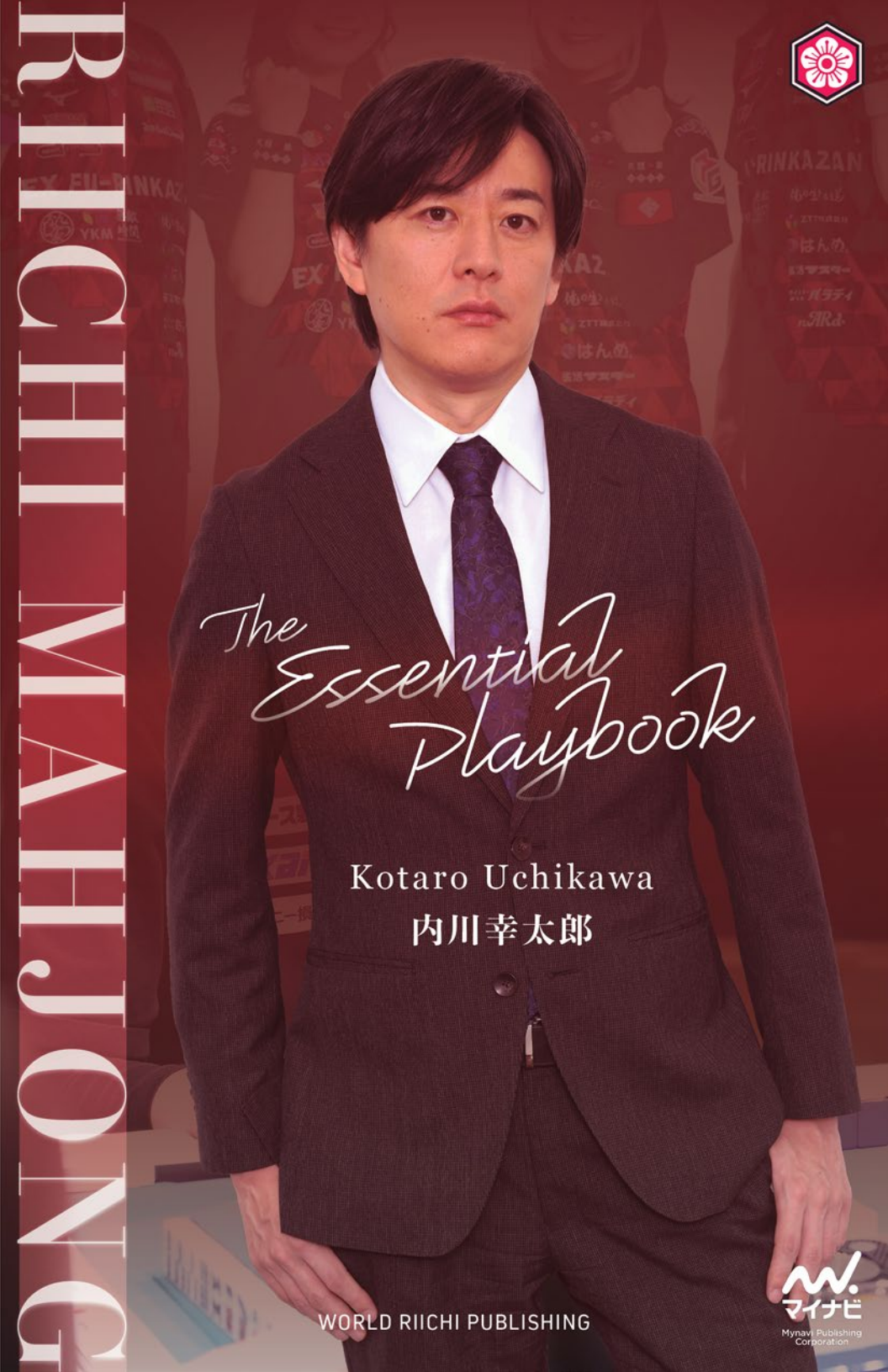
RIICHI MAHJONG



The Essential Playbook

Kotaro Uchikawa
内川幸太郎

WORLD RIICHI PUBLISHING

マイナビ
Mynavi Publishing Corporation

Kotao Uchikawa, Jenn, and I joined JPML at the same time in 2006. We call him Ucchi. We've competed in the same leagues, honed our game in the same study groups, and enjoyed the odd game of Futsal too. But to say we're still on this journey together would be trying to hitch our wagons to a rocket already leaving our solar system. When this book was first published, Ucchi had recently taken down the JPML 10-tier Tournament and soon after that was drafted to the M.LEAGUE Kadokawa Sakura Knights team, leading some to believe he was at the peak of his career. Since then he's won the World Riichi Championship, and won the entire M.LEAGUE with his new team, EX Fu-rinkazan. So is this the peak? I'm not betting on it.

Despite this ongoing collection of accolades, he chose in this book to go back to the basics. Maximizing hand efficiency while balancing it with opportunities for value and defensive play seem like basic ideas that obviously we all must already have a handle on. Right? Tricky play may be needed to beat basic play at the higher levels, but we can't jump straight to the tricks without first mastering the basics. A pitcher wouldn't first learn how to throw a curveball. Ucchi's insights help us remember the importance of our fastball, how to perfect it, and then to make it the mainstay of our arsenal, forming a foundation on top of which we can build the rest of our Mahjong strategy.

-Garthe Nelson, Japan Professional Mahjong League

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A Note From the Translator

Welcome to the next step in your journey of riichi mahjong. When I joined the Japan Professional Mahjong League in 2006, one of my major goals was to create English riichi content to share with the world. Gemma, Garthe and I have done just that for the last 20 years with more and more contributors each year, but official translations of Japanese books took a long time to turn into a reality. Now, with World Riichi Publishing (WRP), that dream has finally become a reality.

If you're new to the game, I recommend picking up Riichi Mahjong: The Only Way to Play (Jenn Barr, Huntington Press). It will take you from the most basic rules and game play all the way up to the intermediate level. This book, Riichi Mahjong: The Essential Playbook (Kotaro Uchikawa, WRP/Mynavi) is the next natural progression, followed by Riichi Mahjong: Balance Your Game (Yoshihiro Matsumoto, WRP/Mynavi).

The biggest challenge in providing English riichi content is choosing when to use the Romanized version of Japanese terms, and when to use English equivalents. It is an entire balancing game in itself. The terms used in this book were decided through observation of the riichi community in 2026 and collaboration of opinions between those of us who have been in the community for decades. At the same time, common and preferred terms evolve with time and terms may vary in future WRP translations.

We recognize the desire of many players to use Japanese in the game as well as the benefits to using English terms to appeal to a wider audience. WRP will continue to follow this evolution and provide modern translations of mahjong materials to help the community grow all over the world.

The reason the theme of this, my first book, became 'lines of play,' is because I'm known as the "Tejun Maestro" and in mahjong '*tejun*' means 'line of play' or 'play.'

It's the entire line you take in a hand, from the deal to building and calling to folding or winning. In Japanese, "maestro" carries the nuance of an artisan. I was given this name because when someone once asked me what I thought was important in mahjong, I happened to answer, "Lines of play, I guess."

It was just a random conversation, but it is true that I find lines of play to be important. In mahjong, there are many things to think about. There is calling, defense, riichi judgments, pushing or folding decisions and more. But, the most important thing is how you play your own hand. If this were a physical sport, your lines of play would be your core strength, and if you don't develop it, you can't survive in the world of professional mahjong.

Since winning the Japan Professional Mahjong League's

10-tier tournament, mahjong has been going well for me and I have won a fair number of broadcast matches, so people tell me I'm 'in the zone.' Additionally, I was drafted to the KADOKAWA Sakura Knights in the 2019 M.LEAGUE draft, so I guess I'm on a roll in some ways.

I don't disagree. Even when I'm playing, I can feel it myself.

But the reason I've had such good results is actually because of the slight deviations from the play lines.

It may sound like I'm contradicting myself, but these 'deviations' are intentional and lines that I created myself. It means sometimes intentionally deviating just a little from the normal, 'correct' procedure, and by my own analysis, this is improving my mahjong performance.

Naturally, when this book offer first came, I thought about making that deviation the topic. I do feel like it would appeal to niche mahjong fans. Having practiced my own theory and analyzing the results, I have confidence that there are no major mistakes. I've done this for several years and have organized my thoughts, so I can now speak systematically about it.

But I decided not to go that way.

That's because before discussing that deviating line, I thought I should go back myself and study the basic play lines, with no deviation.

I thought it would be a good chance to go back to the basics, not only for the mahjong fans but also for myself.

Moreover, there are now many high-level strategy books aimed at niche fans flooding the market. Ever the contrarian, I thought it might be good to publish a book that systematically compiles procedures that would be helpful for beginners and serve as an opportunity for reflection for intermediate players and above, and that includes myself, while writing it.

In the beginning, it might be boring for intermediate-level players and above. You'll see things that you think you already know without being told, but in the daily battles, we tend to gradually neglect fundamentals and form individual idiosyncrasies. While those habits might be strengths or exhibit unique styles, they can also easily become weaknesses.

For the veteran players, I hope you can patiently accompany me to the end with the intention of giving your game a tune-up.

For beginners, I hope you can fully utilize this book to learn the fundamentals of building hands and then create your own mahjong by making your preferred adjustments.

And then someday, if many people are interested in my deviations from these play lines that have served me so well, maybe I'll get another book offer (lol). For now, please master this book, and I hope you all can work hard to become maestros of your own lines of play.

JPML 35th 10-tier Champion: Kotaro Uchikawa

Essential Plays Overview

Even after learning the rules of mahjong, it's not that simple to start playing live games right away.

You discard one tile from the 14 tiles in your hand, then draw a new tile, and discard another one. This process is what mahjong is all about, but if you play randomly based only on intuition and table atmosphere, you won't be really playing mahjong.

Whether you play mahjong to win or for enjoyment, you'll still want to play seriously to some extent.

To do that, you need to know the correct lines of play.

When you first start playing mahjong, you might look at your hand and feel excited, thinking, "I will aim for that yaku (hand pattern)." However, if you only focus on that, you will ignore efficiency and end up playing around too much.

Once you realize that, you may go to the opposite extreme, become obsessed with speed mahjong and focus on nothing but efficiency. In mahjong, winning hands is everything. You might take a straightforward, aggressive approach, letting the wall decide when you'll get high scores just by the hidden ura-dora and red doras. This will lead to one-dimensional attacks that will work against beginners, but stronger players will see right through you.

You need balance.

You need to look at your hand to assess the speed and scoring potential you can aim for while still winning faster than your opponents to make a comprehensive judgment on which moves to make. The early game is particularly important. If you make a mistake at the beginning of a hand, things will quickly go awry. Just like when building a tall structure, if the foundation is even slightly off level, the upper parts will become significantly tilted. The initial phase of a hand is that crucial.

Don't be lazy with your first discard. You need to develop the habit of making careful judgments when deciding all of your plays.

In reality, in addition to the importance of the lines of play in your own hand, there is also a defensive element in mahjong.

You wouldn't need defense if you were playing alone, but since your three opponents are all also aiming to win, focusing only on your own hand will more often put you at a disadvantage.

To avoid mid-game panic, you must prepare for defense.

Suddenly cramming a lot of information in your head can be another cause of panic, but don't worry. I will explain everything carefully, one turn at a time. And by the time you finish reading this book, I am sure that you will officially be an intermediate-level player in terms of play lines.

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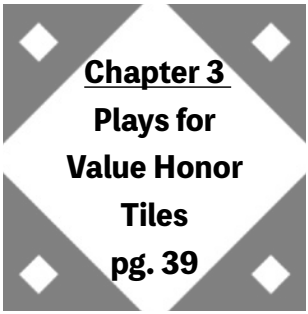

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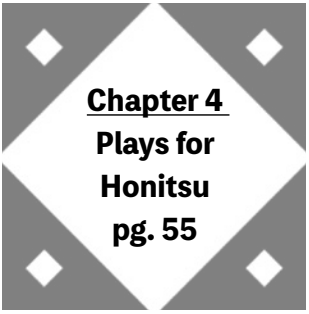

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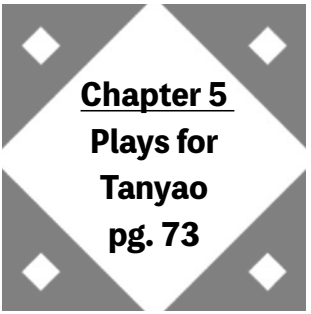

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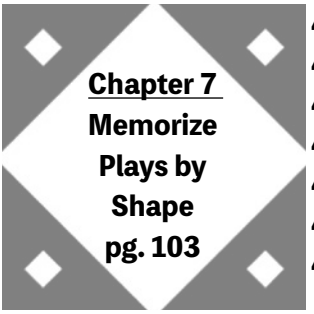

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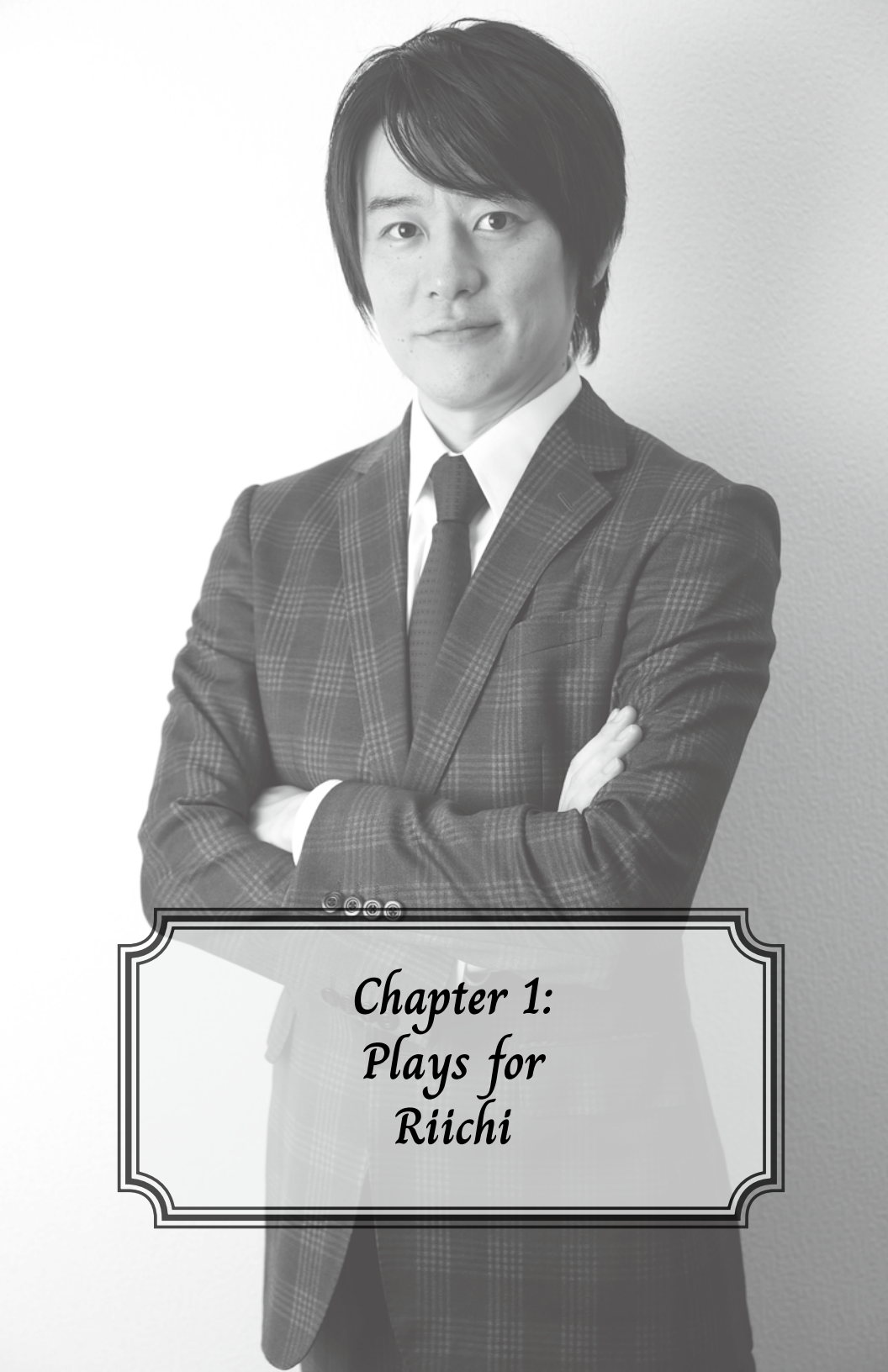


Chapter 1: Plays for Riichi

Essential Play 01

Playing your draws is basic strategy

I mentioned in the line of play summary that when you're building hands in mahjong, it's not good to focus too much on building yaku or focus too much on efficiency. Ideally you'll be just a little bit faster than your opponents, with just a bit higher score, but that's easier said than done. The one thing you can do is build a hand that can adapt to as many conditions as possible, without killing a lot of possibilities. Realistically you can discard any tiles that don't help you with speed or score and won't be useful in defense. Let me summarize:

1: Honor tiles
2: 1 and 9 tiles
3: 2 and 8 tiles
4: 3 to 7 tiles

Tiles should be discarded in the order laid out above. For numbered suits it's easy to remember to start with 1 and discard in order to 4. However, the discard order of honor tiles changes depending on your hand and whether the tile is a guest wind, dragon, or double wind.

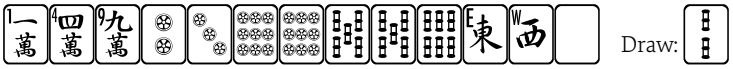
The discard order of terminals (1 and 9) will also change depending on the yaku you can visualize, their relation to other tiles in your hand, and how much defense you need to

play.

If we start discussing what some call the 'three-dimensional aspects of mahjong' here, which include score situation and our opponents' discards, it gets even more complicated, so this book is going to focus on our own hands. Even when it comes to defense, we will judge based solely on our own hand and the basic situation, such as whether we are in the East or South round, without considering the opponents' discarded tiles.

With that in mind, let's get right into the first hand. With the hand below, what should we discard? The situation is Game 1, East-1 and it's our first turn as the South player. The hand is not skewed in any direction and we can't see any specific yaku where we would mainly be calling, like value honor tiles, flushes, or all triplets. It also is not a *tanyao* (inside hand/all simples) or pinfu. It's not likely to be a *chanta* (common ends/half outside hand)/*junchan* (pure ends/pure outside hand) or *chiitoitsu* (seven pairs). And yet it's also not so bad that we have to start folding right away, so this is a hand that we would play based on probability and the tiles we draw.

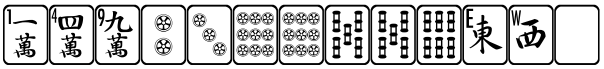
East-1, South Seat, Turn 1, Dora



Essential Play 02

Cut terminals if you have the suji

East-1, South Seat, Turn 1, Dora



Draw:

Answer: Discard

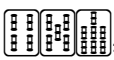
The tiles that are hardest to form sets with are the honor tiles since they can only become triplets, but the usefulness of a 1 when holding a 4 and a 9 when holding a 6, is considerably low. For example, if you have , discarding will still leave the option for a sequence if you draw , so if your and are both isolated, basic strategy says to cut from the edge.

This book assumes that you know what *suji* are, but as a quick summary:

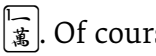
***Suji* to 4 = 1 and 7**

***Suji* to 5 = 2 and 8**

***Suji* to 6 = 3 and 9**

For example, if you hold and draw , it becomes , and in the end will be redundant. On the other

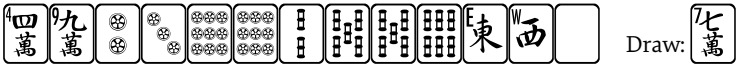
hand there are cases where can be combined with a drawn to create a two-sided (*ryanmen*) wait, so when I say redundant here, I'm referring exclusively to the terminal tiles. For now, only apply this to 1 when holding a 4 and 9 when holding a 6.

In this hand, since we have , the most redundant number tile is . Of course, honor tiles are still the hardest to turn into sets, but the strategy reverses when the element of safety is considered.

Naturally, there are exceptions, such as when that 9 is already in the opponent's discard pile, but if neither has been cut yet, then honor tiles are safer than number tiles, so it is correct to discard the isolated number tiles before the honors.

Now, we've drawn in turn two for the following shape. What should we discard here?

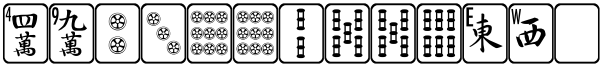
East-1, South Seat, Turn 2, Dora



Essential Play 03

Differences between terminals and 2/8

East-1, South Seat, Turn 2, Dora



Draw:

Answer: Discard

I understand the desire to hold honors as safe tiles, and if you need to play defensively, is a better discard. Unless there is a particular reason to be overly cautious, there is the possibility of a 2-3-4 *sanshoku* (mixed sequences/mixed triple sequences) and since the blocks are not locked in yet, it is acceptable to simply discard the guest wind.

It goes without saying that and are value honor tiles for everyone, including yourself, so you should discard first, which is only a value honor tile for the West player. It's important to note that even among honor tiles, there is an order of priority.

I mentioned in the previous round that isolated terminal tiles are redundant, but let's review:

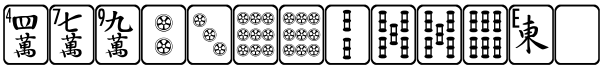
Suji to 4 = 1 and 7
Suji to 5 = 2 and 8
Suji to 6 = 3 and 9

There is a in this hand so the is redundant, but can you see how it is a bit more useful than a terminal? That's right, if you draw , you can form a two-sided wait, so there is a significant difference between 1/9 and 2/8.

Even if there was no clear *sanshoku* possibility in this hand, as long as there are not enough blocks then should be held onto.

So, how should we play the following hand?

East-1, South Seat, Turn 3, Dora

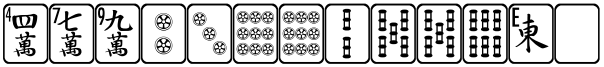


Draw:

Essential Play 04

Don't fall on a bad-wait sword

East-1, South Seat, Turn 3, Dora

 Draw:

Answer: Discard

Some may want to discard and keep both types of honor tiles. However, that is too passive and may actually weigh down your hand, causing you to miss a tenpai or win, and increasing the risk of point loss.

Unless it is clear that someone is likely to make an early riichi or you sense danger, you should play straightforward and advance your hand.

Moreover, this is an opportunity hand with two dora. Since we definitely want to win, we should focus on offense.

If you discard despite still holding the middle wait and overlapping acceptance in the *souzu* (bamboos), it would be a disaster to draw or . It would still be fine to draw but if you discard all in a row, it will usually lead to your opponent winning.

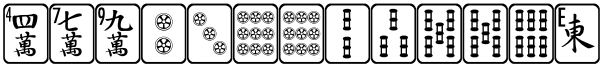
Here, let's consider 4萬 as a potential block and discard □. The reason for not discarding E東 first is that if the dealer calls pon on it, it will automatically give them a two-han hand.

With this hand on turn 3, some people may intentionally discard E東 first, aiming for the dealer to pon and making things more difficult for the West and North players, and some will discard it early precisely because they don't want it to be called. I also have various reasons for discarding E東 early in certain cases. That may be correct in a sense, but the basic strategy here is to discard □ first. As long as you understand this basic principle, you are of course free to decide what to discard based on your own thoughts.

Just keep in mind that here we are learning the basic play lines.

So, what should you discard from the following hand?

East-1, South Seat, Turn 4, Dora

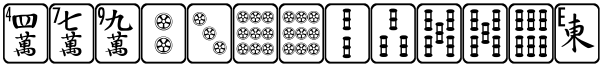


Draw: 8萬

Essential Play 05

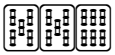
Squeeze to win

East-1, South Seat, Turn 4, Dora

 Draw:

Answer: Discard

The previously problematic middle wait was filled, resulting in a 2-away hand. Even though it includes overlapping acceptance, it's 2-away with three two-sided blocks and even if or triple up, it will be a great 1-away shape, so this can be considered a decent 2-away hand.

Here, the most aggressive play is to discard , but if something sticks to then dropping  and aiming for a 2-3-4 *sanshoku* is going to far.

Even though this hand is a great opportunity hand, if is discarded and ponned, then we have to discard and to get to tenpai, which is rough. If any of those were to be called or deal in, then the blame would land on the poor line of play.

Of course there is a possibility that after the is ponned, we could draw and tenpai just by discarding and without dealing in, but in that case we can discard first

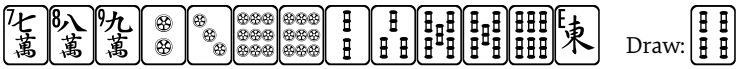
and then we only have to push after the pon.

This is all hypothetical, but the line of play theory aims to minimize risk without getting in the way of your own hand-building.

Especially during opportunity hands, you don't want to allow an opponent to call if it kills your own hand. This is the difficult part of mahjong, but everything is about balance. Until the previous turn, the only option was to keep the hand as flexible as possible, so we had to discard an honor tile, but now that the shape is more or less decided, we can think about slimming down the hand and prepping defensive elements for our opponents' upcoming attacks.

Therefore, after discarding , the hand looked like this on the next draw. What would you discard?

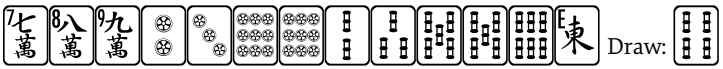
East-1, South Seat, Turn 5, Dora



Essential Play 06

Release the squeeze when you're ready to fight

East-1, South Seat, Turn 5, Dora

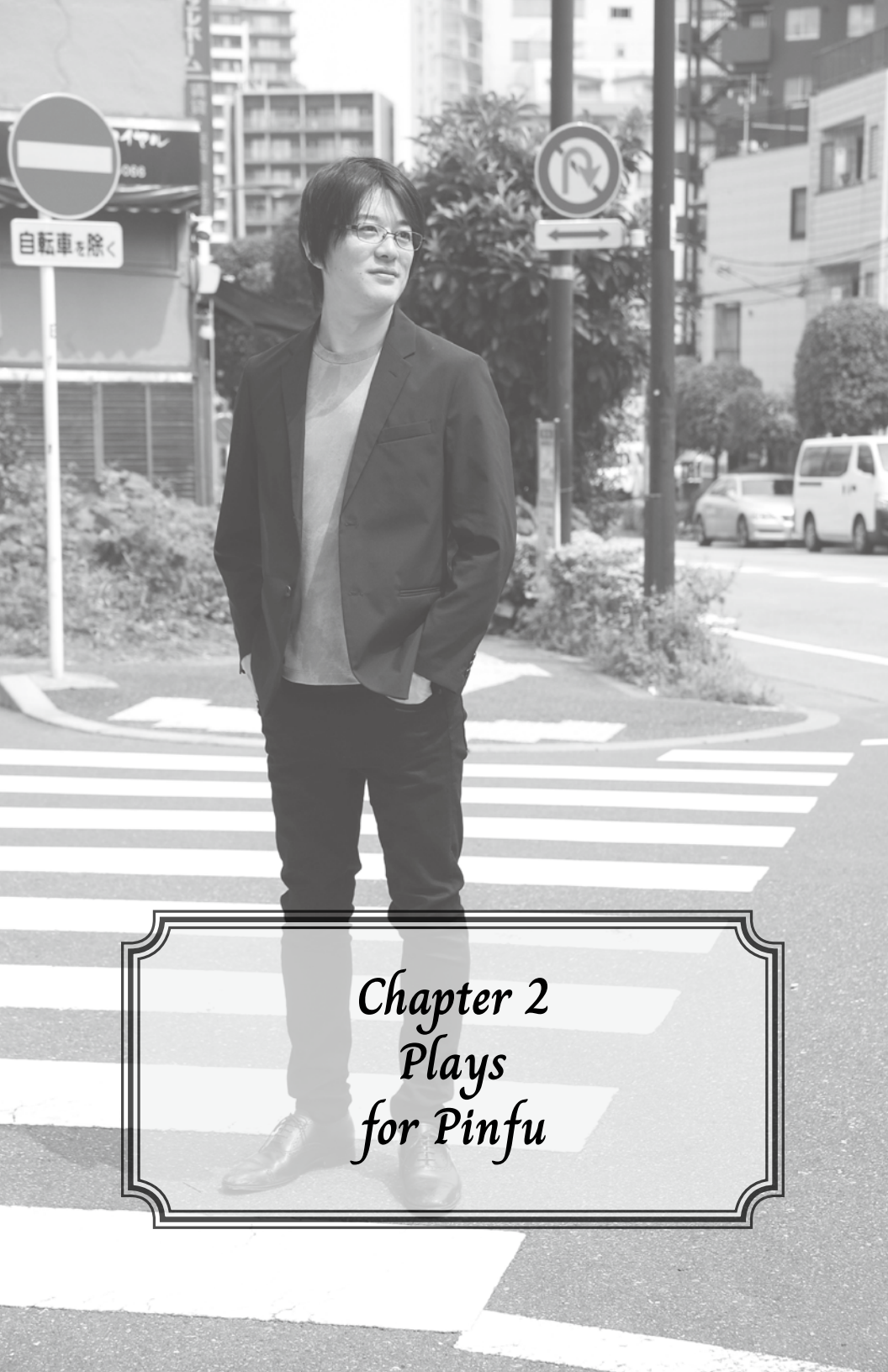


Answer: Discard

If we have to make a pinfu hand no matter what, we can keep and discard , but if the yaku isn't as important, we can leave as much acceptance as possible. Since it is not guaranteed that will fill in first and become a three-sided *souzu* wait, we should discard in case we draw or .

In the previous round, we discarded so we could hope to win the hand without allowing opponents to win, but there is a huge difference between the shape then and the shape now. Not only is the number away from tenpai different, the waits are also good, so even if it ends in an opponent calling, we need to minimize any backfires. It's time to jump in feet first and win this hand.

Of course, it always depends on the situation, but if there are no specific obstacles, then this is a hand that you should insta-riichi with, even with a guaranteed yaku.



Chapter 2
Plays for Pinfu

Essential Play 07

There's no fu in pinfu

In the previous chapter, we covered lines of play for riichi, but we ended up 1-away from a pinfu. This shows us, as I'm sure you already know, that lines of play for riichi and pinfu are very similar.

When you're playing to your draws, there are many times where your hand turns into pinfu without even trying.

In this chapter, I would like to clarify that it is not an absolute requirement to aim for pinfu, but rather that it seems reasonable to be aware of pinfu from the early stages of the hand.

First, let's review the requirements for pinfu. Pinfu is essentially a point-less hand. The kanji as a normal word generally means "peace," but in mahjong the second character (和) means "win a hand" and the first one (平) means 'flat' or 'nothing.' A winning hand with nothing. A zero-point win is pinfu. In reality, there are the base 20 fu and an additional 10 fu for a win on a discard with an uncalled hand, making it 30 fu in total.

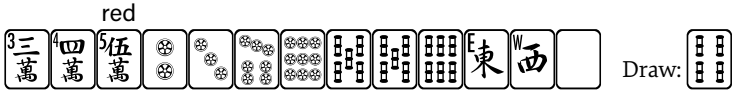
To summarize, it means building a hand without point-bearing elements like pairs of value honor tiles, any triples, or a wait with fu, so it has to be two-sided. Achieving all of this earns you one han.

This is why people from Kansai (a region in Japan) argue that it is not pinfu if you draw your own winner. They say the added 2 fu for the draw excludes it. Historically, I think that is correct, but the rule of allowing pinfu on a self-draw has spread and become standard nationwide, and there's no going back now.

Additionally, since the rule is 'in exchange for allowing pinfu on a draw, the 2 points for a draw are not counted,' a self-drawn pinfu win is only granted 20 fu, so even with 4 han, it's only worth 5,200 points.

We've ventured into trivia territory, but let's take a look at the next hand. What should be discarded here?

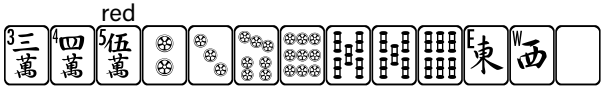
East-1, South Seat, Turn 1, Dora



Essential Play 08

Take care of value honor tiles first

East-1, South Seat, Turn 1, Dora



Answer: Discard

The line for discarding honor tiles is as follows. It is standard to discard honors in order from 1 to 4 based on the list below:.

1: Guest winds for yourself (winds that are not the prevailing wind or your seat wind)

2: Dragon tiles

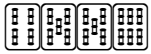
3: Prevailing wind tiles

4: Guest winds for others (your own single wind)

5: Your own double wind tiles (double or double)

1 doesn't give you a yaku; 2 is one han for every player; 3 is one han for yourself, but is two han for the dealer in the East round, and is two han for the South player in the South round; 4 is one han for you but a guest wind for the others; 5 is two han for yourself. If the situation allows for an

aggressive approach, use this list as a guide to the order for discarding honors in your hand.

This hand has one middle (*kanchan*) wait and one two-sided (*ryanmen*) shape, two completed blocks, and is 2-away with a decent shape.  can also be considered as a couple of two-sided blocks, so this hand has quite a bit of flexibility.

However, there is no pair, which is a key point of this hand.

Looking at the entire hand, the possibility of getting to pinfu is quite high, but if or pairs up, it won't count as pinfu. For this simple reason, let's discard .

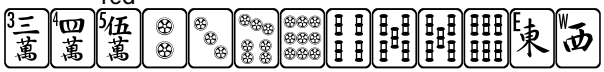
You don't have to be worried that I'm just giving you an elementary approach to match up tiles in your hand. At its core, mahjong is a game of matching tiles, and it has additional three-dimensional elements that also make it an incredibly complex intellectual game, but fundamentally it's better to take a simple approach.

Therefore, the discard here is either or , but it is not good to give the dealer a free two han when your hand is unstable and doesn't even have a pair, so let's start with .

So, what would you do with the hand below?

East-1, South Seat, Turn 2, Dora

red



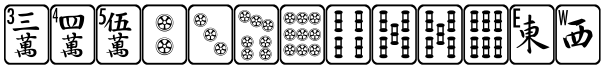
Draw:

Essential Play 09

Guest winds first is standard

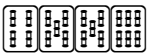
East-1, South Seat, Turn 2, Dora

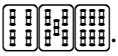
red

 Draw:

Answer: Discard

In the blink of an eye, the dora has paired up, meaning we also have the pair that the hand needs to win. This gives us a lot more leeway and our hand is even better than before. The scoring potential has increased, and the speed has also improved.

At this point, the  block takes on even more significant meaning. It can also be thought of as a couple of two-sided blocks: and .

However, this does not mean that is unnecessary. If you draw or , the *souzu* (bamboos) can be used as just one complete sequence: .

Therefore, we should play an honor tile here, and basic strategy would call for a discard.

Some professionals and advanced players will disagree

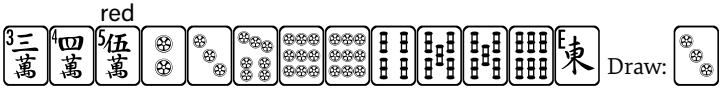
with me here. The argument would be that since it's still only turn 2, then 東 should be discarded first under the theory of discarding 東 before the opponent completes a pair of them.

Of course, I also have games where I intentionally discard 東 first from this position. However, I believe that as a basic principle when teaching, the discard should be 西. If our opponent is to call a 1-han tile or a 2-han tile, the 2-han tile is the one that causes more trouble for us. Having a simple theory as your base will minimize mistakes. If the West and East players each hold two dora, and the West player pons 西, the score is 3,900 for 西, dora-2. Meanwhile, if the dealer pons double 東 with two dora, it's 12,000 points. Additionally, the 西 is only a value honor tile for the West player, but 東 gives value to any player who uses it.

A full discussion on whether to play 東 or 西 would take several pages, and no conclusion would be reached. Additionally, it becomes a topic that is too niche and not suitable for this book. Ultimately, here we will set discarding 西 as the standard, but when you actually play, it is also acceptable to decide to discard 東 first, based on your own judgment.

So, what would you do with the hand below?

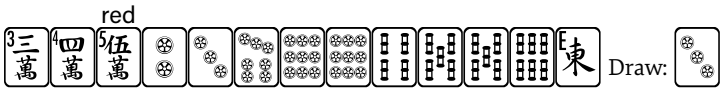
East-1, South Seat, Turn 3, Dora



Essential Play 10

If you can win, go for flexibility

East-1, South Seat, Turn 3, Dora



Answer: Discard

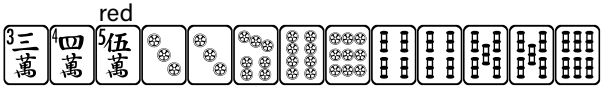
You may hesitate to discard after hearing that if the dealer pons double with two dora, they'll have a dealer mangan (12,000 points); but in this case it is indeed best to discard it.

Of course it's not pleasant to let the dealer call a double , but if you cut something like or to prevent that, it will severely hinder your own hand.

The number of useful tiles at the moment of discarding is 14 types/45 tiles, and when discarding , it's 13 types/43 tiles, which is actually only a two-tile difference.

This may make people want to squeeze the more, but the path after that is quite different.

For example, you will miss out on winning shapes like the following:



In other words, the pattern of having a as your pair will disappear.

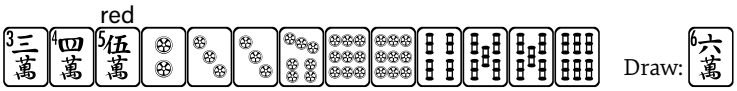
We would prefer to use the dora as a pair, but since there is also a red dora, if we're able to riichi, we can aim for at least a mangan hand even after cutting one .

is a tile that will be discarded at some point no matter what. In that case, it's better to discard it as soon as possible. This is the situation where you want to discard it before your opponent pairs it up.

In the previous round, we kept because we were comparing it with discarding , but when comparing with or other necessary tiles, the discard should very clearly be .

After discarding , the next turn brought the following hand. What should be discarded here?

East-1, South Seat, Turn 4, Dora

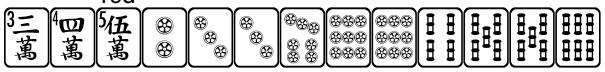


Essential Play 11

Only focus on problem spots

East-1, South Seat, Turn 4, Dora

red

 Draw:

Answer: Discard

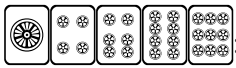
With this draw things might suddenly get difficult. This shape could lead to mistakes, even among people who play a lot of mahjong. First, the four consecutive *manzu* (character) tiles are a good shape that you would want to build out more to a tenpai. If or come, it will turn into a three-sided wait and drawing or will give us a two-sided (*ryanmen*) wait.

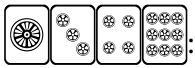
Although it is inferior to the four consecutive tiles, the bulging shape (*nakabukure*) is really good. We want to hang on to these shapes until we get to the point that we have no choice but to discard from the *manzu* or *souzu*. So we will discard from the *pinzu* (dots), but plenty of people would probably discard .

However, in reality, playing accepts 5 more tiles than playing . If we discard , we will become 1-away from

tenpai by drawing one of the 20 types/68 tiles that we can use. Discarding will give us 19 types/63 tiles that are useful.

Furthermore, if we forget about the perspective of simply getting closer to tenpai, and instead compare how many of the useful tiles give us good shapes, it will look like what is described below. Since the conditions are the same for *manzu* and *souzu*, we will only compare the *pinzu*.

Discard: : 5 types/17 tiles

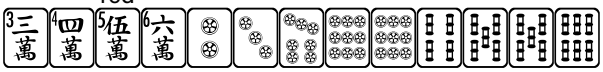
Discard: : 4 types/12 tiles

As you can see, there is a difference of 5 tiles. At a glance the hand looks complicated, but if we set aside the *manzu* and *souzu* since we won't be touching them yet, and focus only on the *pinzu*, the answer is much simpler.

So, what would you play if you had the following hand?

East-1, South Seat, Turn 5, Dora

red



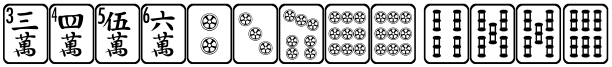
Draw:

Essential Play 12

Don't get too comfortable with 1-away

East-1, South Seat, Turn 5, Dora

red

 Draw:

Answer: Discard

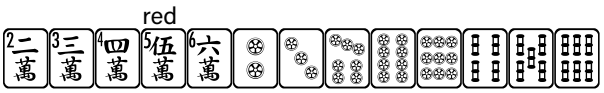
With this draw, we are now 1-away from tenpai. Whether we draw or , we will be tenpai with pinfu and three dora, but the issue here is where to cut from .

Of course, it would be nice if we can just draw perfectly to tenpai, but this discard will be the turning point if we don't.

If we cut , drawing or will give us a three-sided wait in *manzu*, so we can switch the partial blocks.

While it does depend on the number of tiles discarded on the board, if we discard then draw and discard , we'll have the following 1-away shape:

red

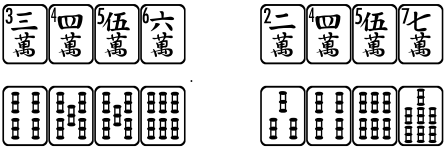


Alternatively, it is acceptable to drop to hedge red acceptance.

This is more a way of thinking than a line of play, so either one is fine, based on your aim or strategy for the hand or the game.

However, from this hand, you should discard instead of .

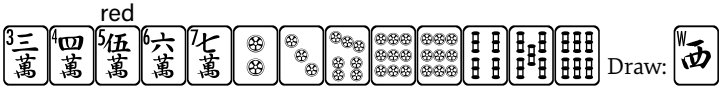
The number of useful tiles that give you a two-sided wait or better doesn't differ between four connectors or bulging shapes, but the four connectors gives you a chance at a three-sided wait.



They both accept 4 types/14 tiles.

So, let's say the next turn we draw , discard and we get the hand below. What's next?

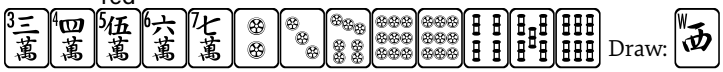
East-1, South Seat, Turn 7, Dora



Essential Play 13

Prepare to defend to win

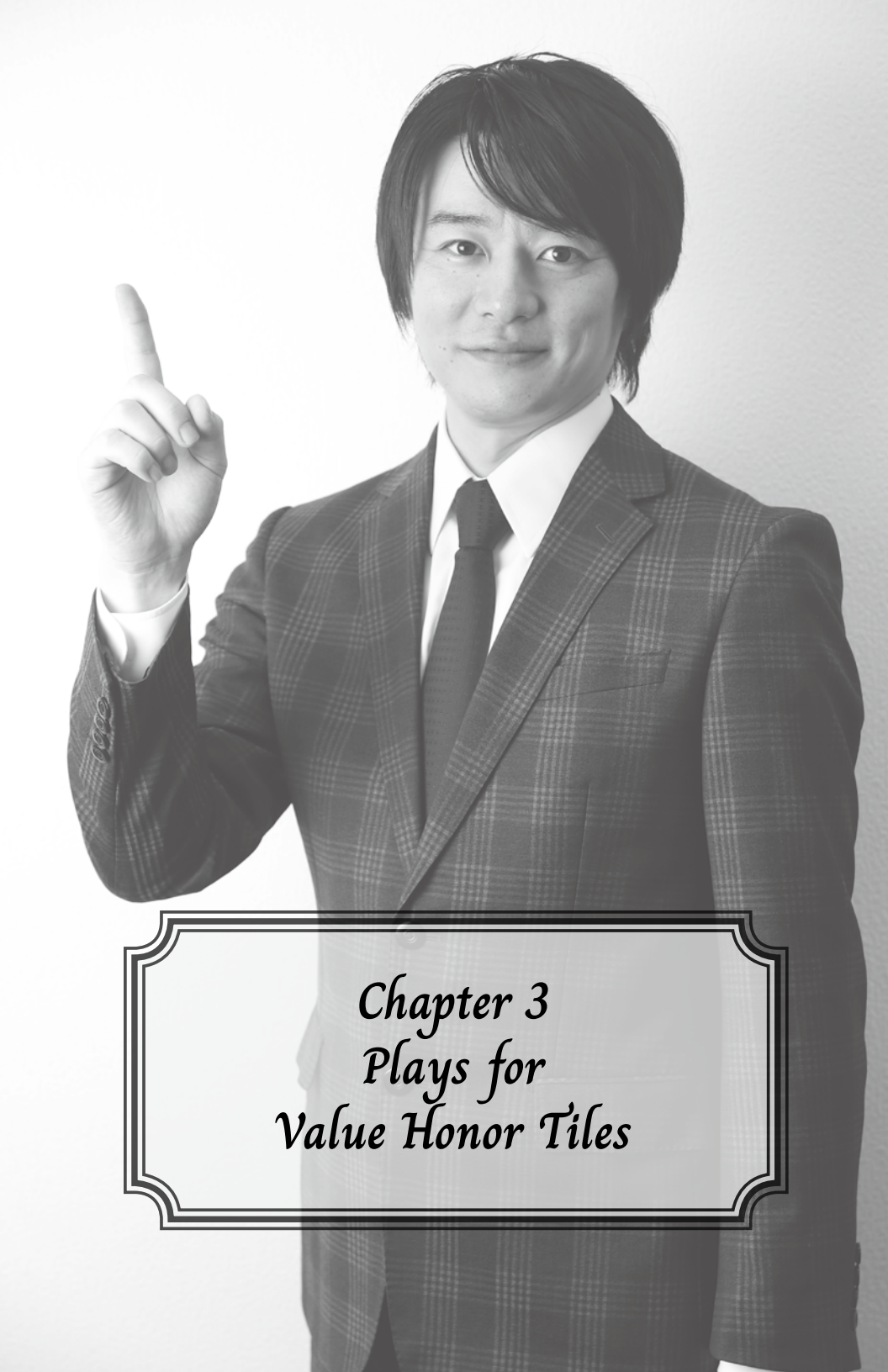
East-1, South Seat, Turn 7, Dora



Answer: Discard

Keeping will give us a path to a wide 1-away shape if we draw the middle wait and drop , but then we would have to discard dora, and also since is next to dora, we want to take care of it as soon as possible.

We are already in turn 7 and approaching mid-game. If we hem and haw about it for two or three turns, it's going to get more and more dangerous, and if we don't draw anything useful in that time, there's a good chance we'll get into the end-game without a safe moment to release that . Dealing into someone's hand in mahjong means you also miss that chance to win your own hand. This hand is our opportunity to go all in without worrying about dealing into someone else. Obviously, dealing in hurts, but being unable to win your own hands hurts even more, so since we've come this far, let's forget about drawing the and keep a safe tile instead.



Chapter 3
Plays for Value Honor Tiles

Essential Play 14

Pon to tenpai for cheap hands

Lines of play for value honor tiles are essentially ways to advance the hand with the premise of ponning a value honor tile and the assumption that you will win the hand.

Since we plan to pon and that will leave us with a shorter hand, defensive awareness is even more necessary than when going for a riichi+pinfu hand.

Of course, when you have two or three dora and can expect a mangan or bigger, then speed becomes the priority and you should call everything to get closer to winning, but the ideal situation is to only call the value honor tile and already be tenpai.

Don't fall into the trap of believing that calling early will get you an early win. Even if you call a value honor in the early-game, if you're not already in tenpai with a good wait, then your hand isn't necessarily fast. Late-game you may find yourself in the worst situation where you are losing in speed to your opponent and calling attention to yourself, all with a cheap hand.

If you start calling with a cheap hand that is still far away and the player to your left doesn't have a decent hand, they won't let you call. If they squeeze like this and you can't draw the tiles you need yourself, you'll get stuck when another

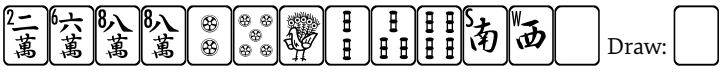
player calls riichi. You might end up just waiting for that player to draw their winner, or get so stuck you end up dealing into them.

To avoid that situation, when our hands are cheap, let's say it has to at least be 1-away with a good wait candidate to pon a value honor tile.

Even if we pon a [ ] to tenpai for just one han, once we get to turn 13 without winning, the hand is no longer categorized as 'fast'. In fact, we're stuck with a cheap, slow hand. When you have a cheap hand, you have to be prepared for that outcome before calling.

The following hand paired up [ ] and has two dora. How should we play it?

East-1, South Seat, Turn 1, Dora 8萬



Essential Play 15

Count your potential blocks

East-1, South Seat, Turn 1, Dora

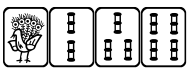
Draw:

Answer: Discard

Since there are two dora and we got a pair of , if a comes out then we definitely want to pon to aim for 3,900 or 8,000, but before that we have to choose a first discard.

If we want to hold onto some safe tiles, then one discard option is as *suji* to , but is that really the right choice?

Once you've learned that terminals and 2/8 are not very useful when you hold their middle *suji* in your hand, it's common to sort of mechanically discard them right off the bat, but with this hand, we don't have nearly enough blocks to do that yet.

 (sequence + 1)

(incomplete block)

(incomplete block)

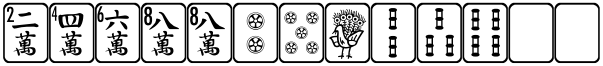
Currently, we only have these three laid out here.

In mahjong, we need a hand with four sets of three and one pair for a total of five blocks, but we still only have three block candidates in this hand.

That means we need to keep tiles that can easily become blocks. If we can get a that sticks to it will be a two-sided (*ryanmen*) wait, so we can discard a brazen to make the hand as flexible as possible.

Here, the player to our left discarded the first to the board. Should we pon here? Or should we pass on it?

East-1, South Seat, Turn 2, Dora

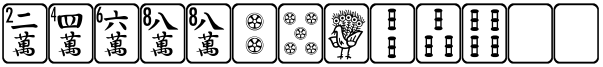


is discarded

Essential Play 16

Pass calls when you're short on blocks

East-1, South Seat, Turn 2, Dora



is discarded

Answer: Pass

We would like to call, since there are two dora, but calling without enough block candidates is extremely risky.

While the hand feels like a big opportunity with two dora, it is only 3,900 points in a rule set with red fives, not big enough to put everything on the line. Calling while the hand is still such a mess should be done when we can hope for at least 8,000 points. It's often not even worth it unless it's 12,000 or more.

That said, it *is* still an opportunity hand and if we can get another dora or red five then it *will* be worth 8,000 points, so we can definitely call the second if it comes out.

Many people say, "If you're going to call the second one anyway, you may as well just call the first one," but you can mostly ignore them.

Of course, there may end up being times when you think you should have called the first tile, but there will also be cases where you complete a different block on your own, unexpectedly advancing your hand so you end up completely dropping the honor pair. Consistency is an important element in mahjong, but if you focus too much on it, you will lose out on flexibility. Be careful not to get too stuck in your own ways.

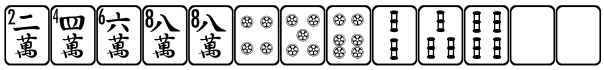
Depending on the draw, the hand could change to this:

After drawing on turn 2 and discarding , then drawing and discarding on turn 3, you could end up with this shape on turn 4.

At this point, rather than relying on the , I would aim for a pinfu with *sanshoku* (mixed sequences/mixed triple sequences) and drop the pair of .

So, would you call if the hand turned out as follows? Of course this is the second that came out.

East-1, South Seat, Turn 7, Dora

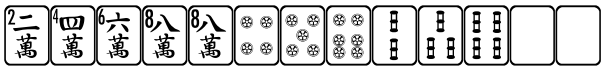


is discarded

Essential Play 17

Watch for post-tenpai changes

East-1, South Seat, Turn 7, Dora 8萬



[ ] is discarded

Answer: Pon [ ], discard 2萬

Since the hand will be tenpai, I think I would pon the [ ], but now the question is which of the two middle waits to take.

Looking only at the shape of the hand, discarding 2萬 is the correct answer. This is because drawing 7萬 or 8萬 next would create a better wait than we have now. Also, since it is red tile mahjong, if we win with red 5萬, it will also become a mangan.

Some would say the 6萬 *suji* trap waiting for 3萬 would make it come out easier, but it's actually the opposite.

More and more players have mastered efficiency these days and that means any tiles related to the discard at tenpai are immediately suspicious, and discarding 6萬 or 2萬 from

this shape is also considered to be a type of adjacent wait.

For example, if you declare riichi with 6萬, a middle 3萬 wait will be suspected in the same way that the straddle *suji* 4萬 7萬 and 5萬 8萬 are. The 4萬 4萬 6萬 and 6萬 8萬 8萬 two-pair (*shanpon*) wait is also suspect here.

The same applies when you call tiles. If the opponents assume a pon to tenpai, then 3萬 will not easily come out after discarding 6萬.

If this were early in the hand, cutting 6萬 is a valid option. Your opponents might think, "Surely, you're not tenpai yet, right?" and inadvertently discard your winner for you. In addition, after locking in that tenpai, by empty-cutting tiles that are in your hand already like ⁘ and ⁞, you could induce misreads as 6萬 would no longer be the last discard from your hand (*tedashi*), thus increasing the chances of your winners being discarded.

However, in this setting it is already the 7th turn, and the opponent is also cautious of pon-to-tenpai, so let's stick to the theory and discard 2萬 here.

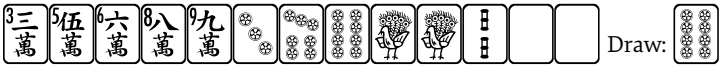
Let's take a look at a different hand. What should you discard here?

East-1, South Seat, Turn 1, Dora 南

Essential Play 18

Reverse suji (ura-suji) theory

East-1, South Seat, Turn 1, Dora

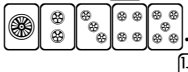


Answer: Discard

Since there are enough block candidates in the starting hand, we can discard an isolated tile.

The floating tiles are and , and the answer here is .

The reason is that there is a two-sided partial sequence with .

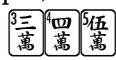
If we discard , five different types of tiles become wasted draws: . If you play , the wasted draws are cut down to 3 types: . This is because and can be used by sticking them to the that you already have.

This is similar to the theory of discarding isolated tiles while holding a *suji* to that tile.

From we discard just like if we had and if we have , we discard , just like when we have .

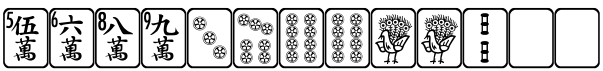
This way of thinking is fundamental to progressing your hand, which gives rise to the concept of reverse *suji* (*ura suji*). If a player has an early discard then is dangerous, and if there's an early then are dangerous.

However, it is better not to develop a habit of mechanically tossing out reverse *suji* too much. When it forms four connecting tiles, it turns into a really strong shape, especially the 3467 tiles, which can stretch in different directions, so don't just let those shapes go without thinking.

For example, drawing a when you already have gives you a  shape, so discarding just to keep an isolated honor tile or a safe tile is a fairly passive strategy.

Instead, holding onto the turned out to be worth it, giving us the hand below. In this case, we'll actually have too many blocks, so how should we play?

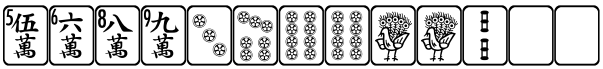
East-1, South Seat, Turn 2, Dora



Essential Play 19

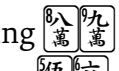
Cut side waits from the inside

East-1, South Seat, Turn 2, Dora

 Draw:

Answer: Discard

Assuming we won't touch the value honor tile, the two-sided shape, or the part, the only options of blocks to drop are and . Basic strategy calls for the drop here.

One reason is that forms a combination of side (*penchan*) wait and a two-pair wait, but the main reason is that dropping  doesn't cause to be a loss if drawn. Since we have , drawing will just complete a sequence and won't backfire (term used when a tile is drawn after one or more of the tiles that would have accepted it, have been discarded).

Even if this were a comparison of just two-sided wait shapes, the answer would still be to drop .

As for the discard order of and , unless there are specific conditions we usually want to start with the inside

tiles. The efficiency of numbered tiles in mahjong is hierarchal, where 3 to 7 are all about even, followed by 2/8, and 1/9 as the hardest to use. Naturally, the same applies to your opponents, so 1/9 will generally be safer than 2/8.

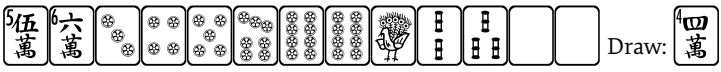
Of course, if there are good reasons for discarding 9萬 first, such as if 8萬 already appears in someone's discards (*genbutsu*), or someone is clearly aiming for *kokushimuso* (13 orphans) then we should discard 9萬 first.

What about if the dealer has already discarded 9萬 and the west and north players have already discarded 8萬? This is a hard one, but generally you want safe tiles to the dealer, so start with an 8萬 discard. Even in a situation where the west and north players had discarded 9萬 and the dealer discarded 8萬, then we would still start with the 8萬. Lastly, if the dealer had discarded 8萬 and only the west player discarded 9萬, we would start with 9萬. This is often a case-by-case decision and is quite important.

After this, we drew 1筒 and discarded 9萬. Next we drew 2索 and discarded 1索, and by turn 5 we have the following tenpai.

In this case, what should we do? I want you to think about what you would discard, whether or not to riichi, and also provide the reasons.

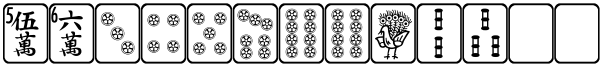
East-1, South Seat, Turn 5, Dora 5南



Essential Play 20

3 han is standard for two-pair waits

East-1, South Seat, Turn 5, Dora

 Draw:

Answer: Discard and riichi

If we discard and go for a riichi with a two-sided wait for , no matter how we win, it's only 1,300 points. If we discard and go for riichi with a two-pair wait, winning on gets us 1,300 points. If comes out, we get 2,600 points.

While it depends on what the discards look like, it is usually relatively easy to ron on a 2-honor wait, so the win rate doesn't really drop significantly, but for a self-drawn win, two-sided is far stronger.

You may still want to go for a two-pair wait because you want a higher score, but even the more expensive side is only an extra 1,300 despite the wait being a pair wait that's not as easy to draw. That's not very appealing.

The theory here would be to take the two-sided wait. If both ways just get you a cheap hand, then always take the one that is easier to draw.

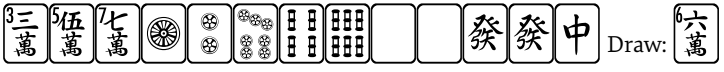
However, if you have at least one dora, then the basic strategy is to take the two-pair wait. Then, winning on the more expensive side for riichi, [ ], and a dora gets you 5,200 points. This big of a difference in points allows you to go for the 2-honor tile wait and hope for a chance to ron.

Now, what if there are two dora?

If there are two dora, it's better to go with the two-sided wait. If you riichi and draw your winner, it will be mangan. Even if you wait to complete the triple and draw the more expensive [ ], it will ultimately score mangan too, so there is not much difference there. Keep in mind that a two-sided wait is the basic strategy for two or more dora. Of course, if someone always immediately discards an honor when you riichi, or if there are other judgment factors to make you think the two-pair wait is better, that's up to you, but as a basic principle, you should go for the two-sided wait.

Let's move on to a different hand. What would you discard here?

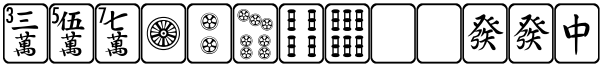
East-1, South Seat, Turn 1, Dora



Essential Play 21

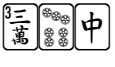
Floaters close to sequences

East-1, South Seat, Turn 1, Dora

 Draw:

Answer: Discard

There are two pairs of value honor tiles, but it's not a hand that could go for *honitsu* (common flush/half flush), *toitoi* (all triplets), or *chanta* (common ends/half outside hand), and there are no dora either. The hand is lacking, but unless the pairs up giving us a glimpse of *daisangen* (big dragons/big three dragons), all we can do is pon the value honor tiles and go for a quick win.

The  tiles are floaters, but it is too early to give up on the possibility of drawing another , so it could be either or . In this case, the line of play is to discard . Tiles and are those 3/7 tiles we've discussed and they have the same efficiency, but if we draw to the shape, it will give us a three-sided wait (*sanmenchan*), so we should hang onto it.

Chapter 4
Plays for Honitsu

Essential Play 22

Read your course from the deal

Looking at a dealt hand, the sort of automatic thoughts that pop up usually fall into one of these categories:

Category 1: This hand can't win without calling

Category 2: This hand should be kept closed

Category 3: I can't decide whether to call or not until I get more draws

Category 4: This hand cannot reasonably be expected to win

Recognize which of these four categories applies to your hand. Then, categorize the hand further as described below:

1-1: Only value honor tiles

1-2: Value honor tiles + *Honitsu* (common/half flush)

1-3: Value honor tiles + *Toitoi* (all triplets)

1-4: Value honor tiles + Dora

1-5: *Chinitsu* (perfect flush/full flush)

While there are several patterns for Category 1 as described above, Category 2 mostly consists of hands aiming for riichi, and depending on the draw, it may also include pinfu.

For Category 3, there are generally two types:

3-1: Whether or not to call for *tanyao* (all inside/all simples)

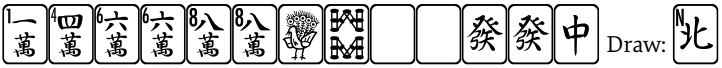
3-2: Whether or not to call value honor tiles

For Category 4, the basic strategy is to aim for hands like *kokushimuso* (13 orphans), *chiitoitsu* (seven pairs), *chanta* (common ends/half outside hand), or *junchan* (pure ends/pure outside hand), while also reinforcing defense. Even if you start with the intention of Categories 1 to 3, you may end up with a Category 4 hand if you don't draw improvements, or if your opponents go on the attack.

In this chapter, I explain the lines of play for a *honitsu*. In Category 1, the most common hand you will consider calling is when you have dora, and the next most common is *honitsu*. *Toitoi* does not appear nearly as frequently, and although it's worth the same 2 han, *honitsu* happens far more often.

So, from the following hand, what should we discard?

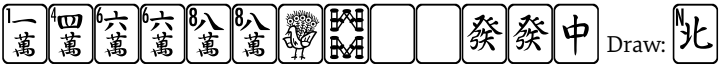
East-1, South Seat, Turn 1, Dora



Essential Play 23

Keep your discards demure

East-1, South Seat, Turn 1, Dora

 Draw:

Answer: Discard

If you play as I've taught you up to this point, the discard should be . This is because we have and the only way would be useful if it pairs up.

Now take a look at the entire hand. Do you see that we should be aiming for a *honitsu* in *manzu* (characters)? With two sets of value honor tiles ( ) and two potential blocks in *manzu*, this is a hand where we can hope for mangan, even with calling.

This means that the unnecessary tiles are the *pinzu* (dots) and *souzu* (bamboos). Since you will discard it eventually, it's fine to start with an discard, but won't stand out as much, so let's start with . It may seem trivial, but if you make your discards look a bit more subdued, your opponents might not even notice what you're doing. From our perspective, even though we are clearly going for a *honitsu* in *manzu*,

there are many cases in actual play where a distracted player doesn't notice at all. As one example, if you have ponned [ ] and [發], compare how your opponents will see this discard pile:

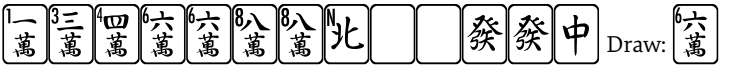
to this discard pile:

The level of caution opponents will have toward you differs between these two discard piles.

However, it would be foolish to be overly fixated on these differences, and the worst thing to do would be to hold onto [北] for too long and accidentally deal in. That said, let's get in the habit of creating a somewhat subdued set of discards while also ensuring a certain level of safety.

Now, on turn 3 your hand looks like this. What would you do?

East-1, South Seat, Turn 3, Dora [南]



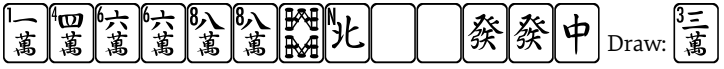
Essential Play 24

Don't sacrifice for camouflage

East-1, South Seat, Turn 3, Dora

Answer: Discard

Let's say that the tile drawn on turn 2 was actually , giving you the following hand:



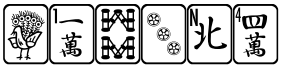
Discarding first is an option. With stuck to , the possibility of going for a normal block hand by ponning the two sets of value honor tiles will increase our win rate significantly higher than going for *chiitoitsu*.

However, if we discard and then draw a next, we can take the 1-away shape for a closed *honitsu* and *chiitoitsu*.

Some players choose to discard here to camouflage their hand so that the opponent does not think it's a *manzu honitsu*.

This is the discard holding onto 一萬 longer:

and this is what they'd be if we cut 一萬 on turn 2:



So how do they compare to each other?

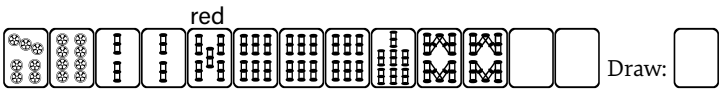
I think most opponents won't read this as a *honitsu*.

Therefore, while cutting 一萬 early has its merits, the basic strategy is still to discard 九萬. As long as you know this, it's fine to establish your own strategy and to even discard 一萬.

Now, the main question is the what it looks like after discarding 九萬. Here we should keep 北 and discard 一萬. Both 一萬 and 北 are now unnecessary tiles. If that's the case, it's better to keep the safer 北 and discard 一萬 first.

Now let's move on to a 1-away hand where we've already taken the next draw.

East-1, South Seat, Turn 4, Dora 南

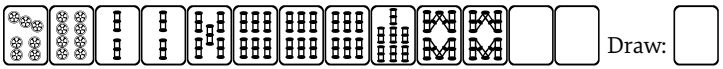


Essential Play 25

Don't put all your eggs in the honitsu basket

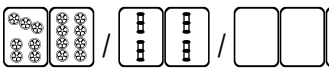
East-1, South Seat, Turn 4, Dora

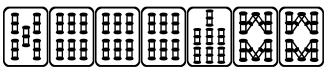
red

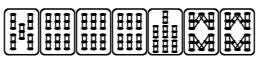


Answer: Discard

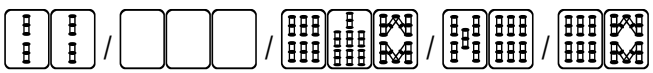
To jump right to the conclusion, it's better not to aim for a *honitsu* here. Let's divide this hand into blocks.

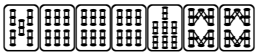


 (2 blocks)

It's natural to view the blocks in this way. The  shape accepts or and we can easily create two blocks. Additionally, we triple up the shape collapses nicely into a pair and a block. This is how the blocks should be divided when following the natural course of the hand.

Things change if we want to aim for *honitsu*.

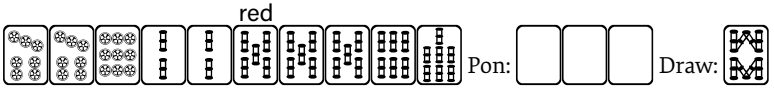


Since can't be counted as a block, we have to build three blocks from the  shape. This makes our hand significantly slower than when we weren't going for *honitsu*. The middle wait and shape are concerns as this is one of those overlapping acceptance shapes, which isn't very efficient. The hand has potential to score high, but it's slow.

Here, let's cut for a flexible 1-away shape and aim for riichi.

Let's look at another hand. This hand is tenpai, but which wait should we choose?

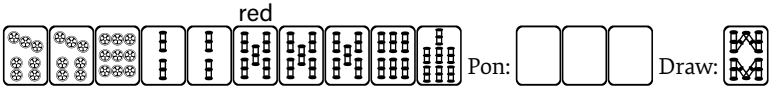
East-1, South Seat, Turn 8, Dora



Essential Play 26

Now you can go for honitsu

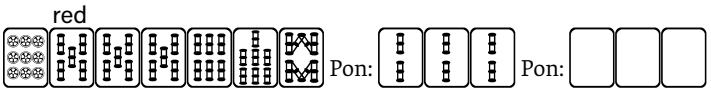
East-1, South Seat, Turn 8, Dora



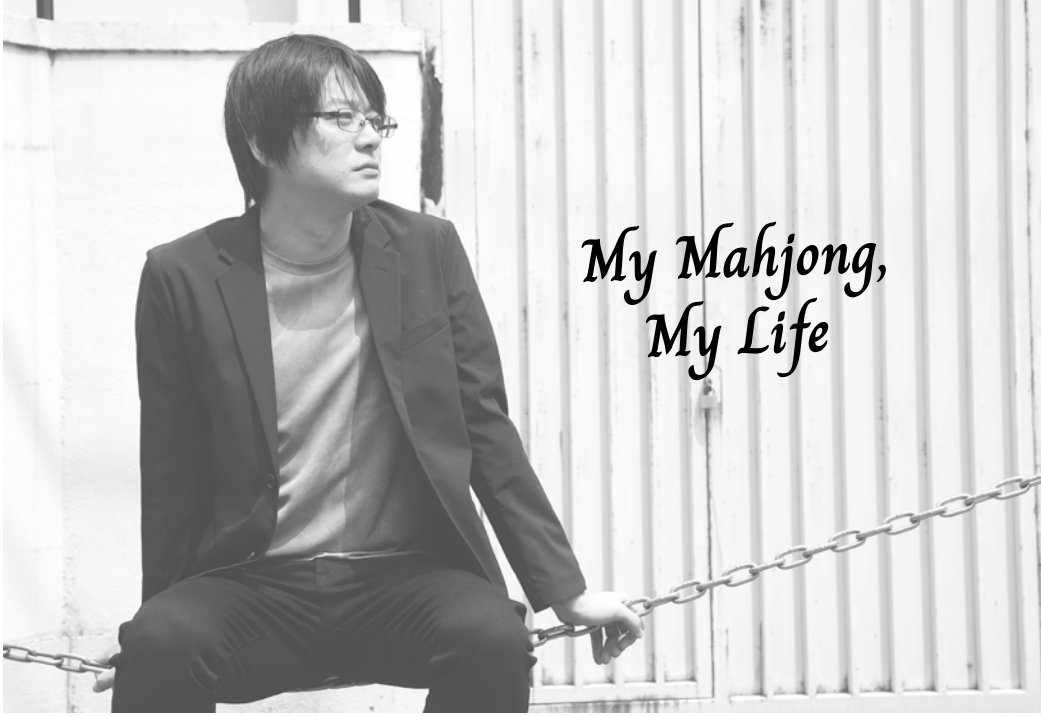
Answer: Discard

This is a common "What Would You Discard" question and the answer is to take the middle wait and discard .

The middle wait has four winning tiles, and the two-pair (*shanpon*) wait has the same four winning tiles. Numerically it sounds the same, but if we take the middle (*kanchan*) wait and is discarded, we can pon, cut and get the following shape:



Temporarily taking this single (*tanki*) wait gives us a path to *honitsu* if we draw any *souzu* or honor tiles.



My Mahjong, My Life

I first encountered mahjong when I was probably around eight years old, and it was a family thing.

I say probably, because my family must have also been playing before that, but I have no memory of it at all.

Maybe I actually saw it even earlier.

My family home is in the countryside of Nagano, and since it was basically the hub for my father's family, there were a lot of Uchikawa relatives all around me.

We had so many relatives in the area, that I didn't fully understand what that hub was until I moved up to junior high.

My family in my home included my grandfather, grandmother, father, mother, younger brother and younger sister. I am the eldest son of three children.

My father is also the eldest son among three siblings, so I had many cousins, but I was the oldest among them.

During the Obon and New Year holidays, the grown-ups would all gather and we naturally had enough for a small tournament.

The first thing I learned was *chiitoitsu* (seven pairs).

I don't clearly remember what attracted me to mahjong, but I do remember being captivated while watching the adults play.

I started to enjoy it properly as a high school student.

Although I went to one of the two top schools in the prefecture, I spent my days immersed in soccer and hanging out with friends, and mahjong was just part of that.

I had so much fun in high school that I wasn't prepared for the university entrance exam, so I had to take an extra year (known as 'ronin' in Japanese).

During my ronin life, I hardly went to prep school, and instead spent my mornings playing pachi-slot, then ended up in the mahjong parlors, almost as an inevitability.

There was even a funny incident where I played mahjong against one of my prep school instructors at a mahjong parlor.

In the end, due to changes in my family environment, I ended up not going to university and started working instead.

I was told by a parlor owner whom I was close to that they had to close, so I ended up taking it over and managing it instead of letting it close.

By that time, I had made many mahjong friends, and although it was rough, we managed and created our own place of belonging.

While all of this was happening, I saw an announcement for a mahjong tournament in Kindai Mahjong. It was the Nagano amateur qualifier for the Saikyosen tournament.

I had a lucky day and advanced to the national tournament held at the “Silver" venue in Yokohama.

I think this was about the time that my desire to test my mahjong skills grew significantly.

After that, I participated in Yuko Ito's (Vice-President of JPML) "Otoko-juku" sessions when he came to hold them in nearby Nagoya.

That was when I decided to take the pro test for the Japan Professional Mahjong League.

When I started, I wasn't super serious. I mostly wanted to test my abilities and I thought the qualification would help me run the parlor.

At that time, the professional test was overseen by Yudai Maehara, Naoki Setokuma, Takaharu Ooi, and Kazunori Takizawa, and I was assigned to Setokuma's group.

I passed smoothly, and for the next two years, I continued to travel from Matsumoto City in Nagano Prefecture to Tokyo for pro league and title matches.

During this time in my life, I played mahjong every day.

I played mahjong for 364 out of 365 days a year.

From Monday to Friday, I played at our parlor, then took the last train to Tokyo on Friday night to spend the weekend in pro league matches, study sessions, and title matches before going back to Nagano on the first train Monday morning to get back to work.

During those first two years of being immersed in mahjong, my feelings started to change. Seeing Naoki Setokuma and Kazunori Takizawa, I started to think that I wanted to be like them.

And the person who influenced me the most, passed the test at the same time as me, Hisato Sasaki.

His strength and popularity were already well-established when he joined and while I had heard of him, we existed on different planes. Fortunately, I got good results and was able to move up to B2 League, which made me want to really focus on pro activities, so I made the move to Tokyo.

While working in JPML tournament management, teaching mahjong classes, and running the dojo, I devoted myself to honing my competitive mahjong skills every day.

But after moving to Tokyo, I struggled to achieve the results I desired.

I was in the B league for a total of seven years.

I was eliminated multiple times in the qualifiers for various media tournaments.

It wasn't that I was overwhelmed by life in any way, but there was a certain sense of dissatisfaction with my situation after moving all the way to Tokyo. Simply put, my mahjong skills had not

caught up with my ambition.

The turning point was when I reached the finals of the OUI tournament and was just one match away from victory! But I missed that massive chance.

At that time, I did not understand what I was lacking or how I could have won, but over time, I became acutely aware of my emotional weaknesses.

Exactly ten years into my pro career, when I failed to promote from the A2 league for two consecutive years, I thought I was not suited for mahjong and considered quitting.

I have always had a personality that doesn't face competition well.

I believe that everyone would be happy if we could just live in peace.

However, that's not an easy ask.

I was not anywhere near competitive enough to try and make it in the world of professional mahjong.

I decided to throw out my emotions and put myself on the line. I learned gradually from many losses that competition is always a desperate endeavor, and this helped me improve little by little.

I believe the biggest turning point was the "National Championship of Professional Mahjong Organizations."

It was the first competitive match among the four major organizations (at the time), and it was truly a team battle where I could carry the banner of my organization.

The JPML team was mainly composed of young, up-and-coming players, but there were also some seasoned players. Our team included: Satoshi Fujisaki, Naoki Setokuma, Naoya Maeda, Hisato Sasaki, Masatoshi Sarukawa, Kenji Katsumata, and Sho Shiratori.

Mahjong is an individual sport, but representing this team and organization, I felt several times more pressure than usual.

Fighting while carrying some sort of weight can be a burden, but it can also serve as a great source of strength.

That weight could be a title for a title holder, or it could be the fans who support you.

For me, this competitive match became a wonderful experience of fighting on behalf of my many colleagues, and gave me a sense of belonging in the organization.

After that, I was able to advance to final tables in title matches, such as the A1 league Hououi title match and the Grand Prix finals. I was also able to gain experience in serious competitions with a select few from other organizations, such as RTD.

Those experiences became part of me, and I finally managed to win the 10-tier Tournament in its 35th edition.

What changed to allow me to start winning in so many places? Sometimes I think back on it.

Technically I have improved a bit, but I believe the biggest change is that I have become better at identifying critical moments and have a solid understanding that the

outcome of a match is uncertain until the very end.

M.LEAGUE was established last year.

In M.LEAGUE's first-year draft, I was not selected, and I felt envious watching familiar faces perform on that stage right in front of me. They were all shining stars.

Rather than feeling regret for not being chosen, I was happy that such a wonderful stage had been created. I sincerely thought that I would strive to get a spot to compete there the next year.

With good timing, I was able to align luck on my side, leading to good results such as the 10-tier Tournament win and a runner-up finish in RTD.

As a result, I received an offer for a first pick from KADOKAWA Sakura Knights, for which I am extremely grateful.

Looking back, it all happened in the blink of an eye.

I have not achieved anything yet in M.LEAGUE, and even if I work hard from now on, I think it will take time to accomplish anything.

I want to continue walking this path of a professional mahjong player one step at a time without wavering.

Chapter 5
Plays for Tanyao

Essential Play 27

Defense is high-difficulty

The lines of play for *tanyao* (inside hand/all simples) are quite similar to the lines of play for riichi and pinfu, but the major difference is that *tanyao* has the option to call.

There is a mahjong proverb that says 'mahjong begins and ends with pinfu,' but given the current rules where calling is not allowed for pinfu, but is allowed for *tanyao*, these days it seems more accurate to say 'mahjong begins and ends with *tanyao*.'

I think the lines of play for riichi are unavoidable since riichi lines are used particularly when no other yaku can be formed, but it's better not to focus too much on plays for pinfu. Pinfu has so many restrictions, it is difficult to build, only offers 1-han, and is also limited to closed hands.

In contrast, *tanyao* offers a high degree of freedom. To win with only number tiles from 2 to 8 essentially means to use the most versatile mahjong tiles, which naturally means they have a higher appearance frequency.

Furthermore you can also call without it affecting the yaku, so if you had three dora, you could happily pon or chi to make a mangan. From the defensive side, it is possible to call only with a *tanyao* and disrupt a big hand is opponent is going for.

Therefore, when you have a hand you need to win, look at your starting hand and if it looks like you can choose between riichi, pinfu or *tanyao*, you should go for *tanyao* without hesitation.

However, outside of situations where you need to make sure to win the hand, *tanyao* is not recommended.

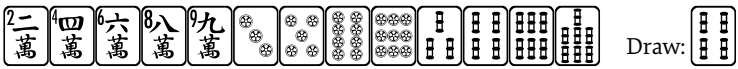
This is because *tanyao* is weak when you need to switch to defense.

Creating a hand using only number tiles from 2 to 8 gives you flexibility, but it also means you have to rush the board while holding onto only tiles with low safety.

While *tanyao* is strong offensively, its defensive power is significantly weaker.

With that in mind, let's look at the following hand. As with the other examples, this is a very typical starting hand and includes the first draw. So, what is the discard?

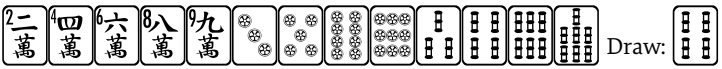
East 1, South Seat, Turn 1 Dora



Essential Play 28

Hidden floaters

East 1, South Seat, Turn 1 Dora



Answer: Discard

Here, we'll return to the basics of discard order, but if we focus solely on advancing the hand without considering defense, the order of how unnecessary each tile is becomes the following:

1: Isolated honor tiles
2: Isolated terminals
3: Isolated 2/8 tiles
4: Isolated number tiles from 3 to 7
5: Side waits (*penchan*)
6: Middle waits (*kanchan*)
7: Two-sided waits (*ryanmen*)

This hand does not contain any honor tiles. Also, there are no isolated terminals, but can you recognize any tiles that should basically be treated as isolated?

The most isolated is .

There is one terminal, , but since it's in a partial sequence with , it doesn't count as being isolated.

 is also part of a side wait sequence, but since that block is actually , discarding maintains the middle wait partial sequence that accepts .

It's true that if we draw both and , you can make two blocks with , but that is only if we conveniently draw both, and even if we were to draw right now after discarding , I wouldn't consider that a significant loss.

Of course, if there are any purely isolated tiles, they should go first, but the discard that allows for minimum loss in this hand is .

Next we drew , and since we had already taken care of all the isolated tiles, we could move on to discarding the side wait. After that, the hand formed the shape below. What should be discarded here?

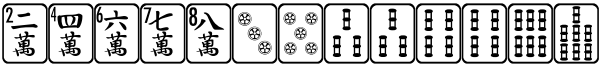
East-1, South Seat, Turn 5, Dora

Draw:

Essential Play 29

Comparing middle waits

East-1, South Seat, Turn 5, Dora

 Draw:

Answer: Discard

On turn 2 we drew and discarded , on turn 3 we drew and discarded and finally on turn 4 we drew and discarded . Now, on turn 5 we've drawn to complete two blocks.

The remaining block options are:

There are two sets of two-sided waits with , but basic strategy calls to cut the middle waits first.

However, there are two sets of middle waits, right? Don't

just flip for it. There is a proper order of priority.

If you think about why we take care of side waits before middle waits, then you'll arrive at the answer easily.

To change an side wait to a two-sided wait requires drawing two more tiles: and . But, a middle wait can be upgraded to two-sided with just one draw.

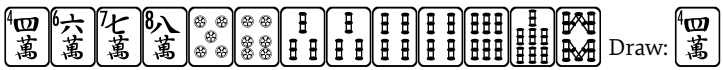
For example, only needs to draw a to upgrade, and from , both and upgrade the wait.

Now you know the answer.

In the hand above, we have and , but the only draw that would give us a two-sided wait in *manzu* (characters) is . However, in *pinzu* (dots) and both upgrade the hand, so the best partial sequence to drop here is . If we just discard for now, we can upgrade to three-sided (*sanmencha*n) with a draw, so let's start with cutting .

Then, after drawing and discarding we have the hand below. What would you discard?

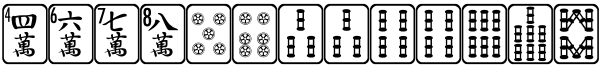
East-1, South Seat, Turn 7, Dora



Essential Play 30

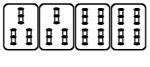
Reject overlapping two-sided waits

East-1, South Seat, Turn 7, Dora



Draw:

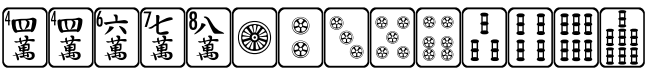
Answer: Discard

Next we need to compare two-sided partial sequences with each other. The  shape can take a draw, leaving a wait again. In other words, if we discard , the only proper two-sided wait we'll be left with is , twice.

Conversely, if we discard , we will be able to tenpai with either or .

Indeed, if we keep the *souzu* (bamboos), there is a possibility of getting tenpai with *iipeiko* (twin sequences/pure double sequences), but the probability of achieving tenpai itself is significantly better by discarding .

So, what about this hand?

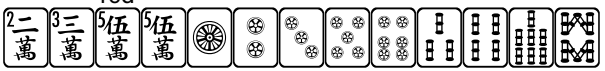


In this case, the *souzu* part has another overlapping wait. Since the wait is overlapping, if you discard or , it will be a wider 1-away shape. This is a better shape than the previous discard, but it is still referred to as an overlapping wait. If the *manzu* turn into 5-6-7, there is also a possibility of a *sanshoku* (mixed sequences/mixed triple sequences) so let's discard .

Look at the next hand. What do you think is best to discard here?

East-2, South Seat, Turn 11, Dora

red

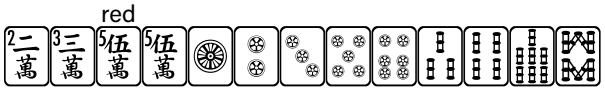


Draw:

Essential Play 31

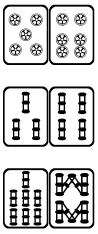
Dealing with backfires

East-2, South Seat, Turn 11, Dora



Answer: Discard

This hand we're comparing two-sided waits that are not overlapping:



We have to drop one of the three two-sided waits listed above, and the correct answer here is to drop .

This is because if the backfire comes, we can discard and aim for *tanyao* with *sanshoku*.

In comparison between two-sided partial sequences,

---

1 Backfire: a term used when a tile is drawn after one or more of the tiles that would have accepted it, have been discarded

when there are no overlapping waits, let's get into the habit of checking if any backfire tiles can be recycled.

Of course, in actual games, the situation on the board is important as well. For example, if the *pinzu* are in very low demand and discarded all over the board, but the *souzu* are in high demand and not coming out, dropping is a decent option.

But remember, if you get too caught up with the board situation, you may keep yourself from playing normally, so just use this as a foundation of things to be aware of. While we'll keep this in mind, we will still discard a different tile this time.

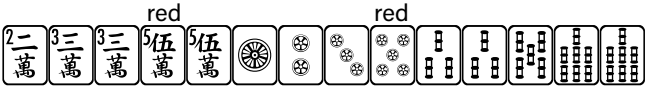
Note that the reason we're not starting with is to leave acceptance for drawing red .

Now, let's add the possibility of a quick, open *tanyao*.

Please look at the following hand.

The dora indicator was discarded from the player to our left. What should we do?

East-1, Dealer, Turn 7, Dora

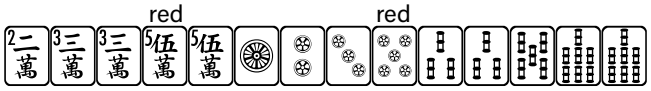


is discarded

Essential Play 32

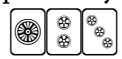
Throw away blocks for speed

East-1, Dealer, Turn 7, Dora



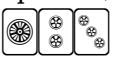
comes out

Answer: Chi the middle and discard

If you are at least an intermediate player, you'll probably call the chi immediately, but if you fixate on the  being a finalized block, you might overlook this play.

This hand is somewhat put together and if it goes well it could become pinfu, but the red dora is floating.

If we draw or , we will end up with too many block candidates, so we'll have to drop something useful no matter what. Considering that, this hand really doesn't have the benefit of speed.

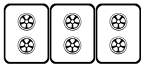
If we want to win quickly, the options are to drop dora, or call the middle to drop and replace the  sequence with the red block.

This not only increases the hand score, but also allows for moves like pon and chi, which increase the speed.

Since we are the dealer in this scenario, I think most people would make the call, but it is a recommended call, even as a non-dealer.

Now, please take a look at the following hand. What would be the correct discard here?

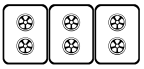
East-2, South Seat, Turn 7, Dora

Pon:  Draw:

Essential Play 33

Forget about iipeiko and call

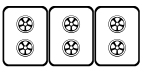
East-2, South Seat, Turn 7, Dora

Pon:  Draw:

Answer: Discard

If this was a closed hand, discarding would create a high-scoring *iipeiko* shape, so some people might instinctively discard it. However, the correct discard is .

If we discard , we will get the shape below if we draw next.

Pon:  Draw:

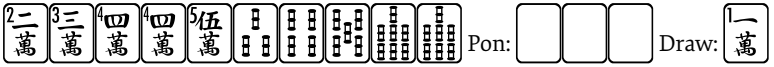
That's right, if we discard , it has the potential to change to a three-sided wait.

When calling, remember to intentionally break the *iipeiko* shape.

However, in the following shape, it makes no difference what is discarded after the call:

Pon:

If we discard 5萬 from this hand and then draw 1萬, it will only result in the following shape:



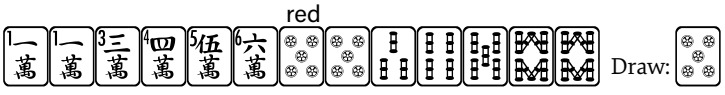
Even if we discard 4萬, we'll only get the same 3萬 6萬 acceptance, so cases where discarding 2/8 or terminals leaves us with an *iipeiko* shape are exceptions.

Since there won't be wide acceptance either way, cut the outside tiles with consideration for their level of safety. In this hand, playing 2萬 is typical strategy.

Incidentally, breaking up the *iipeiko* from this shape is effective even for a closed hand. For example, if you're in a position in South-4 where any win will put you in first place and the score doesn't matter, then it's better to ignore the *iipeiko* and keep the possibility of expanding to a three-sided wait.

Now we'll move on to a different hand. We can take tenpai, but what should we discard to do it?

East-3, South Seat, Turn 4, Dora 北

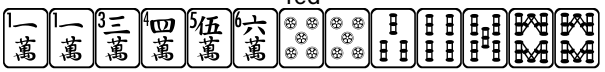


Essential Play 34

Dama to break up bad shapes

East-3, South Seat, Turn 4, Dora

red

 Draw:

Answer: Discard

Of course, it is perfectly fine to declare a riichi by discarding or . This is because it is a dora-3 tenpai without any yaku, so you cannot win unless you declare riichi. That's undeniable.

However, it may be difficult to determine whether a two-pair (*shanpon*) or middle wait is better at such an early turn. Additionally, if we discard and draw something like , we will have a good shape, and it will also form a *tanyao*. If we consider the possibility of whiffing on an immediate riichi, waiting for some improvements instead of declaring a riichi right away sounds very appealing.

If we insta-riichi here, is the two-pair wait better? In response to an early riichi, players often have few safe tiles, so they might discard for us. However, if that does not happen, the best outcome would be an exhaustive draw, and

the worst outcome would be us dealing into a chasing riichi.

Taking the above into account, I recommend a dama wait discarding 1萬. I believe this would be considered basic strategy. I promise it's normal.

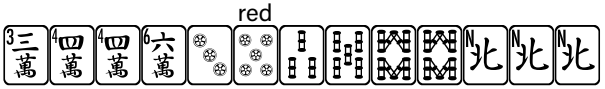
Of course, as I mentioned earlier, this is based on the expectation of a good shape with *manzu* and a transition to *tanyao*, but that's not all. If the player to our left discards 2萬5萬 or 4萬7萬, then we can chi.

With a 2萬5萬 chi, we can discard 1萬 and wait for 4萬7萬. With a 4萬7萬 chi we will wait for 2萬5萬. This hand is still mangan with *tanyao* and dora-3.

Since the assumption here was to break up what we have to extend to better shapes (*kuinobashi*), I think discarding 1萬 and keeping it dama is advantageous here. If there is no transition to a quick open *tanyao*, then insta-riichi is more advantageous.

So, what about the hand below? Should you call a tile discarded from the player on your left or let it go? If you call, how should you do it? Think about it for a minute.

East-3, South Seat, Turn 4, Dora



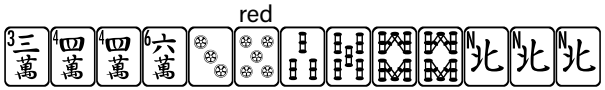
5伍萬 is discarded

Essential Play 35

Drop a concealed triplet

East-3, South Seat, Turn 4, Dora

red



comes out

Answer: Chi the middle and discard

While cases where every one of these conditions are met are rare, this is a play that you will not regret learning.

Chi the middle that came out, and drop the triplet of .

You may feel it is a waste to drop an entire triplet, but this hand has many middle waits so it will be hard to get to tenpai with a closed hand. Moreover, since it's a mangan hand, if the or comes out it will get us closer to winning too, not just the .

The only difficult decision is whether or not to call , and I think either way is fine, until the third shows up, and then we should definitely call.

Chapter 6
Plays for Irregular Hands

Essential Play 36

When you can't make a hand

A winning hand in mahjong requires four completed blocks and one pair. While this is the basic for any winning hand, *chiitoitsu* (seven pairs), and *kokushimuso* (13 orphans) are exceptions.

Chitoitsu is nothing but making pairs, while *kokushimuso* is a hand with all isolated honors and terminal tiles.

In this chapter, we will introduce lines of play for these irregular hands.

The other yaku that become realistic aims when going for these irregular hands, end up being outside hands like *chanta* (common ends/half outside hand) and *junchan* (pure ends/pure outside hand) so we include them in the 'irregular hands' category.

When it comes to winning a hand, *chanta*, *chiitoitsu*, and *kokushimuso* are completely different categories of hands, but the process is similar in parts, especially in balance at the early-game.

Furthermore, due to the similarities in the impression of the discards when aiming for these hands, and the fact that they are hands you aim for without really expecting a good outcome, they end up placing a strong emphasis on defense so it makes sense to classify *chanta* and *junchan* as irregular

hands.

Additionally, while *sananko* (three concealed triplets) and *suanko* (four concealed triplets) are not irregular hands, they sometimes happen and win as extensions of the play lines for irregular hands.

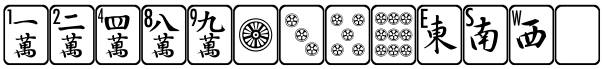
We mainly aim for unconventional hands when we have poor starting hands. If you go in the typical order of taking care of honors and then floaters with a starting hand that seems like it will be slow to tenpai, you may be stuck with a hand full of dangerous tiles and still 3-away from tenpai, while the opponent is already tenpai.

The idea is to avoid that situation and be intentional about building an expensive hand since it is going to be slow anyways.

For these irregular hands, you start by discarding the dangerous middle tiles, and holding on to the relatively safer honors and terminals to use in your own hand.

Let's get into it a bit deeper. How should we play with this sort of starting hand?

East 1, South Seat, Turn 1 Dora

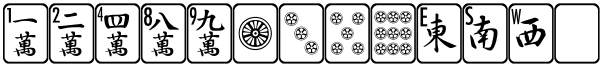


Draw:

Essential Play 37

Not pursuing efficiency

East 1, South Seat, Turn 1 Dora

 Draw:

Answer: Discard

We've started the hand with 8 types of terminals and honor tiles. If we had just one more type, the 'Nine Different Terminals' rule might apply, but lately tournament rules no longer allow for abortive draws liken nine different terminals, four same winds, triple ron, four kans, and four riichis.

The trend is to keep the rules of mahjong simple and minimize exceptions, but make sure to check the rules whenever playing with a new group.

I digress, but of course you would want to redeal this hand if playing in a rule set allowing abortive draws. Even so, we only have 8 types so we're forced to play it no matter which rules we're playing.

If we treated this as a normal meld hand, we would start by cutting the isolated honor tile or , but even if we play that way, it looks like a low-scoring hand.

If the dora [ ] pairs up, there is a slight glimmer of hope, but since we're dealing with red dora rules, even a pair of dora isn't really enough here.

Therefore, let's cut [●] straight away and hedge *chanta*, *junchan*, *honitsu* (common flush/half flush), *chinitsu* (perfect flush/full flush), *kokushimuso*, and *chiitoitsu*.

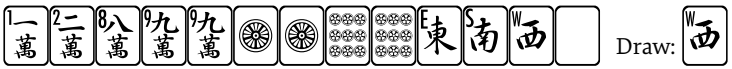
After this, we drew [●] and discarded [●]. Next, we drew [●●●] and discarded [4四萬]. This is because while the *manzu* (character) *honitsu* was a distant possibility at first, it's not even realistic at this point. Since we have two pairs in the *pinzu* (dots), it would be excessive to discard all four of them for a *manzu honitsu*.

Therefore, we will focus on *chiitoitsu*, *kokushimuso*, *chanta*, and *junchan* and discard [4四萬].

The next tile we draw is [W西] to make the shape laid out below.

Now, what would be the best way to play this? Make sure to think of the reasons too.

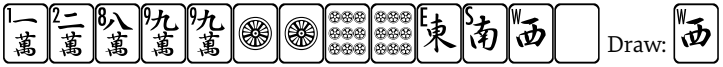
East-1, South Seat, Turn 4, Dora [ ]



Essential Play 38

Folding lines for chiitoitsu

East-1, South Seat, Turn 4, Dora



Answer: Discard

This gives in four pairs. In other words, we are now only 2-away from a *chiitoitsu* tenpai.

Chitoitsu is seven pairs for a win, so tenpai is six pairs. 1-away is five pairs and 2-away is four pairs.

With only three pairs, it is indeed early to consider *chiitoitsu*, but once you have four pairs, you should be in the habit of thinking, "This hand is 2-away from a *chiitoitsu* tenpai." Depending on the hand shape, there may be cases where *chiitoitsu* is the fastest option at that point.

Besides the four pairs, this hand also has only two partial blocks with side (*penchan*) waits and the rest of the tiles are isolated honor tiles. It is clear that *chiitoitsu* seems faster than a normal 4-block/pair hand.

So we'll set on chiitoitsu here. I set the answer to to hedge the possibility of *kokushimuso*, but if is a clear safe

tile for an opponent, then it's better to hold onto it. If are in our opponents' discards, then we should give up on *kokushimuso* here and discard . In short, let's play in a way that preserves tiles that are safe to our opponents for now.

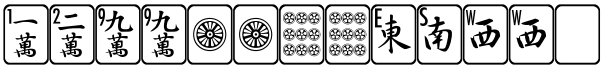
The reason is that this *chiitoitsu* serves as a strong safety buffer.

Think back to the way this hand started. Didn't you see it and think, "What a mess..."? However, as we got more and more pairs, it started to feel like maybe we could actually win the hand, right? But how much would the hand be worth if we did win with it? It would be great if the dora pairs up, but if it doesn't, we have nothing but seven pairs. Of course, we could declare riichi waiting for a single dora, and drawing it would give us haneman. But that hand is much weaker when playing mahjong with red dora than when playing without it, and it's a lot more risky.

Unless you really need to win this hand, then let's prioritize later safety as much as possible.

Except next, that dora really does pair up. You know what to do now, right?

East-1, South Seat, Turn 5, Dora



Essential Play 39

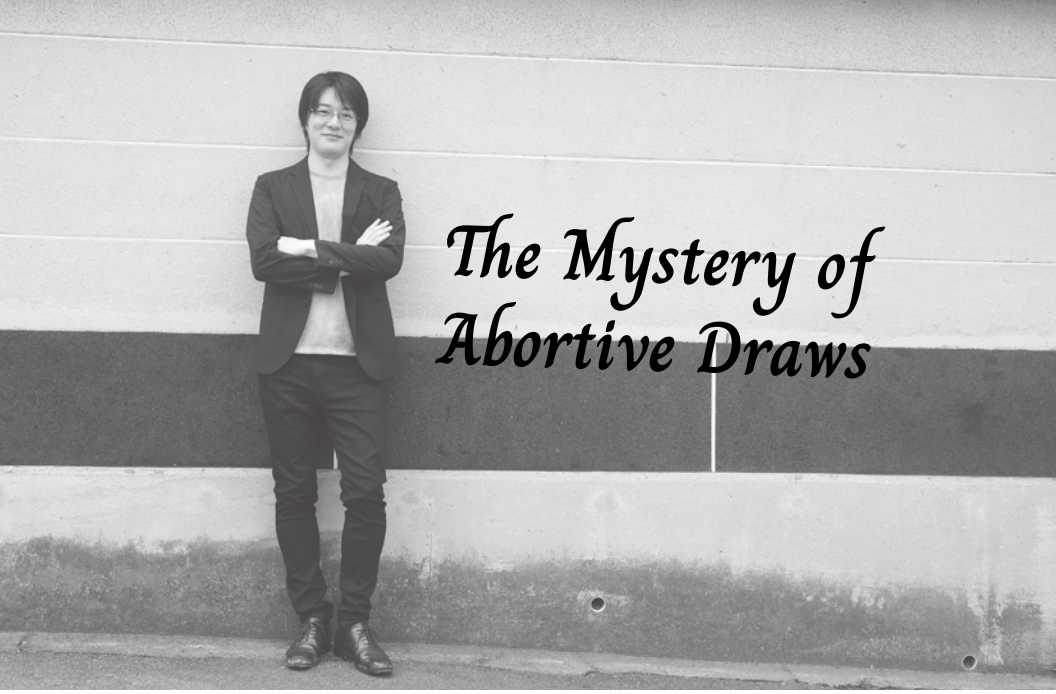
Aggressive lines for chiitoitsu

East-1, South Seat, Turn 5, Dora

Answer: Discard the tiles that are on the board already

Apologies for the abstract answer, but it is difficult to decide what to discard in *chiitoitsu* hands just based on our hand alone. This is because it's always a choice between either keeping tiles that look like they could pair up, or keeping tiles that will be safe to your opponents. The exception is when you have a line of play that allows balance between pairs and sequences, but that doesn't happen in most cases. Here, *chiitoitsu* is our only choice for the hand, so our discards will depend on the board conditions. Now that dora has paired up, we can forget about using this hand as a safety cushion and shift into high-gear instead. The dora pair has turned this *chiitoitsu* into an offense hand, and we can forget about defensive strategy for the time being.

For example, if two have been discarded, discard your too. Instead of worrying about keeping opponents' discards and safe tiles, just get rid of the tiles that are unlikely to pair up.



The Mystery of Abortive Draws

We touched on the topic of abortive draws in Chapter 6, and as a mahjong instructor, I have studied the topic a bit. Why do the abortive draws even exist?

Since mahjong is not generally studied extensively as an academic subject, there are not a lot of reliable references to its history, but I can share explanations that are considered to be established theories.

The nine different terminals rule likely exists because having a completely scattered hand is too disadvantageous, so it gives the player a chance to try again. This is a reasonable theory to most people. Indeed, that may be the case.

Additionally, the triple ron abortive draw seems to exist because it is considered inauspicious to pay out to three players simultaneously, or that the loss is too significant

and harsh on that one player.

Calling a draw for four-players in riichi is probably because someone said they didn't want to play out the hand as a coin flip. Since the original Chinese rules didn't have riichi, this abortive draw likely originated in Japan.

The four kan abortive draw is also likely of Japanese origin. After four kans, the kan replacement tiles run out due to the position of the dora indicator. It seems like a logical point for an abortive draw, but as dora is not used in Chinese rules, there's no limit to the number of kans allowed.

It almost seems like all abortive draws have originated in Japan, but there is one that is clearly of Chinese origin, and that is the four same winds on the first discard.

This one is puzzling even in Japan, because it has nothing to do with the game play. Why would we restart the hand when all players play the same wind as their first discard?

The prevailing theory is as follows.

Originally, the rule was that the game would only end in a draw if four tiles were discarded in the first turn.

In ancient China, West represented the direction of India, which was pronounced "Tianzhu" at the time. As the birthplace of Buddhism, it carried the image of being an inauspicious direction and deeply associated with fear and death.

The story goes that something bad could happen if the hand was continued after four inauspicious tiles were

discarded in a row right from the start.

This concept was relayed to Japan, where it was probably determined to be strange to apply the rule only to , so it was expanded to all wind tiles.

Of course, none of this is certain, but I thought it would be interesting as trivia, so I wrote a short essay on it.

Lately, many rule sets have started omitting abortive draws. None of them occur often and none of them enhance the integrity of the game. In fact, they have a higher potential to disrupt the balance of the game, so omitting all abortive draws is becoming more popular.

Incidentally, the Japan Professional Mahjong League (JPML), which is the organization I belong to, used abortive draws in their official competition rules until the 2023 season. As a professional organization for competitive mahjong, there is a perspective that rules with low rationality should be eliminated, but JPML kept them around for a long time.

Actually, about 20 years ago the discussion of amending the rules started in a board meeting. There was an opinion then that abortive draws should be abolished, but it wasn't implemented due to the opinion of the president at the time, Asataro Nada. He said, "While the competitiveness in mahjong is important, the history is also significant. Even if JPML is the only organization using this rule, as the oldest professional organization, it might be good for us to preserve it for future generations." Many board members agreed with him and the rules remained.

Indeed, if one were to seek only consistency, there is no shortage of strange rules in mahjong. For example, *chiitoitsu* (seven pairs) not rounding up from 25 to 30 fu or accepting pinfu with a tsumo even though the self-draw is supposed to add two fu and then counting it as 20 fu anyway, which is not proportional score-wise to the difficulty of pinfu. If all of these were changed, it might even be hard to still recognize the game as mahjong.

Of course, JPML always hopes for mahjong to be popular among the masses, so there is support for simplifying the rules for general players. For instance, in another rule set adopted by JPML, the World Riichi Championship (WRC) Rules, *ippatsu* (unbroken) and ura-dora (hidden dora) are included, but abortive draws are not.

On the other hand, JPML competition rules are carried over from over 50 years ago, when *ippatsu* and ura-dora weren't used. The JPML competition rules are considered to be professional rules, and the organization has no intention of promoting them to the general public.

The first title I won—the 10-tier Tournament—and JPML's professional league—the Hououi—use the competition rules without *ippatsu* or ura-dora, and it is possible that the redeal from the nine different terminals greatly affected the outcome.

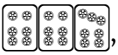
As professional mahjong players, we are well aware of the luck that affects the outcome of our competition, and we are also prepared to accept the outcomes as a result of that.

Chapter 7
Memorize Plays by Shape

Essential Play 40

Play in patterns

Up to this point in the book, I've explained lines of play according to yaku that seem achievable from dealt hands, but for the following chapters, I will focus on the shapes of the hands rather than the yaku. Mahjong involves the repeated act of considering the balance of score and speed, then discarding a tile, and in actual games it's not realistic to count and recount the tile acceptance count with each discard.

If I'm always thinking, "Since it's a two-sided shape, it accepts eight tiles, if two of those are already discarded, that leaves six, but since I have , I can accept for a concealed triple, so that's eight useful tiles...but if I discard this instead then..." it could take 10 to 20 seconds just to make a single discard and this would be inconsiderate to my opponents. When someone is thinking that long every turn, their opponents will start to think, "Please get on with it." There is not always a time limit for thinking in mahjong, but that doesn't mean players can spend an unreasonable amount of time thinking. Of course, if beginners are practicing against each other, it might be acceptable for all the players to think for about 30 seconds each turn, but for a competent player, it's more common to spend no more than 3 to 4 seconds for a normal turn and occasionally take several more seconds

to think, but only in difficult situations. In these cases, it is polite to inform the other players that you're going to take some time with a casual apology.

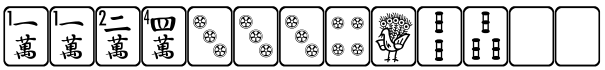
Does that mean that intermediate players are overwhelmingly smarter than beginners? Not necessarily. In essence, this is about familiarity. It is also because they play their hands by shape to some extent.

Before thinking about how many tiles have been discarded and how many their hand accepts, they have memorized certain patterns in their core memories so that they can almost instantly recognize certain shapes and how to play them. On top of that, if many of the same tiles have been discarded, all they need to do is double check before committing to a shape that uses them. With this, thoughts can be organized while the opponents are taking their turns, and there is no need to spend a long time thinking during their own turn.

I will not introduce all the shapes in this chapter, but I have gathered those that are often encountered in actual play and are useful to remember, so make sure to go over them multiple times and commit them to your core memory.

Let's get right into the first example. What should be discarded in the following shape that can be categorized as memorizing lines of play by shape?

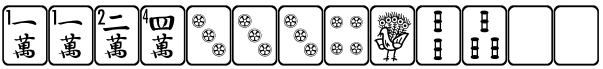
East-1, South Seat, Turn 4, Dora



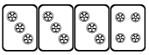
Essential Play 41

Concealed triples are not sticky

East-1, South Seat, Turn 4, Dora



Answer: Discard

The  shape combines a two-sided wait with and a single (*tanki*) wait of , making it a very good shape to wait on. This is called an irregular three-sided (*sanmenchan*) wait, and if you declare a riichi with this shape, it feels easy to win with.

However, that's only true if it remains the final shape that you wait on, and it's iffy in the mid-game stages.

In this hand there doesn't seem to be any way that will be the final shape.

If the middle comes, we'll end up with a two-pair (*shapon*) wait for and , and even if we pon , we'll end up with the middle wait. The only real possibility would be if we intentionally discard , then draw the backfire , discard , then pon and finally discard , leaving the coveted irregular three-sided wait.

But if we take that line, what in the world are we even doing? Truly, this is no longer a necessary tile.

Considering we already have three , which is one of the tiles we would normally want to stick to , the growth potential for this part of the hand is limited.

Therefore, it is best to discard to smoothly get to tenpai. If either or stick to the dora indicator , it will form a two-sided (*ryanmen*) shape, expanding the hand. It is definitely better to take this approach.

So memorize this: If we already have two or more pairs, tiles next to concealed triples are unnecessary. The same applies when we want to connect tiles to floaters to form shapes. If there are no other obvious tiles to discard, choose the tile next to a concealed triple, and give up on the irregular three-sided wait.

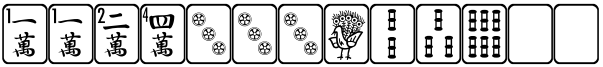
In the next turn, the dora has connected as planned. What should we discard?

East-1, South Seat, Turn 5, Dora

Essential Play 42

Middle waits stuck to pairs

East-1, South Seat, Turn 5, Dora

 Draw:

Answer: Discard

Since the dora is now connected to and a two-sided wait has been formed, it's natural to keep it.

The issue is that we have too many block candidates, so we need to decide which one to drop.

One of these three partial sequences will be cut, but first we will exclude . There is no reason to intentionally discard a tile that can form a yaku even when it is called.

Therefore, we need a pair that we can use in case we do pon or it triples up in the hand. That would be , and the

conclusion is that the redundant partial sequence becomes 2萬 4萬.

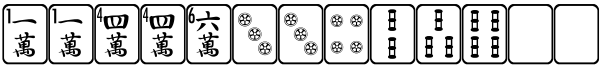
And that's where the problem arises. If we cut from the outside, in the order of 2萬 and then 4萬 like a typical middle (*kanchan*) wait-drop, it slows down our hand.

What if we cut 2萬 from 1萬 1萬 2萬 4萬 and then draw 3萬? We have to just discard it, right? But if we cut 4萬 first, we'd still have 1萬 1萬 2萬 3萬, allowing us to discard 1萬 for riichi and wait on 1索 4索.

For this pattern, remember that when you have two pairs with a middle wait connected to them, start by dropping the furthest from the pair. It is the same with tiles that aren't on the edge, like 5筒 6筒 7筒 8筒. The middle tiles include a two-sided wait, so it's even clearer that we need to start discarding from the further tile.

The following is a completely different hand, but what should we discard here?

East-2, South Seat, Turn 5, Dora

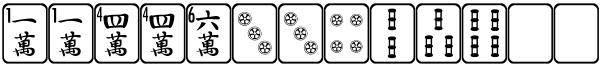


Draw:

Essential Play 43

Lock in two-sided over middle waits

East-2, South Seat, Turn 5, Dora



Draw:

Answer: Discard

First, what is currently the best wait in this hand? The answer is the two-sided wait. Since the shape is strong, we don't mind dropping and giving up on it becoming a triplet.

If or triple up, or if we can pon them, or if we can draw or chi , then we can tenpai with a wait. This is the ideal situation, right?

If we fill in the pinzu first, we will have to take either a two-pair wait for or a middle wait. These waits aren't preferable, but we can't choose if the *pinzu* (dots) will come first or not.

In this case, a middle dama tenpai would be the typical choice. Even with a dama tenpai, there is a possibility of a mangan, so it's standard to take the middle wait and hope for a two-sided upgrade by drawing or . However, if there

is a reason or insight that 1萬 is likely to come out, it is fine to wait on two-pair wait instead.

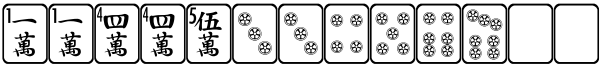
I have explained all the possible waits, but in actual play, you must choose this discard before you get to tenpai. Discard 4萬, 6萬, 8, or 9? 9 isn't an option because it turns an important two-sided shape into just a pair. That leaves three choices, and in this case you should decide on the shape you want to wait for. With this hand, let's lock in the two-sided shape by discarding 8.

If our ideal future tenpai is reached by cutting 8, then we can discard it right now. If the *manzu* (characters) fill in next, we can cut the extra *manzu* tile to end up in a two-sided wait tenpai, instead of trying to decide between the middle and two-pair wait.

Remember that at the 1-away from tenpai (*iishanten*) point, if you're in a situation to lock in a middle wait or a two-sided wait, lock in the two-sided.

Now, what would you discard in the following situation?

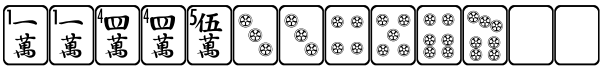
East-3, South Seat, Turn 5, Dora



Essential Play 44

Put off the weak, lock in the strong

East-3, South Seat, Turn 5, Dora

 Draw:

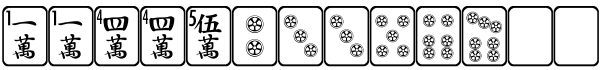
Answer: Discard

This hand is quite similar to the previous one, but now the comparison is between the two-sided wait and the three-sided wait.

Following the same logic, lock in the three-sided wait here. The idea is to keep more helper tiles for your weak shapes, and lock in the already-strong shapes.

If you were to apply this to humans, those of us who are a bit clumsy or inexperienced need support and leeway, but it is acceptable to be somewhat stricter with independent and competent individuals. Of course, it's best to provide ample support to both, but the closer you get to tenpai, the more 'support tiles' you must cut, reducing your hand's acceptance.

How about this hand?

 Draw:

This is a comparison of two-sided waits, and the acceptance count is the same for both options.

So, should you just pick the one you like better? No. The truth is that there are clear differences in these shapes.

If there is no particular reason based on the board state to suggest otherwise, discarding is the correct answer for this hand.

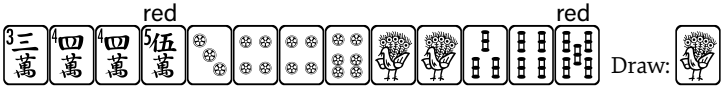
When everyone is forming their hand, the first tiles they drop are honor tiles, followed by terminals, then 2/8 tiles, and finally the tiles 3 to 7, right? Doesn't this mean that we can say that will be discarded easier than will?

Based on these reasons, even when choosing a two-sided wait, it's better to wait closer to the edge.

This is a comparison between two-sided shapes, and the first thing we should do is decide that is the better two-sided wait.

So, what would be the correct cut here?

East-4, South Seat, Turn 5, Dora

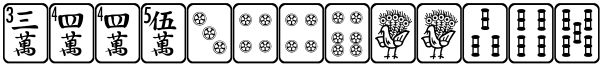


Essential Play 45

Keep tiles further from pairs

East-4, South Seat, Turn 5, Dora

red red

 Draw:

Answer: Discard

Since we not only have a triplet of the dora, but also two red dora, we want to do anything to win this hand. However, it's not a hand we can win by calling, so we need to focus on speed of this closed hand when choosing what to discard.

Looking at the shape alone, it seems that we would naturally consider . Discarding with the reasoning that we could draw , or that the *manzu* could grow wider, actually really reduces our acceptance.

If we play here, there will be 10 types/33 tiles that get us to tenpai: .

The correct play is to discard , giving us acceptance of 10 types/33 tiles: .

Wait a tick? Wasn't the first option the exact same, 10 types/33 tiles for ? You're right.

The difference actually appears when we think about the final wait shape.

If we limit acceptable options to two-sided, discarding leaves us with 7 types/22 tiles: .

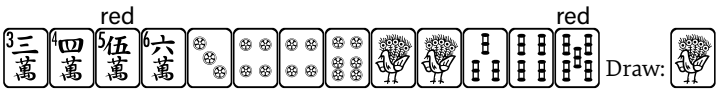
Playing results in 7 types/24 tiles: .

Although it is a difference of two tiles, that difference is big enough to determine an outcome in mahjong. This is an important pattern to learn.

It is good to remember: for a sticky 1-away shape, keep tiles further from pairs.

How about the following hand, which has a similar shape?

South-1, South Seat, Turn 5, Dora

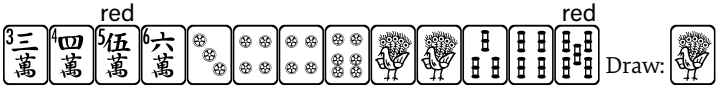


1 Sticky 1-away means you have floaters waiting for a connector

Essential Play 46

Keep connectors with a double edge

South-1, South Seat, Turn 5, Dora



Answer: Discard

The *manzu* only changed from the bulging (*nakabukure*) shape in the last hand to the four connectors (*4-renzokukei*) shape in this one, but even that 1-tile difference changes the answer.

If we discard , our acceptance is 13 types/45 tiles: .

Discarding gives acceptance of 13 types/45 tiles: .

This is the same thing again, but the difference becomes apparent when examining tiles that lead to at least a double-edge (*nobetan*) wait. Earlier, there was no possibility of this double-edge shape, but here we will take the double-edge waits into account as they correspond to two-sided waits.

With a discard, the acceptance is 7 types/24 tiles: .

With a discard, the acceptance is 9 types/30 tiles: .

There's an even bigger difference than before.

This is clearly because there are double-edge final shapes. Please memorize this clear difference between the bulging shapes and four connectors shapes.

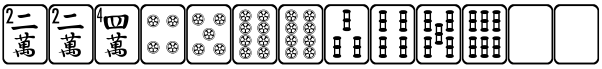
It is good to remember: for a double-edge shape, keep the pair+two-sided connectors.

I'm going to change the theme completely here.

Take a look at the following hand.

There are three candidates for the pair. How should we play a shape like this? If you take a straightforward approach, the answer will be obvious.

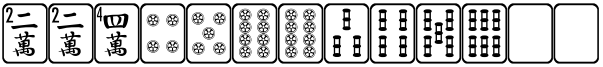
South-2, South Seat, Turn 5, Dora



Essential Play 47

Drop isolated pairs

South-2, South Seat, Turn 5, Dora



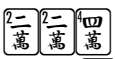
Draw:

Answer: Discard

Since it makes no sense to drop the two-sided or three-sided wait shapes in the *pinzu* or *souzu* (bamboos), if we exclude those, we are left with the options below:

Among these three, only is combined with a middle wait so that there are two types of acceptance.

The others are isolated pairs, so unless the third copy of that tile comes, they cannot be used as a complete group.

This means that the  shape is stronger, and it is clear that we should drop the or pair.

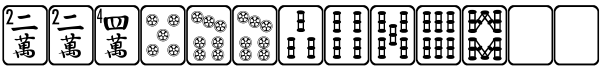
At this point, do you see that it's clear you should discard

? Since is a value honor tile, it is better to drop rather than going out of your way to toss out a potential 1-han set.

If you have too many blocks and end up with three pairs, remember to drop an isolated pair.

Now, although the shape is similar, think about how you should play differently with the following hand.

South-3, South Seat, Turn 5, Dora

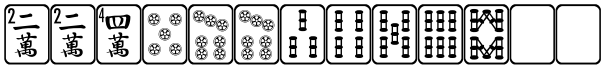


Draw:

Essential Play 48

1-away with three pairs

South-3, South Seat, Turn 5, Dora

 Draw:

Answer: Discard

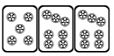
The significant difference from the previous hand is that now we are not over-blocked.

Since this hand is already 1-away from tenpai, there is a possibility that the next turn will get us to tenpai, so it would make no sense to drop an entire pair.

For example, if we were to drop the pair, the hand would no longer be 1-away from tenpai, so it's not an option.

The remaining discard candidates are .

Try to recall the theory: Put off the weak shapes to later and lock in strong shapes now.

Which is the stronger shape: or  ?

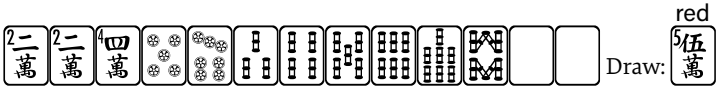
Since there is not much difference in the two-pair wait shapes, ignore them and compare the middle waits.

While doesn't upgrade to two-sided unless you draw

5萬, the 2萬3萬 shape can be upgraded with either a 2萬 or 4萬 draw. In other words, 2萬3萬4萬 can be considered the stronger shape.

Therefore, the correct move here is to discard 4萬 and lock in the middle 3萬 shape.

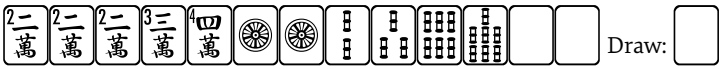
Even if you draw red 5萬 the next turn, you'll have the following shape:



In this case, there will be too many blocks again, so the typical play would be to drop the □ pair and aim for a riichi, *tanyao*, pinfu hand.

What about the next hand?

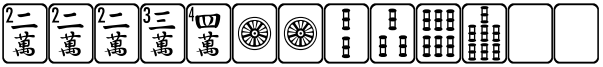
East-1, South Seat, Turn 4, Dora 9萬



Essential Play 49

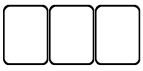
Keeping irregular 3-sided shapes

East-1, South Seat, Turn 4, Dora

 Draw:

Answer: Discard

has become a concealed triplet and the hand is now 1-away from tenpai. Let's start by dividing this hand into blocks.



The shape can be counted as two blocks since it can form a triplet and a two-sided wait, or a pair with a sequence. This results in us having 6 blocks.

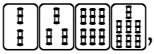
From here, we need to drop one block, but since the

triple is a completed block, it makes no sense to discard it.

There is also no need to drop any of the two-sided incomplete sequences. Thus, what remains is the pair of and the pair of , if we think about the *manzu* block as the pair+sequence.

Here it is advantageous to discard the isolated pair.

Currently, we are 1-away from tenpai and happy to complete either of the two-sided blocks, but there is no guarantee that tenpai will come so easily.

If in the midst of dropping the pair, we draw , or draw something like , there is a possibility of forming more pairs or triplets and the acceptance increases a ton.

Since these situations are not rare, we should drop the isolated pair here and hold onto the combo shape.

How should we play the next hand?

East-2, South Seat, Turn 4, Dora

Draw:

Essential Play 50

Watch for your final shape

East-2, South Seat, Turn 4, Dora

Draw:

Answer: Discard

We drew the perfect middle fill-in to get us to 1-away from tenpai.

There is a three-sided wait in the *manzu* and we have three block options. Therefore, we need to make another block and our pair somewhere in the remaining *pinzu* and *souzu*.

Currently, both have combo shapes with pairs stuck to two-sided waits but we need to decide on a pair that will give us the widest acceptance possible.

First, memorize that in a 1-away hand with a two-sided wait and two pairs, we need to lock in the pair. Locking in a two-sided shape first can result in really big losses.

Let's verify this.

Discarding = , accepts 2 types/8 tiles
Discarding = , accepts 2 types/8 tiles

Excluding the *manzu*, I can get to tenpai with the above tiles.

On the other hand, if we lock the pair in place, it will look like this.

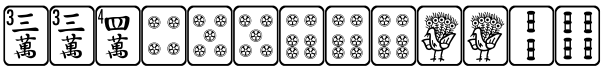
Discard = for 4 types/12 tiles
Discard = for 4 types/12 tile.

See? There are four more tiles that can get us to tenpai this way that we would lose out on if we locked in the two-sided shape first.

The issue here is which pair to lock in, and that's decided by which final wait we wouldn't want to have.

Recall the rule we just memorized, that waits on the edge are more likely to be discarded. In this hand, comparing and , we would prefer the final wait be closer to the edge, with . This means the discard is .

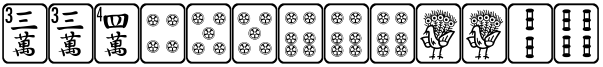
East-3, South Seat, Turn 4, Dora

 Draw:

Essential Play 51

Keep combos to the last second

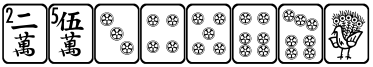
East-3, South Seat, Turn 4, Dora

 Draw:

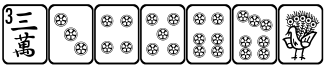
Answer: Discard

Based on the theories we've learned so far, we want to leave the weaker shapes alone and lock in the stronger shapes, so here, we would leave the *manzu* alone and lock in the strong *pinzu* shape. However, the *pinzu* shape is only strong because it is a combo shape, so if we lock it in here we will increase the potential loss and decrease our acceptance.

Acceptance when discarding :

 8 types/24 tiles

Acceptance when discarding :

 7 types/18 tiles

Acceptance when discarding :

6 types/17 tiles

Acceptance when discarding :

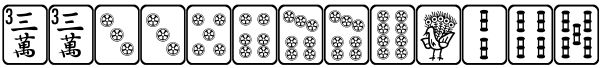
6 types/19 tiles

As you can see, discarding gives us the most tenpai chances, and cutting the *pinzu* will significantly reduce those chances.

Now you'll remember to keep combo shapes to the last second.

Moving along to a different theme, what should be discarded from the shape below?

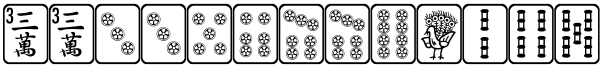
East-4, South Seat, Turn 4, Dora

 Draw:

Essential Play 52

Hidden double-middle waits

East-4, South Seat, Turn 4, Dora

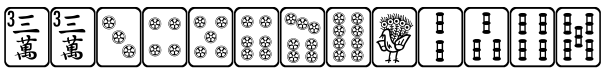
 Draw:

Answer: Discard

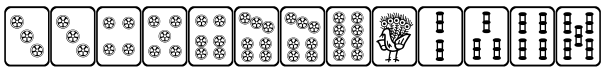
This is 1-away from tenpai for pinfu. Our obvious acceptance is and with two pair options: or . We have to decide which one to drop, and there is a pretty big difference between them.

In fact, this shape is a very famous "What Would You Discard" problem and the answer is .

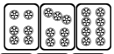
If we cut , we end up with the shape below, and we get a pinfu tenpai by drawing and discarding :

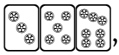


However, if we cut , we get a wider shape with the same draw, but not tenpai:



This is a variation of the so-called double-middle (*ryankan-chan*) wait shape.

Try taking the  part out of the *pinzu* section of the hand, leaving .

See how the double-middle wait stands out now? If you cut here, the shape shifts to , so even by playing after drawing , we can complete the sequence.

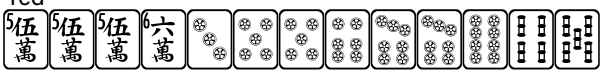
At first, you may need to think hard to remember shapes like this, but this is a very common shape in actual matches. Let's get into the habit of taking out the completed sequences when we have a two-sided combo shape with a completed sequence and a pair nearby.

In a recent Saikyosen match, someone referred to this as a "hidden double-middle wait" (*kakure-ryankan*). It is not an official mahjong term, but it's easy enough to remember, so I decided to make it the title of this play.

Now, how about the following shape?

South-1, South Seat, Turn 4, Dora

red

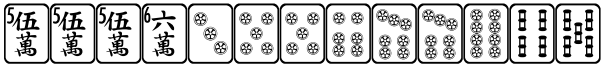


Essential Play 53

Lock in irregular 3-sided waits over double-middle waits

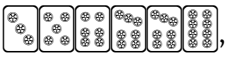
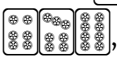
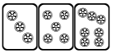
South-1, South Seat, Turn 4, Dora

red



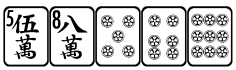
Draw:

Answer: Discard

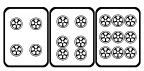
The shape in the *pinzu* is the same hidden double-middle wait as in the last section. If we cut , the shape is , and if we take out , we can clearly see the double-middle  shape.

However, the correct play here is actually to discard . This is because the *manzu* can turn into an irregular three-sided wait if we have a pair somewhere else.

Let's verify the acceptance here. We'll ignore the *souzu* since there are no differences there.

Discard = 

5 types/14 tiles

Discard =  3 types/11 tiles

You can see that there is a difference of three tiles between and discards in the acceptance count.

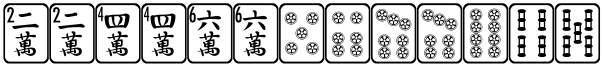
Even if there is a "hidden double-middle wait," remember to prioritize the irregular three-sided wait if you have one.

Time for a different hand.

This hand is also a well-known "What Would You Discard" shape, and there is a definitive answer for this shape.

Below, two sets are completed, and there is one two-sided block. Additionally, since the *manzu* section of the hand can become either a pair or a sequence, it's in a 1-away from tenpai state. What is the correct discard? Surely, it would not be reasonable to drop the two-sided block, so it will likely be one of the *manzu* tiles, but which one?

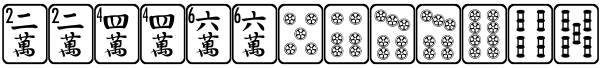
South-2, South Seat, Turn 4, Dora



Essential Play 54

Cut skipping pairs from the middle

South-2, South Seat, Turn 4, Dora

 Draw:

Answer: Discard

When there are three pairs that resemble a double-middle wait—that is, the pairs are in sequence but skip a number in between each one—basic strategy calls to discard from the middle pair.

Of course, if there are other tiles to discard first, that is a different matter, but in a situation like this hand where there are no excess tiles and we're in a 1-away state, the answer is to discard .

Let's count the acceptance here. We'll ignore the *pinzu* since there are no differences there.

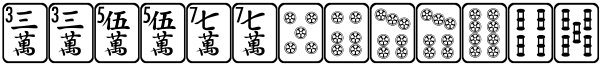
Discard = 3 types/8 tiles

Discard = 4 types/12 tiles

Discard = 3 types/8 tiles

In this way, cutting from the middle pair is better than cutting from the outer pair, as it allows us to accept four more tiles.

Even with the shape below, it would still be advisable to cut from 5萬.



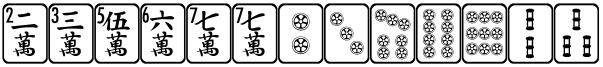
There may be other opinions on what to do if a red 5萬 comes, but I believe it is nonsensical to slow down so much for a tile whose arrival is uncertain. If that does happen, we can just put the red 5萬 in our hand, discard the normal 5萬, and if we happen to draw 3萬 or 7萬 next, we'll just have to let the red 5萬 go.

From our opponents' perspective, since it would look like we're discarding a triplet that includes a red 5萬 they may get super confused.

We'll now switch to a different theme. Let's get into pinfu shapes where the pair is not locked in.

First, please look at the following hand. What should be discarded from this shape?

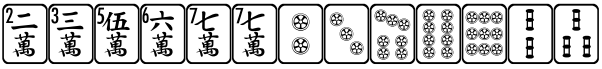
South-3, South Seat, Turn 6, Dora



Essential Play 55

Headless 1-away for pinfu

South-3, South Seat, Turn 6, Dora



Draw:

Answer: Discard

This shape seems to be an eternal theme for all mahjong players, and while the discussion has reached a conclusion, the truth is that advanced players still struggle with it in many matches.

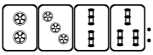
In this hand, if we only seek the number of tiles needed to reach tenpai, it is clear that is the best discard.

Discard = 8 types/28 tiles

Discard (or) = 4 types/16 tiles

This is clearly a significant difference. A 12-tile difference in a 1-away shape is massive and if we are only concerned with tenpai speed, then we should never lock in the pair from this shape.

However, tenpai is not the only significance here. There is more nuance if we think as far as actually winning the hand. If we play and limit ourselves to only the pinfu tenpai,

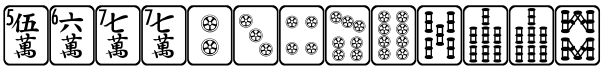
our acceptance will be : 12 tiles/4 types, which is only 4 tiles fewer than a or discard.

However, even if we get to tenpai with a single wait, we retain the option of reverting to a pinfu tenpai afterward, so it's really hard to make a definitive statement on which is better.

Here there is a 1-2-3 *sanshoku* (mixed sequences/mixed triple sequences) potential, so locking in the pair and discarding is acceptable. Since there is a possibility of drawing red , we will discard first, just in case.

Now, what should we do with the hand below?

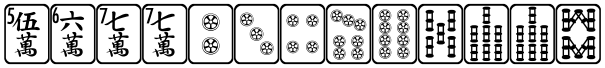
South-3, West Seat, Turn 4, Dora



Essential Play 56

With a sequence combo, cut pairs

South-3, West Seat, Turn 4, Dora

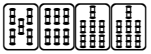
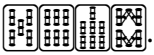
 Draw:

Answer: Discard

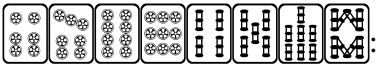
This is also a pinfu, 1-away from tenpai where we haven't committed to a pair yet.

The number of tiles we can accept with a discard is still overwhelmingly higher, but we don't want to end up with a single wait.

In the previous hand, there was a 1-2-3 *sanshoku* possibility and it was easy to commit to a certain pair, but we don't have that tipping point in this hand.

However, there is a combination two-sided block in the *souzu*, and if after discarding , even if we fill in the two-sided shape, we can shift the souzu to a  shape and wait for the double-edge .

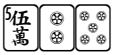
Let's count the number of tiles that do not result in a single wait.

Discard = : 8 types/26 tiles

There are so many.

In this case, I think we can discard without hesitation.

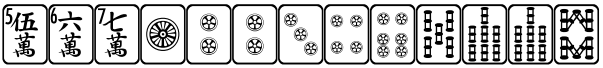
However, there isn't much we can do if we draw first.

If that happens, we can temporarily take the single or single wait and then hope to draw  to switch to a pinfu waiting for a pair with a pseudo two-sided (*aryanmen*) wait.

Now, how about the following shape?

This is also a hand that is 1-away from pinfu where the pair is not yet determined, and this is a shape we should memorize.

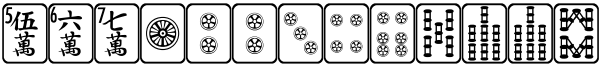
South-3, North Seat, Turn 4, Dora

 Draw:

Essential Play 57

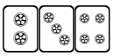
Keep a side + middle wait combo

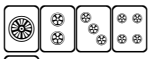
South-3, North Seat, Turn 4, Dora

 Draw:

Answer: Discard

From here, we discard and the shape we're left with is called a side-middle wait (*pen-kan-chan*).

This is a combination of and  and since the can be accepted in either a side or middle wait, and both are considered poor waits. Especially since we're already using one of the ourselves, it is considered to be one of the worst waits in mahjong. However, this shape can be very valuable in a situation like this where the pair is not yet determined.

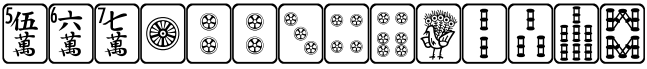
This is because a side-middle wait can be viewed as a combination of double-edge and two-sided waits. This is a  shape where a stuck to it, so drawing or and discarding locks in our pair. It is also a shape with a stuck to it, which accommodates draws, or leaves us with a wait if something else fills

in first.

Therefore, if you have a hand like this, don't immediately hate on the side-middle wait and instead, discard the with confidence.

Moreover, since this hand has combo shapes in the *souzu*, even if we end up drawing that side , we can discard and take the pinfu shape.

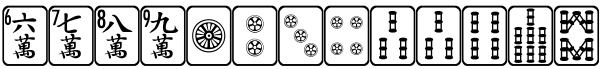
What if the *souzu* shape was different, like the hand below?



Even in this case, we discard and if we end up drawing we can be patient and discard or taking a temporary single wait, hoping for a draw to switch back to that pinfu.

So, how should we structure the following 1-away hand?

East-1, North Seat, Turn 6, Dora

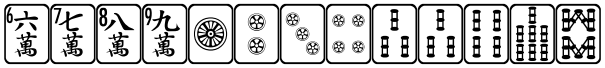


Draw:

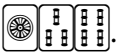
Essential Play 58

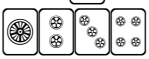
Terminal 4-tile connectors are weak

East-1, North Seat, Turn 6, Dora

 Draw:

Answer: Discard

At a glance, the discard candidates are .

Since the dora is , we can't discard . And because and  are functionally the same shape, if we are going to discard from those shapes, is best.

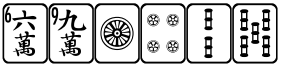
Cutting isn't a strong option. Locking in the pair means there is an intention to build on the connectors, but they are not very flexible as it stands.

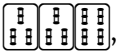
If the four connecting tiles start with 3 or end with 7, they are very wide shapes, but the ones that start from 1 or end with 9 are not wide at all.

With this in mind, discarding seems good, but is it really?

Let's count only the acceptances that are at least two-sided or double-edge waits.

Discard = 7 types/23 tiles

Discard =  6 types/20 tiles

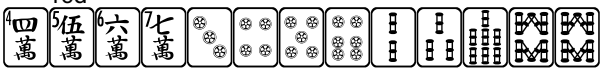
It was just as predicted. Organizing the sequences from the edge into one meld and leaving the form of , which is a combination of pairs and two-sided waits, will make our hand more versatile.

Please remember that four connecting tiles that include a terminal are not very strong at all.

How about this shape?

East-1, South Seat, Turn 6, Dora

red

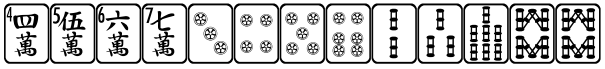
 Draw:

Essential Play 59

Middle 4-tile connectors are strongest

East-1, South Seat, Turn 6, Dora

red



Draw:

Answer: Discard

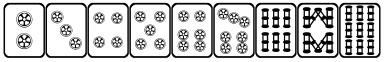
At a glance, I think you can tell that this is an extremely versatile 1-away shape.

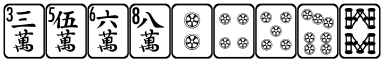
However, I think many people lack confidence when it comes to making this shape the widest it can possibly be.

As I just mentioned with the previous hand, four-tile connectors starting with 3 or ending with 7 are very sticky and wide. It is not an exaggeration to say that it is the widest shape in mahjong.

There are two sets of four connectors in this hand, so in a hand like this we can fix the pair as , and even if we reject the two-sided acceptance, we should still have extra waits.

Just for good measure, let's count acceptance of tiles, limited to those that are at least a double-edge wait or better.

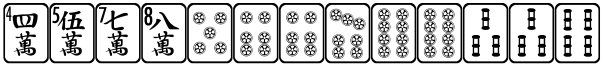
Discard 七萬 =  9 types/30 tiles

Discard =  9 types/30 tiles

Wait a sec, it's exactly the same? This means that even if we discard 四萬 七萬 or instead of , we won't make any major mistakes. However, if we include the bad shapes in the count, discarding 四萬 七萬 gives us 13 types/45 tiles, and discarding gives us 17 types/58 tiles which is a big difference, so we should learn to discard when possible.

What would be a good tile to discard with the following hand?

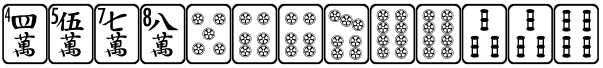
East-1, West Seat, Turn 6, Dora

 Draw: 六萬

Essential Play 60

Prioritize 1 han over 1 tile

East-1, West Seat, Turn 6, Dora



Draw:

Answer: Discard

This is the shape we learned already where we need to lock in the pair. Even if one of these pairs triples up in the hand we will get to tenpai, so the correct answer is to lock in the pair, not the two-sided shape.

Now we just need to compare the two-sided blocks with each other. One is already used in the *pinzu*, which reduces its acceptance by one tile. However, that adds the possibility of *iipeiko* (twin sequences/pure double sequence), so I would recommend discarding instead of .

I believe that the possibility of adding 1 han is more valuable than gaining one tile, so let's discard and hope to draw the middle and then riichi. Of course, if we draw first then we can discard and give up on the *iipeiko*, choosing the two-sided wait instead. Remember pinfu is also worth the same 1-han.

Commemorative 10-tier Tournament Win Interview

Interviewer: Yuya Matsumoto
(Japan Professional Mahjong League)

2018 marked a big shift for mahjong in Japan. Takeo "Mr. Mahjong" Kojima, the first mahjong pro, passed away, and not long after that, M.LEAGUE began.

It was a year that anyone involved in mahjong will never forget, and another reason for that is a victory that fans had been waiting for.

The winner of the 2018 10-tier Tournament (Judansen) was Kotaro Uchikawa, taking down his first G1 title with a series of comebacks throughout the tournament.

Kotaro Uchikawa took the pro test in 2005, advanced to A2 league in 2014 and promoted to A1 in 2017. He is a young player who represents the Japan Professional Mahjong League (JPML) in the RTD League and the National Championship of Professional Mahjong Organizations. Although Uchikawa made it to the final table taking 3rd in the 2011 OUI, and got 4th place in the 2016 Grand Prix

MAX, he hadn't yet actually won a title.

"I finally got one."

This was the first thing he said after the final table of the 10-Tier finished and he received the trophy from JPML President, Shigekazu Moriyama.

Not only is he a good-looking guy, he's proven his mahjong skills by earning his way into JPML's A1 league and attracted media attention since he was a new pro. Despite the pressure of high expectations from everyone around him, he's risen to the occasion and answered both those expectations, and his own strong desire to win a title. I, Yuya Matsumoto, was given the opportunity to interview Uchikawa about what he was thinking during the tournament matches and what his goals are for the future. Since I had so many questions for this interview, I've omitted the detailed hand reviews. For detailed information about the tournament play, please check out the detailed commentary written by Naoya Maeda on the JPML website.

My first encounter with Kotaro Uchikawa was initially as a player while Uchikawa was working as staff at the venue. For a while, that was the extent of our relationship, but when the JPML Sugamo Dojo was established, I was also given the opportunity to work there. That's when I started working alongside Uchikawa.

Currently, I am also teaching mahjong classes, and that started with Uchikawa as well. Not too long after I started

working at the dojo, he suddenly asked me if I would like to run a class at the dojo, and that's how it all began. Without that one comment, I would not be a mahjong instructor now.

One day, after finishing work at the dojo, Uchikawa, myself, Miyabi Takasawa and Ayaka Matsuda went to a cafe together. At that time, Uchikawa, who had reached the finals of the Grand Prix MAX tournament, said to the three of us:

"If I win, I will take you out to eat whatever you want!"

I remember that all three of us said:

"Yakiniku!!" (Korean BBQ) without hesitation.

However, he was defeated in the Grand Prix MAX and so were our dreams of barbecue.

• • •

October 2018, at a certain location in Tokyo...

I let Uchikawa decide where we would hold the interview. When I arrived at the promised time, I realized he had chosen yakiniku!

Uchikawa: I can finally bring you here. (lol)

Matsumoto: Are you serious?!

That's right. He fulfilled his promise from a few years prior. Takasawa and Matsuda joined us and we all toasted

Uchikawa's win before settling down to start the interview while enjoying barbecue as a group of four.

Matsumoto: First of all, congratulations on your 10-tier Win!

Uchikawa: Thank you!

Matsumoto: Watching the 10-dan match, it seemed to me that it was comebacks that won you the tournament. Looking back, how did you feel about it?

Uchikawa: Hmm, you're right. I was chasing the whole time. In that sense it turned out really well, huh? I didn't run away (lol).

Uchikawa: And did you see what happened in the quarter-finals?

Matsumoto: That was the match where you came back from an 88-point difference, right?

Reversing an 88-point difference in one hanchan is extremely difficult (also this tournament uses JPML competition rules). The JPML competition rules have a 12-point floating uma. Positive or negative points are decided depending on if you have more or less than 30,000 points.

One player above 30,000:
1st place: +12 points
2nd place: -1 point
3rd place: -3 points
4th place: -8 points

Two players above 30,000:
1st place: +8 points
2nd place: +4 points
3rd place: -4 points
4th place: -8 points

Three players above 30,000:
1st place: +8 points
2nd place: +3 points
3rd place: +1 point
4th place: -12 points

In other words, even in the best situation, the only points you can make up for with uma alone is 20 points. This means that you need to have a score difference of at least 68,000 in raw points with the target player.

Uchikawa: That's right! That match was rough, but I managed to win a four concealed triplets and then a haneman in South-4. It felt like I got all the hands I really wanted at just the right moments. It was the same in other matches, and I think that was the overall feeling in this 10-tier Tournament.

Matsumoto: I see.

Uchikawa: Also, I think it was good that I wasn't greedy this time? Or rather, it was minimal, at least.

Matsumoto: Does that mean you didn't even want to win?

Uchikawa: Of course, I wanted to win! But I had no

sense of urgency at all. In the past, I had always been thinking about how much I wanted a title, and that if I could win a title early, I could make it as a pro. But I ended up getting into A1 before I won a title. In this 10-tier Tournament the feeling was more like, 'I better get a title soon-ish.' I made it to the final table of the Grand Prix MAX right after moving up to A1. At that time, I thought, 'Alright!' I'm going to take this down!' I was so motivated, but ended up losing badly. However, I didn't get discouraged and I worked really hard in pro league matches, making it to the A1 final table, and again, I was determined to do well that time, but again, I lost badly. Compared to those two times, I didn't feel greedy at all this time.

Matsumoto: You were relaxed? Is that what you mean?

Uchikawa: I wouldn't call it relaxed, but I learned a bit about how to fight from my experiences in the Grand Prix and A1 final tables, and that really helped me this time. Especially in the A1 title match, I felt like I gained some insight by reducing my score difference by about 100 points on the final day, against those incredibly strong opponents.

Matsumoto: I see. So playing against such strong opponents was beneficial training for you?

Uchikawa: Even in A1, I am constantly competing against people who are undisputed legends. You can't

get much better experience than that! That's why I want to make sure I learn and absorb various things while those individuals are still active. And I want to win!

I also decided to ask him about Takeo "Mr. Mahjong" Kojima, who passed away that year. I heard that Kojima-sensei was very fond of Uchikawa since the time he joined the organization. He passed away right after this current 10-tier Tournament started, so I was curious about Uchikawa's feelings.

Matsumoto: This year, Kojima-sensei passed away before the 10-tier Tournament was over. I hear that he was really fond of you. Is that true?

Uchikawa: Kojima-sensei really did take care of me. Of course, we talked about mahjong itself, but I also learned a lot about what it means to be a professional. He told me a lot of stories. Of course, he also treated me to a lot of meals. I'd like to think that I was able to repay him a little bit by winning this tournament. Also, after the final table, I received a message from Kojima-sensei's granddaughter, Yuu-chan, congratulating me on my victory. She said she was sure he was happy for me. That made me really happy.

Uchikawa: I still can't play mahjong that captivates fans the way Kojima-sensei did, and I don't have any originality to offer, but what I can do right now is

continue to do my best and build up my experience. I think maybe I'll only reach that level after accumulating wins.

Matsumoto: I see. Kojima-sensei was someone who led the way for professional mahjong players. All of us professional mahjong players certainly have been influenced by him. But I truly envy that you were able to speak with him in-person.

Uchikawa: It's thanks to the teachings of various people, including Kojima-sensei, that I was able to achieve this victory.

Matsumoto: I see. And with this victory, you have also secured the same seed that the A1 league winner gets for the Saikyosen finals.

Uchikawa: After it was over, Makoto Sawazaki told me that winning is just the beginning. From here, I need to take my second and third shots and aim for the next title. I have to teach my body this winning feeling. In that sense, this year I get seeds in OUI and WRC, and I have RTD and the Saikyosen finals, so I need to take advantage of these huge opportunities!

Matsumoto: I am looking forward to the upcoming matches (and delicious meals)! (lol)

Takahashi & Matsuda: Thank you for the meal! (lol)

Next, I shifted the topic to the talk of the industry, M.LEAGUE.

Matsumoto: And now that you've won the 10-tier, maybe there is a clear path to M.LEAGUE for you?

Uchikawa: To be an M.LEAGUER... If you were to ask me what my goal was after 10-tier, and I said, 'M.LEAGUE!' they would tease me in the comments about how I should be aiming to win A1 next (lol). Of course becoming an M.LEAGUER is a short-term goal of mine! But my ultimate goal as a mahjong professional is definitely to win JPML's A1 league. The whole reason I joined JPML was to become Hououi. I mean, I won't make it this year (lol). Right now I have to fight just to stay in A1 and not drop down!

Matsumoto: Every year, the A1 league battles for both the championship and relegation are fierce. Of course, the fans are looking forward to it, and so are we.

Uchikawa: I need to make sure I don't give anyone a chance to give me a hard time because I dropped to A2!

Matsumoto: Speaking of M.LEAGUE, you attended the first draft, and honestly, I was surprised you weren't selected!

Uchikawa: Hmm, I honestly wanted to be selected, but the fact that I wasn't means I was lacking compared to others. The companies are always watching closely. I think the main reason I wasn't selected is that I haven't achieved enough as a mahjong professional,

particularly in terms of titles.

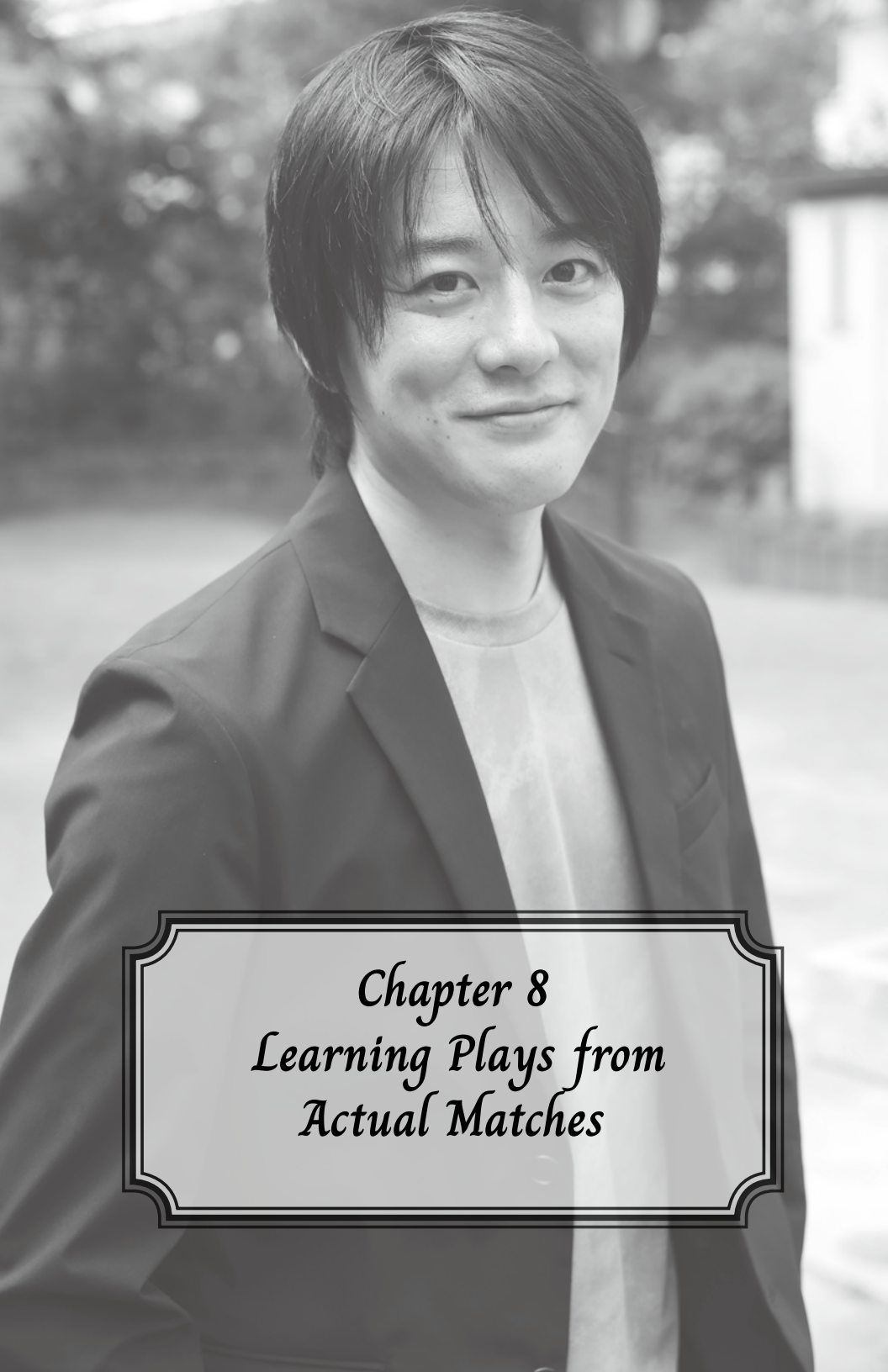
Matsumoto: Well that's been resolved! You have the feeling that next year is the year, right?

Uchikawa: I do feel that way! But what I think is truly important, as I mentioned on Twitter, is how those who were not selected will contribute to the excitement of M.LEAGUE. I wasn't selected this time, but I really want to help promote M.LEAGUE. If M.LEAGUE succeeds and gains popularity, there will be even more opportunities, right? So we all need to work together as professional mahjong players to help M.LEAGUE grow even bigger!

Matsumoto: Thank you! Finally, please give us a message for the fans!

Uchikawa: For now, I will do everything I can. That is where I am right now. By the time this interview is posted, it should be the RTD semifinals? Or maybe the finals? Maybe I'll be there. Or will they have already finished by then? I'll keep doing my best, so please keep cheering me on!

The impression I got from interviewing Uchikawa is that he is always looking straight ahead. He doesn't fear defeat or failure, and converts those experiences into strength without wavering. That is a very difficult thing to achieve. And it was all of those failures and defeats that led him here, to finally grasping the big 10-tier title. He will surely not miss the opportunities it will bring him!



Chapter 8
Learning Plays from Actual Matches

Essential Play 61

Lock in dora

East-1, Dealer, Turn 1, Dora

red

Answer: Discard

From here, I will explain lines of play that I actually took in live games. The hand histories were taken from the JPML official online mahjong game website, RonRon. These are games that I played in the past with rules that used red fives.

The above hand was dealt to me as the dealer. It is a big opportunity hand with a pair of dora and a red dora, but I decided to discard here. Since I had and is isolated, discarding is also an option, but I didn't plan to draw or discard the dora here so I wanted to lock the dora pair into the hand.

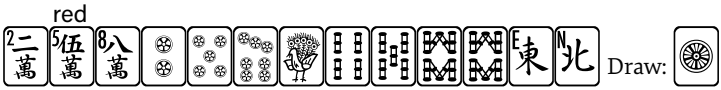
In that case, is just a dangerous tile, right? If deals into someone, unless it is a single wait or a two-pair wait, it must be part of a block that uses the dora, so it would also have a decent score.

Moreover, since the dora is a useful tile for everyone, it will

often be related to the wait, which is why tiles neighboring the dora or straddle *suji* to the dora are considered to be risky tiles.

Therefore, I discarded it immediately on turn 1.

On the next turn, I drew and ended up with the following shape, where I decided to discard .



There was still an option to discard here, but I was very aware that I didn't have enough blocks in the hand. Counting the partial melds, I had only four blocks, but since I was the dealer with dora-3 and an opportunity I didn't want to let go, I chose to discard the guest wind, which was slightly less efficient than .

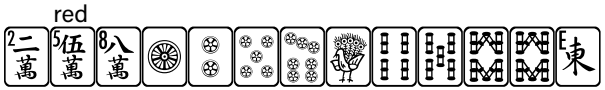
What do you think I discarded from the following shape?

East-1, Dealer, Turn 3, Dora

Essential Play 62

Expand to the limit for attacks

East-1, Dealer, Turn 3, Dora

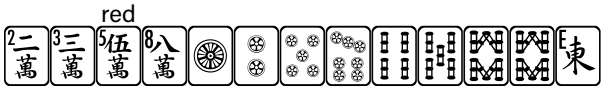


Answer: Discard

With this, I now have five blocks, so is no longer necessary.

However, in the next turn, I drew and discarded .

Since I had the red , the was not very important, but it could become important if I drew .



At this point, if had been three-times cut, I would have dropped , and if I had no other options, I could discard . Then, if I were to draw , the value of the would be realized.

This is an extremely aggressive strategy that is unique to a dealer hand with three dora, but I believe it is acceptable to

go for a win like this and basically ignore defense.

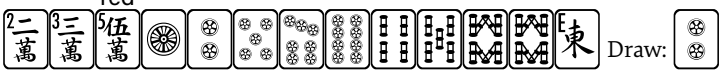
The next turn I drew and upgraded the middle wait to a two-sided , but then instead of cutting , I discarded .

In this case, I felt that there wasn't a big difference between and , so I chose to account for the possibility of drawing a red . Additionally, if I were to discard a 5 early in the game, my opponents would inevitably be wary of the 1-4 and 6-9 *suji* of that suit. Sometimes it's unavoidable when building hands, but since I had the acceptance, I wanted to wait as long as possible before discarding .

Then, on the next turn paired up, giving us the shape below. What do you think I discarded here? Incidentally, wasn't anywhere on the board yet.

East-1, Dealer, Turn 6, Dora

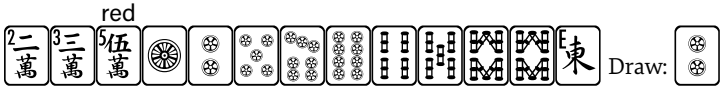
red



Essential Play 63

Significance of squeezing double East

East-1, Dealer, Turn 6, Dora



Answer: Discard

In the end I decided to push the here.

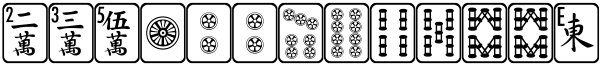
The other discard option was , but at this point it wasn't on the board yet (*shonpai*), and I didn't want to discard a tile that would give me two han just by pairing it up and calling the third one. A double was not only a high-value honor tile for me but also a burden for my opponents. The non-dealers are all thinking about the two han of that triplet if the dealer is allowed to call it, so it's normal for them to be on guard. That doesn't mean I should sacrifice other shapes to keep it, but since I had an unnecessary , I decided I could let that go before .

Immediately after I discarded , the player to my right discarded . If I had discarded first, that player's discard would have been just a simple honor tile discard, but because it wasn't on the board yet, I was able to read

information from the player. We can figure that the hand of the south player who discarded is pretty well put together. Being cautious about discarding also produces this sort of effect.

After this, I drew and immediately discarded and when the player to my left discarded , I called chi on it.

red



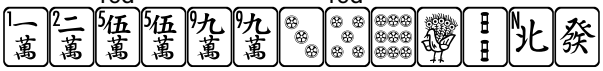
Discarded:

It was already turn 10, transitioning from mid- to late-game, and besides not yet completing a single meld, discarding a draw (*tsumogiri*) three turns in a row made it clear how slow my hand is. Normally, this hand is slow enough that it would be acceptable to just fold here, but since I had a potential high score, I tried to speed it up by making a move on this . After the chi I cut . Since is unnecessary for *tanyao* (inside hand/all simples), I decided on the *manzu* (character) middle wait. However, in the end, the player across from me drew a mangan, and my dealer turn ended.

The following hand is from the East-3, turn 1 of the same game. What do you think I discarded?

East-3, West Seat, Turn 1, Dora

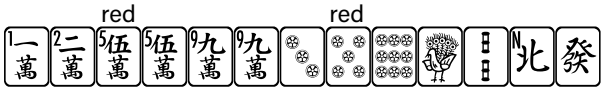
red red

 Draw:

Essential Play 64

Keep dora neighbors

East-3, West Seat, Turn 1, Dora



Answer: Discard

In East-1 I started by cutting honor tiles and tried to even use terminals in sequences, but here I chose to discard .

Although I had many poor shapes like side (*penchan*), middle (*kanchan*), and two-pair (*shanpon*) waits, I also had two red dora, and enough block options.

Also, in the previous hand I had three dora as dealer, but here I have two dora as a non-dealer. I deemed that it wasn't quite good enough to start with honor tiles and decided to make it as wide as possible.

Moreover, since was just discarded by the player to my left, it seemed very safe to me so I decided to keep it in my hand for now.

So I discarded , and the reason I chose it over is because was dora.

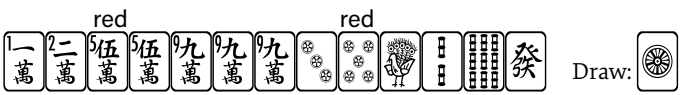
It should be obvious, but you always have to be aware of the dora. If I were to drop here and then draw or next, it would be unbearably painful.

In the next turn my tripled up, and instead of , I discarded .

Although it was valuable as a safe tile, since dora was , I wanted to hold on to . Also, since the dealer across from me had discarded , I would be able to respond to a dealer riichi, which was my biggest defensive concern.

Next, I drew , which gave me a double-middle (*ryankan*) wait in the *pinzu* (dots). Since I wanted to use red , and nothing in my hand really accepted the , but I could see a glimpse of a 1-2-3 *sanshoku* (mixed sequences/mixed triple sequences). What do you think I discarded here?

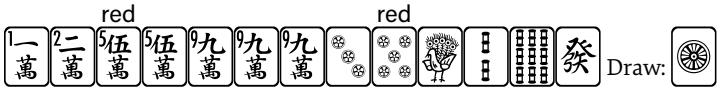
East-3, West Seat, Turn 3, Dora



Essential Play 65

Start with aggression

East-3, West Seat, Turn 3, Dora



Answer: Discard

Even with a big opportunity hand like this, there are players who only think about defense, likely because their lack of defensive skills makes them uneasy. As a result, they want to hold on to a lot of safe tiles.

Newcomers to the game often don't have enough time to think much about defense, naturally leaning towards offensive play.

Between these two types of people, obviously the former thinks about mahjong more, but the latter is often the stronger player.

You'll start to notice that the actions of strong mahjong players can sometimes resemble those of beginners.

That's mahjong.

If you have two red dora and can see a *sanshoku* possibility

in 1-2-3, then start by discarding the unnecessary tile(s). In this hand, I deemed that 發 was less necessary than 1索. I would be more disappointed if I were to discard 1索 and draw 9萬 with no choice but to discard it and let someone call it, than I would be if 發 was called right then.

In actual play, this 發 was called by the dealer, but you can just deal with that sort of thing as it happens.

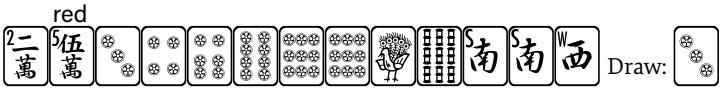
In that same turn, I drew 1索 and discarded 1索. The straddle *suji* to the dora is risky to play against a dealer who has ponned, but I had to discard it then or never. If I were to draw the dora 9萬 after that and it felt too dangerous to discard, then I could just fold.

In mahjong, the situation changes rapidly with each turn, so it's important to pay attention to the current state of the game.

In the end, the player to my left dealt a haneman into the player to my right in East-3.

The following hand is from East-4, Turn 1. The dealer to my left cut 2萬 as their first discard. What do you think I discarded after that?

East-4, South Seat, Turn 1, Dora 1索

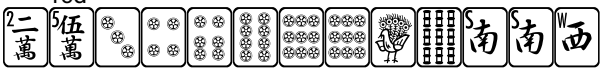


Essential Play 66

Secure safe tiles

East-4, South Seat, Turn 1, Dora

red

 Draw:

Answer: Discard

Since I had red it seemed right to discard first.

If you hold a normal , even though the is *suji* and isolated, you can get a two-sided (*ryanmen*) shape by sticking to it, so basic strategy says to favor over . That being said, if it's red then it's more common to want to discard early, even after drawing that .

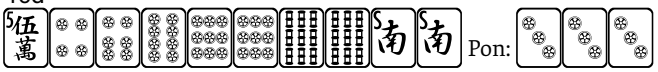
However, since the dealer discarded , we can discard here.

If the dealer declares riichi in the next turn, we can't complain that it's "too fast." If I'm properly observing my opponents' discards, then I should be able to keep this for that situation.

We want to hold on to discards of our opponents to prepare for an early riichi from any direction, but only to the point that it doesn't hinder our own hand.

Initially, I was thinking this hand might be a *honitsu* (common flush/half flush) in the *pinzu* (dots), but once the dora paired up in turn 2, I abandoned that plan. Here, I discarded and immediately after, I ponned the discarded by the player to my right. Then I discarded .

red



This is 100% a backdoor (*atozuke*).

After playing through East-1 to East-3, I got the impression that my opponents were aggressive at calling tiles. Moreover, rather than firmly defending against each other, they were more inclined to counterattack to try and win hands, so the key tiles I needed for my hands were being discarded more readily than normal. That made me believe a big opportunity hand like this could win faster if I back-doored the yaku instead of locking it in first.

Immediately after that, a was discarded by the player to my right, so I ponned it. And what do you think I discarded there?

East-4, South Seat, Turn 4, Dora

red

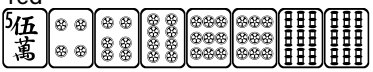
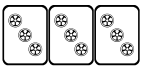
---

1 'Atozuke' or 'sakizuke' (backdoor) means to tenpai with multiple options of winning, but not all the options complete a yaku

Essential Play 67

Dealing in while playing draws poorly

East-4, South Seat, Turn 4, Dora

red  Pon: Pon: 

Answer: Discard red

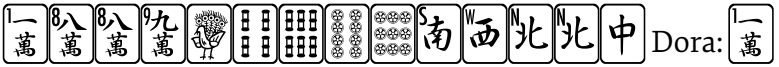
Having come this far, I decided it was time to say goodbye to red . Even if I were to discard or here, trying to stick something to red was too ambitious.

Rather than forcing a mangan, my thought was to leave the mangan chance to a lucky draw, like if I were to triple up or draw red . My plan was to play with the intention of scoring from 3,900 points to 5,200 points with this hand.

As a result, this round also turned into an dogfight with the player to my right calling for one block, the player across from me calling two blocks, the player to my left calling two blocks, and then the player to my right winning from the player across from me for 2,000 points.

Below is the next hand, which is our dealer starting hand

in the south round.



What a miserable starting hand. However, there's no point in just complaining about everything.

As explained in Chapter 6, I gave up on winning this hand halfway through and shifted toward an irregular hand. I chose as my first discard since it's not useful for *chanta* (common ends/half outside hand), *chiitoitsu* (seven pairs), or *kokushimuso* (13 orphans).

In the next turn, paired up and I discarded . Next, I drew a and ended up with the following hand.

At this point, I gave up on *chanta* and focused on *honitsu*, *chiitoitsu*, and *kokushimuso*. I played .

One turn later, when the player to my left discarded , what do you think I did?

South-1, Dealer, Turn 4, Dora

is discarded

Essential Play 68

Intentionally showing your hand

South-1, Dealer, Turn 4, Dora

is discarded

Answer: Pon and discard

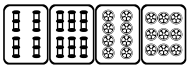
Although I did not have enough meld candidates to aim for *honitsu*, I thought I had no choice but to call here, so I ponned.

The reason I thought I had no choice, was less because I thought my hand was too slow, and more because I thought I was letting my opponents walk all over me.

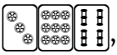
Fortunately, the dora was and it was *manzu*. If the dora had been a different suit, then my guest wind pon would appear cheap, unless I had the red . However, since the dora was , my opponents might have been concerned.

I thought that if I did not hold them back a little, I wouldn't have time to get to tenpai and my dealership would end in one hand.

That's why I wanted to make it clear what I was aiming for and intentionally discarded in this order:



This showed that I had discarded two partial sequences.

In the next turn, I drew 5萬 and discarded 發. After drawing and immediately discarding , the player opposite me then discarded 8萬. I ponned and chose to discard 9萬.

After calling W西, the player to my left drew and discarded □, which hadn't been cut yet. That told me my strategy to slow them down had not worked.

Here, instead of discarding an honor tile after ponning 8萬, discarding 9萬 could increase the probability that my opponents would assume I was tenpai.

Of course I was not yet tenpai and still had more tiles to call, but I was worried about my opponent's aggression enough to try and bluff tenpai.

Even then, my opponents weren't stopping. The player across from me, in the lead, discarded 7萬 and N北. I could call N北 here, but do you think I did?

South-1, Dealer, Turn 12, Dora 2萬

1萬 3萬 5萬 S南 N北 N北 中 Pon: 8萬 8萬 8萬 Pon: W西 W西 W西

N北 is discarded

Essential Play 69

Attacker stand-offs

South-1, Dealer, Turn 12, Dora

is discarded

Answer: Pon and discard

At this point, it was a matter of pride. Of course, depending on the type of match and the score situation, there are times when I might choose to fold here, but this game was a one-off, not a league or a final table. I thought it would be too timid to fold here, so I decided to pon and discard .

Then, on turn 17, I drew and discarded , finally tenpai with a middle wait.

I believe that just achieving tenpai from that starting hand was already a good outcome, but the opponents kept attacking with impunity. The not-yet-cut from the player across from me was discarded first, and then they pushed too.

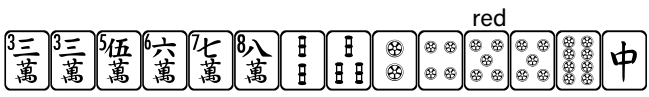
On turn 19 I drew 8萬, and because I was dealer and felt like there was significance in this battle of wills, I decided to *kakan* (promoted quad) it. I drew 3萬 as my supplementary draw and discarded 1萬, shifting my hand to *toitoi* (all triplets).

Surprisingly, 3萬 was discarded by the player across from me because they got to tenpai, and I was able to win a dealer mangan.

I almost faltered under the opponents' relentless attacks, but I was glad I held my ground until the end in this hand. I called it a "battle of wills," but that doesn't mean that I was just playing emotionally. Mahjong is also a battle of information against your opponents. Part of that is a battle of wills. Being seen as someone who folds easily puts you at a disadvantage, and once you've judged an opponent to be someone who pushes risky tiles even when they're not tenpai, it's important to believe that read and push to the end.

Let's move on to the next hand, where I was continuing as the dealer. What do you think I did here?

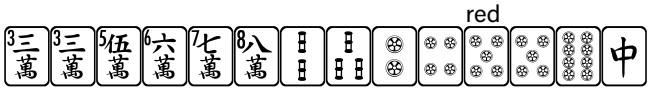
South-1, Dealer, 1 Continuance, Turn 1, Dora 中



Essential Play 70

Deliberately changing up plays

South-1, Dealer, 1 Continuance, Turn 1, Dora 中



Answer: Discard 中

If this were the first half of this chapter, the correct answer would have been to discard 8p. I had red 5p and basic strategy is to cut the isolated 8p, but hold onto the 中 dora.

Of course, if 中 were not the dora, then keeping 8p would still be an option in basic strategy. Drawing 9p and discarding 1p improves the shape even more.

However, in the actual game, I chose to discard the 中 dora.

This was because I used a strategy that went beyond the normal line of play.

This hand certainly doesn't need 8p, but 中 is even more useless. It was almost certain that I would discard 中 at some point.

Because of that, I decided I should discard it first, before

my opponents could easily call it.

In the game it was not called. I drew and discarded and on turn four my tripled up so I discarded .

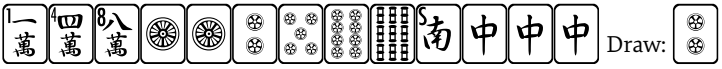
Then, on turn 5, I drew and discarded , immediately declaring riichi.

In the previous hand, I was able to win a dealer mangan directly off the first place player. How would you feel if such a dealer who was getting crazy lucky (hopefully they saw me that way) suddenly declared riichi on turn 5 after discarding dora on turn 1? This was an immediate riichi that took advantage of that psychology.

The result was that I kanned the , drew as my supplementary tile and won a dealer mangan.

The next hand is my starting hand in South-2 after my dealer turn ended. I think you already know what we should discard here.

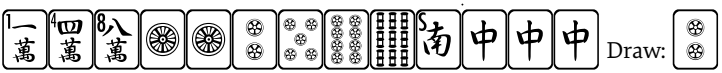
South-2, North Seat, Turn 1, Dora



Essential Play 71

Creating inconspicuous discards

South-2, North Seat, Turn 1, Dora



Answer: Discard

The hand had a triplet of and it seems possible to aim for a *honitsu* in *pinzu*. Since and were isolated, I faithfully discarded .

If you really want to win with a *honitsu*, you should start with discarding the dangerous . If you are going to end up discarding both the *manzu* and *souzu* (bamboo) suits, it's better to keep safe tiles in the hand.

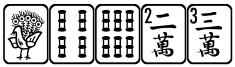
However, if your plan is to discard in that order, then your opponents might not realize you're going for *pinzu* until turn 3 or so.

Also, since the value honor tile is a concealed triplet in your hand, you could get to tenpai without calling. It's possible they could even overlook your flush or your eventual tenpai.

On the other hand, if you start by discarding , it increases the likelihood of your opponents wondering about it.

Taking all of this into account, I decided to discard 1萬.

Then, the dealer to my right began to move, ponning 北 and then 西 right after, building their hand vertically towards pairs and triplets. Their discards looked like this::



As the pons were from the player across from me, my turn ended up getting skipped twice in a row.

After letting the dealer call twice, the player across from me also cut 南, but that wasn't called.

In that same turn, I had the hand laid out below. What would you discard here?

South-2, North Seat, Turn 5, Dora 6萬

Essential Play 72

Copycat discards

South-2, North Seat, Turn 5, Dora 6萬

4萬 8萬 S南 W西 中 中 中 Draw:

Answer: Discard S南

Drawing increased the possibility that I could get a *pinzu honitsu* even more. Additionally, the player to my right called two guest winds while dropping a middle wait in the *souzu* and a two-sided wait in the *manzu*, presenting a high possibility that they were aiming for a *pinzu honitsu*. This was a big problem for me. Nothing good comes from two players trying to collect all the tiles in the same suit as each other. Often, neither of those players can win and one of the other two players sweeps in to win their hand instead. This is obvious, of course.

If the dealer was really pursuing a *pinzu honitsu*, I could feel safe in dropping the 4萬 8萬 and knowing they wouldn't call them. However in this hand, I didn't cut those tiles.

As the point leader, I didn't have any scoring conditions that required me to go straight for a *honitsu*. It was perfectly fine for me to win with just 中 and dora 1, or even just 中.

Should I discard the 西 that the player to my right ponned already? If only considering offense, that might be just fine. I discarded 南 instead as it would be nonsensical for the dealer to call it after skipping the first chance in the same go around. I believe this 南 should be considered a copycat discard.

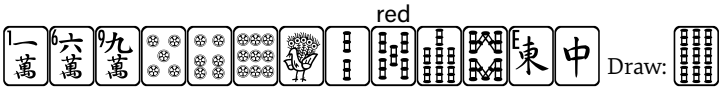
Although the dealer had only called two sets of guest winds, in the future they could pon either 南 or 東 and reach tenpai on a single wait for the fourth wind, locking in *shosushi* (little/small winds).

Holding onto the 南 for several more turns to pair it up could give the dealer time to pair it themselves or triple up the 東. Then the 南 could deal in. To avoid this, I copycatted the 南 discard.

In the end, I won 1,300 off of a 九萬 discard with a 六萬 九萬 wait, bringing my total score to just under 50,000 points.

Below, we look at turn 1 of the next hand. What do you think I discarded first? Before this, the dealer discarded 中 and the player to my left discarded 🀆.

South-3, West Seat, Turn 1, Dora 🀙



Essential Play 73

Considering the game flow

South-3, West Seat, Turn 1, Dora

Draw:

Answer: Discard

Clever readers might see this discard and think, "What the...?" If this was my own hand in the East round, I would have discarded 中 or 東 with this same hand.

With only 3 partial sets, the offensive move would be to start by discarding honor tiles.

However, it was South-3, and I was in the lead with just under 50,000 points.

While it would be ideal to win this hand and move things to South-4, there was no reason I had to go all-in on it.

The more important thing was to avoid giving points to the dealer, and the next priority was to prevent the dealer from continuing their turn.

Therefore, I decided to squeeze the honor tiles and discard only from the outside with tiles that would likely be difficult

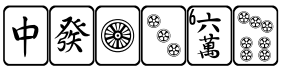
for the dealer to use.

9萬 and ▦ were both similar discard choices, but since the player to my left cut ▦, I decided to hold onto it for safety and cut 9萬.

Immediately after this, the dealer ponned ▯ and then took ▦ with a chi, and on turn 6 I had the hand at the bottom of this page.

I had drawn quite a few useful tiles, and I could see both *ittsu* (full straight/pure straight) and 4-5-6 *sanshoku* in my hand by this point.

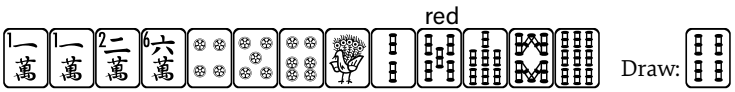
The dealer's discard pile looked like this, and all the tiles were discarded from their hand.



Since they had called twice, dropped a middle wait, and begun loosely cutting middle tiles, I thought there was a high chance they were tenpai.

My discard options were 2二萬 or 6六萬, but which one should I discard first?

South-3, West Seat, Turn 6, Dora ▦



Essential Play 74

If you're going to cut it anyway, get on with it

South-3, West Seat, Turn 6, Dora

Answer: Discard

If we were to assume that the dealer was already in tenpai, appeared to be the least problematic.

My reasoning was to avoid a direct hit from dealer.

However if I were to fill in my side wait with a next, would I be able to properly fold? With no completely safe tiles left, would it really be advisable to try and hold on and find new safety?

After having drawn the more expensive side of my hand to a haneman tenpai, folding only to deal in would be the worst possible outcome.

So, should I discard here and only push the if I draw or on the next turn for tenpai?

Wouldn't it be awful if in that time the dealer got to tenpai and was waiting on the ?

If it's going to cause me this much worry, it's better to just discard it now.

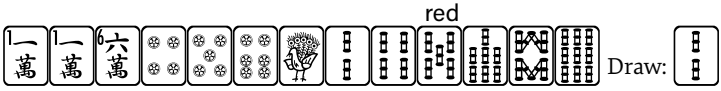
If the tile is going to be cut at some point no matter what, then it is best to cut it as early as possible. This is especially true when the main opponent is the dealer, has very few points, and is unlikely to fold to us.

If this dealer was someone who was likely to fold to me, then I could cut dangerous tiles to try and induce a fold, but I could not hope for that in this hand.

I actually had a rough read on the dealer's discards (which I've omitted for this book since we're focusing on lines of play), and I thought this was not particularly dangerous at that moment. That being said, it was definitely more dangerous than a tile in their discards, so I cut it first.

The passed, but in the next round, I drew another tile that was not safe. What do I do now?

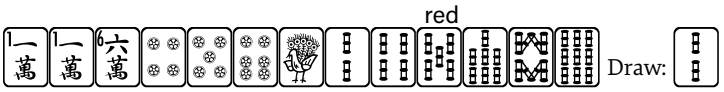
South-3, West Seat, Turn 7, Dora



Essential Play 75

When to focus on shape

South-3, West Seat, Turn 7, Dora



Answer: Discard

Well, this tile gives us a difficult decision. This tile was also somewhat dangerous, and if I were to triple up then my *ittsu* would be doomed, but I would have a two-sided tenpai with two dora. Many people would probably discard here.

I still had a strong awareness that I wanted to discard dangerous tiles first though.

With this *souzu* shape, no matter what I drew to tenpai, I have an *ittsu* chance.

The only time I wouldn't later discard would be if or tripled up, but that would be a cheaper tenpai than the *ittsu*, and I wouldn't be able to win without calling riichi.

To avoid that possibility, I decided to cut the tile straight from my draw.

The dealer had ponned [ ] and had a [8p] chi without a single *souzu* in their discards, but it didn't look like a *honitsu*. They had discarded [中][發] on turns 1 and 2 so that's how I read it, but if that [中][發] had come from their hand much later, I would have to consider the possibility of them having a *honitsu*.

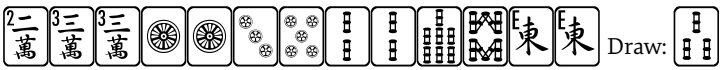
That didn't mean the [2p] was necessarily safe, but normally, if the player had *souzu* sequences or partial sets in their hand, they would be more aware of and likely to aim for a *honitsu*.

In the end, this [2p] passed, but on the next turn the dealer drew and discarded [6萬], and I cut the [3萬] *suji*, which dealt into them for 1,500 points. My theme for the hand was to not give the dealer any points, but it was also a difficult hand to completely fold on and it ended up with value that merited offensive play, so this deal-in was not a big problem. Also, if that [6萬] discard had been from the dealer's hand (*tedashi*), I would have been wary of the [3萬], but since it was from their draw, there wasn't much I could do about it.

I was still able to finish this game in first place.

The next example is East-1 from a different game. What would you discard?

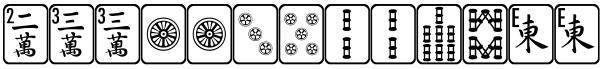
East-1, Dealer, Turn 5, Dora [2萬]



Essential Play 76

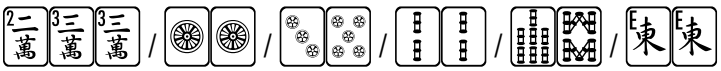
Consolidating into five blocks

East-1, Dealer, Turn 5, Dora

 Draw:

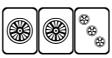
Answer: Discard

The shapes before drawing were:



My hand was composed of the six blocks laid out above. Since there were four pairs, *chiitoitsu* was an immediate option, and for that I'd have to think about how to keep five blocks without breaking up any of those pairs.

The draw made it easier to consolidate into five blocks. had become part of a flexible two-sided wait and was no longer just a pair.

Additionally, since I could also see a potential 1-2-3 *sanshoku*, I was able to discard and count the  as one block in *pinzu*.

Going the route of 6 blocks presents a chance to expand

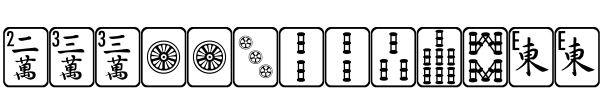
sequences in the hand, whereas consolidating to 5 blocks lets us gather tiles around the pairs.

For example, cutting or from this hand instead of , is the six-block strategy. However, following earlier plays in this book, since there were four pairs and it was also 2-away from *chiitoitsu*, that strategy was not suitable for the hand.

Also, when approaching the mid-game we should always aim to consolidate down to five blocks when possible. The six-block strategy tends to leave little room for safe tiles, leading to situations where the hand remains bloated and dangerous.

On turn 7, with the player to my left discarding from the draw, I got red for the following hand. How did I play?

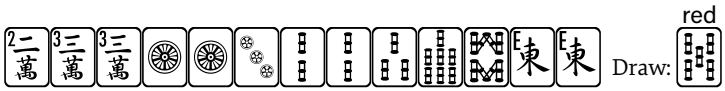
East-1, Dealer, Turn 7, Dora



Essential Play 77

Five blocks in essence

East-1, Dealer, Turn 7, Dora 二萬



Answer: Discard 三萬

Before I had time to think another thought, my hand was unavoidably back to six blocks.

Since I drew red 五, there was new value in expanding the hand's sequences.

If I wanted to set up a shape that could accept both 四 or 七, and would minimize any loss, including in terms of *chiitoitsu*, then I would discard this red 五, 八 or 九. As a sequence hand, things were getting too crowded, but cutting the red 五 to free up space felt wasteful.

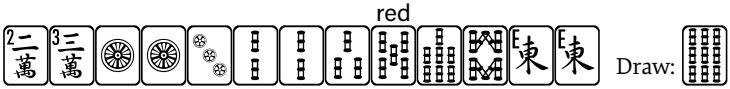
Therefore I chose to discard 三萬, which actually kept it at six blocks, even though I was still treating it as five blocks.

In order to fully utilize the dora 二萬 in a sequence hand, 三萬 must be discarded.

My plan was to build two blocks in the *souzu*, centered

around red 5m.

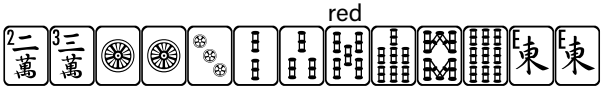
The next tile I drew was 9m.



I decided to play 1p here. If I drew 1s, I would have a shot at 1-2-3 *sanshoku*, and if I drew 2p, I would be able to use red 5m.

After that, I drew and cut 5m 5p, and on turn 11, 1s was discarded by the player to my left. Should I chi? Incidentally, E wasn't on the board yet, but there were two 1s and three 1m already discarded. Neither 1p nor 1p were on the board yet.

East-1, Dealer, Turn 11, Dora 2m



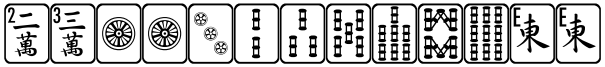
1s is discarded

Essential Play 78

Choices based on dealer continuances

East-1, Dealer, Turn 11, Dora

red



is discarded

Answer: Chi and play red

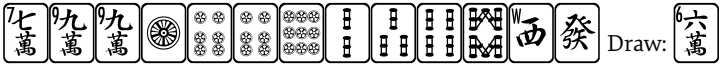
I gave in and called. This was only the second , but if I didn't start there, then I thought I would have a hard time getting to tenpai. Of course winning as the dealer was my goal, but even just getting tenpai so I could continue my dealership was very important.

Although I would have to discard red , by calling , I could get a yaku with *sanshoku*, *chanta*, or , so in my opinion it did merit a calculated risk.

However, the result was quite disappointing. After this, the player to my left declared riichi and I called chi for the middle , but then drew and was unable to win. The player to my left drew a to complete their triple wait and secured a win worth 5,200 points. The other side of the wait

was the 東, which I had a pair of.

I didn't see an easier path here and moved on to the next hand. Below is the starting hand and the first draw.



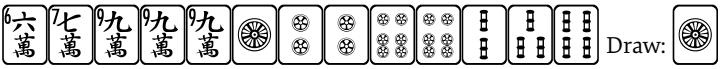
Since I didn't have enough blocks, I could have started by discarding honors to make my hand as wide as possible, but it was an unexciting hand with only one dora, so I decided to squeeze the honors and started by discarding 發.

Then, on turn 6 I had the following shape. What would be the best shape to drop here?

Since I had three pairs, I think you know that I needed to drop one of them.

Let's return to the basics and think for a minute. This is also an important line of play that you should memorize by shape.

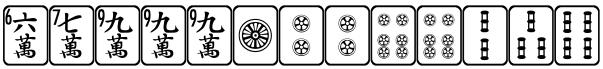
East-2, North Seat, Turn 6, Dora 七萬



Essential Play 79

Dropping pairs: Caution

East-2, North Seat, Turn 6, Dora

 Draw:

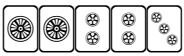
Answer: Discard

Explaining actual hands played is for introducing general shapes, and this particular play is a particularly important fundamental, so let me get into it deep with this example.

This hand was 1-away from tenpai with three pairs, and I needed to choose which one to drop.

Additionally, I had the option of taking the side wait, so counted as a useful tile.

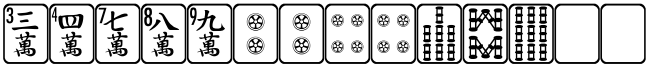
This means it would be better to cut either or .

If I discarded , then even though a draw gives an *iipeiko* (twin sequences/pure double sequences) shape with , it's still not tenpai.

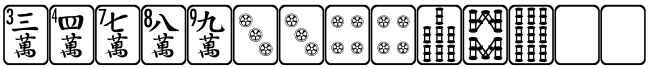
When you are 1-away with three pairs, be careful not to drop the pair that would have helped you get to tenpai.

The same can be said for middle waits and two-sided

waits.



In this case, we need to cut either or and definitely not , or else we would miss out on a tenpai with the draw.



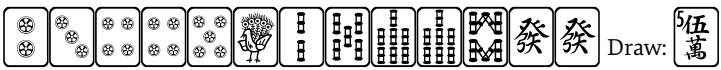
In this case, we need to cut either or and definitely not , or else we would miss out on a tenpai with the draw.

In the actual game, neither nor were on the board yet, but the player across from me who had ponned had also discarded already, so I dropped the safer pair.

As a result, my tripled up so I declared riichi and drew for *ippatsu* (unbroken) and a mangan win.

Then, in the next hand, I ended up in the following situation on turn 2. I had a six-block hand, so what do you think I discarded?

East-3, West Seat, Turn 2, Dora



Essential Play 80

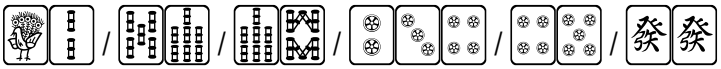
Dropping middle waits for floaters

East-3, West Seat, Turn 2, Dora

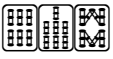
Draw:

Answer: Discard

Here, I had a six-block hand:

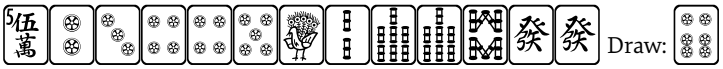


They were all partial sequences, but the middle and the two-sided acceptance were overlapping.

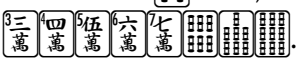
By holding onto the that I drew, I was able to drop the and minimize loss. If I cut the when I drew it, I would lose acceptance for all *manzu*, but keeping allowed acceptance for to . On the other hand, even if I were to discard , the only loss would be a draw. Drawing a after that would complete a  sequence, so there was no big risk of backfire.

This middle wait+two-sided combination shows up in games a lot, so make sure to memorize this shape. Be aware that there are cases in which this shape needs to be valued,

such as when there aren't enough block options. In the next turn, I drew , giving me the hand below.

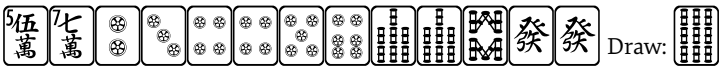


If the only factor was tenpai possibilities, then discarding is the most efficient choice, but I decided to go with here and take care of that side wait.

Just playing straightforward by discarding the would have left me with the a side wait if I drew , and I didn't think it would be easy to call riichi with that shape. If I couldn't pull that trigger, then I thought it better to drop the side wait. This would result in a loss if I drew later, but would leave the wide acceptance for .

Then, on turn 6 I had the following hand. Try to guess how I played.

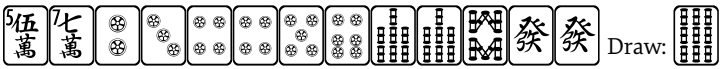
East-3, West Seat, Turn 6, Dora



Essential Play 81

Waiting for upgrades

East-3, West Seat, Turn 6, Dora

 Draw:

Answer: Discard and don't riichi

If I were to discard then I would be tenpai, but the wait would be a middle and even if I won, it might only be worth 2,600 with riichi, dora-1.

The wait would be poor, the winning score would be low and there were still a lot of upgrade options, so the basic strategy would be to dama.

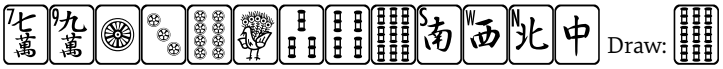
In this case, with a draw, the wait changes to , and with an draw, it changes to . If or paired up forming a two-pair wait with , a riichi win on the would be worth 5,200 points for the ron or a mangan if we self-drew the winner.

In the actual game, I drew red and discarded calling riichi, then drew to win a mangan hand.

After this, I continued to win, and finished this game in first place.

Let me introduce a new hand.

This is from East-1 in another game. I'm in the North seat and this is my hand at the first draw.



Since this is clearly not a great hand, some people may deviate from a normal line of play to discard , but I stuck with a typical discard.

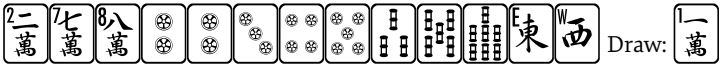
Indeed, it is a tough hand, but I didn't feel it was bad enough to commit so quickly to *junchan* (pure ends/pure outside hand), *chanta*, *kokushimuso* or something similar.

Of course it would depend on the future draws, but I just needed to draw two or three useful tiles in the early-game for it to become competitive.

This hand ended with a 1,300-2,600 self-draw. The example below is turn 2 of the next hand.

What do you think I discarded here?

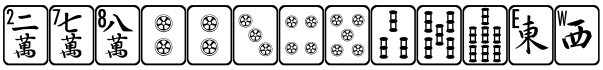
East-2, West Seat, Turn 2, Dora



Essential Play 82

Handling double wind tiles

East-2, West Seat, Turn 2, Dora

 Draw:

Answer: Discard

I'm not trying to say that is the only discard option here. If this hand had been discussed in the first chapter of this book, I might have recommended discarding instead of . It is that subtle, but in the actual game I discarded .

I was somewhat dissatisfied to draw the and keep the side , but at least I had five block candidates. The hand was reasonably put together and not all that bad. If I was to ignore defense, I would just want to discard all the honor tiles here.

However, I still had , which was double points for the dealer, and it was difficult to pick a good time to discard it.

The orthodox approach is to discard it after your own hand gets to 1-away from tenpai.

This is the idea of setting up a shape that is competitive even if an opponent calls, and in the worst case, I'm prepared

to sink their boat, even if I'm aboard.

Conversely, you could see this as giving the dealer time to get into a good position for the call.

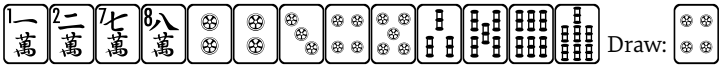
With an earlier cut, the opponent may not have the tile paired up yet, or the hand may not put-together enough to merit a call.

Therefore, if I was going to discard the no matter what, then I wanted to discard it as early as possible and started with that.

I am not saying that you should imitate this move or that it is absolutely correct. After learning these basic strategies and internalizing the fundamentals, the next step is to forget those basics and think about how to play for yourself. I thought this hand was a good example to demonstrate that.

In this hand I drew a lot of useless tiles, discarded them immediately, and ended up with the following hand on turn 8. What do you think I discarded?

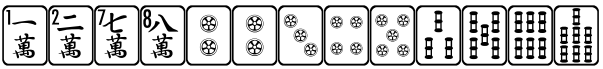
East-2, West Seat, Turn 8, Dora



Essential Play 83

Keeping side waits for sticking

East-2, West Seat, Turn 8, Dora

 Draw:

Answer: Discard

There is also a line where I could have kept and dropped the side wait. I believe that this method is a better and more flexible way to play.

However, it tends to lack speed.

Honestly, if I drew the side , then I wanted to insta-riichi with the wait.

But, if I drew first, then I wanted to drop that side wait and rebuild the hand into a good wait before declaring riichi.

Taking a somewhat half-hearted approach is sometimes necessary in mahjong.

In this hand, I would not leave both and floaters and instead would choose one or the other.

At this time, there was one red and one normal on

the board and one had also been discarded. The *pinzu* were in low demand, but there were too many discarded at this point.

On the other hand, the tiles around seemed plentiful based on the board. The the player to my right had already dropped from the first discard, and the player to my left discarded from their hand on turn 5.

It can be risky to try to read the wall or opponents' hands without more information, but at the very least, there seemed to be more useful *souzu* left than *pinzu*.

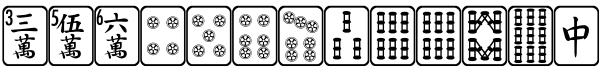
Thus, I discarded , prepared for the side fill, or upgrade chances if the or came first.

This hand ended with the player to my left dealing into the player to my right for 5,200 points.

Then, in the next hand, I ended up in this situation on turn 5. The player across from me called the first to be discarded from the player to my left, with the following discards:

What do you think I discarded?

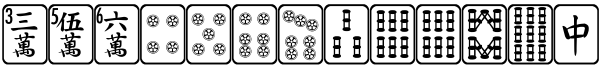
East-3, South Seat, Turn 5, Dora



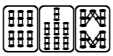
Essential Play 84

Balancing loss and speed

East-3, South Seat, Turn 5, Dora

 Draw:

Answer:

Some people would answer for this hand. If we draw a , we can still make a  sequence then discard , so there would be no backfires.

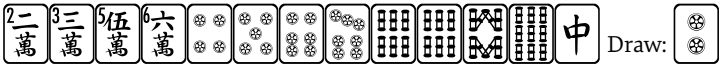
On the other hand, it can definitely slow down our hand because keeping meant would be the pair.

I chose to discard . Do you see the similarities with the question before of which side wait to discard? The difference is that the previous hand was 1-away and this one is 2-away, but the approach is the same. I discarded the , putting my hopes on the sticky and flexible 4-connectors shape.

But why all the contemplation for a simple, 2-away hand? It's because of the floating dora tile. It gets in the way of our efficiency.

Next, I drew and discarded and then drew on

turn 8.

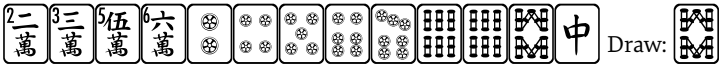


Discarding 中 is the most efficient here, but the shapes hadn't taken enough form yet, so I discarded 🀙.

I proceeded to draw and discard 🀝. I could keep it in my hand for 🀜 acceptance, but then I would have to discard the 中 dora, only exchanging it for a non-*tanyao* sequence. That's a move I'd call high-risk, low-return.

The next turn I drew 🀇 for the shape below, where I decided to drop the 二萬 三萬 two-sided shape.

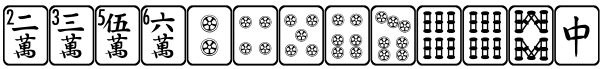
East-3, South Seat, Turn 11, Dora 中



Essential Play 85

Retreat without giving up

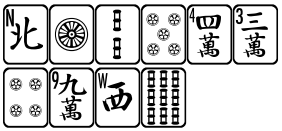
East-3, South Seat, Turn 11, Dora

 Draw:

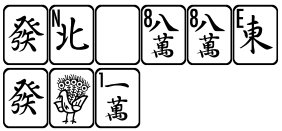
Answer: Discard

The reason I made this play had a lot to do with the conditions on the board, so I'll include the discards for this example.

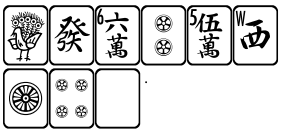
East:



West:



North:



The North player had a pon of and the dealer had a red

5伍萬 chi with 3三萬4四萬.

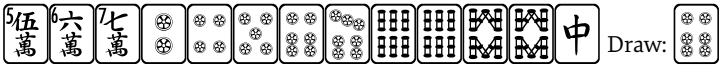
Already approaching the late stages of the hand, and with a red 5伍萬 already discarded by one player and called by another, I just had a floating and not-yet-cut 中 dora in my hand when I drew 9萬. Since 9筒 and 9萬 were both dangerous, and the waits were also bad, I had to judge this hand as being really rough.

Therefore, the line for this hand had to be under the assumption that I couldn't play with straight aggression here. Since the chi for red 5伍萬 had just happened, I started by cutting 2二萬 and planned to drop 3三萬 next. I wasn't ready to fold out just yet, but I had every intention to avoid playing dangerous tiles.

In the next turn, I drew 7七萬. The 3三萬 was only dangerous to the player to my right, but that player wasn't playing particularly strong tiles and didn't seem to be tenpai, so I discarded 3三萬.

On the next turn, the player to my left discarded 中 and I drew 8筒 to the hand below. In this case, what should we do?

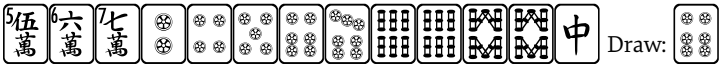
East-3, South Seat, Turn 13, Dora 中



Essential Play 86

What aggression gets you

East-3, South Seat, Turn 13, Dora 中



Draw:

Answer: Discard 中

Obviously we will copycat the 中 discard here. Some may not consider this to be an issue at all, but I actually had a different point.

First, please remember this shape in the *pinzu*. This is the "hidden *ryankan*" we talked about before.

Since it's a shape where we originally wanted the middle , but drew , I think it's easy to see, but just in case, watch out for this.

For example, keeping 中 in the hand and discarding turns this into a pretty bad hand.

There was no need to play a tile that narrows the acceptance when this was the perfect opportunity to discard the 中 that I'd been wanting to get rid of anyway. Moreover, was a tile that was fairly safe to the entire table.

Even so, I did not feel like there was any way I could win the hand, but I also couldn't give up.

After this, the player to my left discarded so I called pon. I discarded and ended up tenpai waiting for . It was only 1,000 points, but it was much better than not being tenpai.

The problem was whether I could fold or not if I drew a dangerous tile. If I hadn't called and discarded them as a pair instead, I may have easily made it to the end of the hand with safe tiles, but I made the decision to pon, so instead I got to tenpai and earned tenpai payments at the exhaustive draw.

This is why you should not fold so easily in mahjong. Note that if the player to my right had been aggressively pushing, I might have folded, so there are times when you can put pressure on your opponents by showing aggression. This is also one of the major elements of strength in mahjong, so don't forget to keep an aggressive stance as long as you possibly can.

The following is a different hand from the same game. How do you think I played?

South-1, North Seat, Turn 2, Dora

Essential Play 87

Lines of play for honitsu

South-1, North Seat, Turn 2, Dora

Draw:

Answer: Discard

If we simply count the potential blocks:

I was still stuck at only four blocks.

In this case, I could take care of the honor tiles, but then I would end up with just a for only 1 han, in this hand that didn't really have speed either.

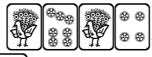
If at least was a value honor tile, I could aim for *honitsu* or *toitoi*, but since it was a guest wind, I couldn't expect enough points to justify calling aggressively here.

This is when the power of *chiitoitsu* comes into play.

The aim here was a closed *honitsu* that took advantage of the pairs.

Of course, the strategy could change depending on future

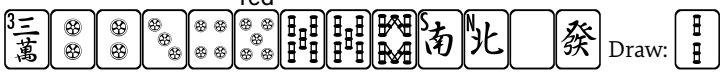
draws, but for now, I focused on a *manzu honitsu* while hedging pairs. That said, considering the possibility of a -only hand in case of an emergency, I decided not to drop and instead cut the isolated .

The next turn I drew and discarded , and then drew to discard . After that, I drew and discarded . At the point I put into my hand, I had already decided it would be a closed *honitsu* with *chiitoitsu*, and my discard pile was already a mess with , so I discarded first, hanging onto the safer . At this time, was in the discards of and safe to the player across from me. The player to my right drew a dealer mangan in this hand, but at least I could show you a line of play for this sort of *chiitoitsu honitsu* and I hope you'll be able to apply it to your own games.

After that the dealer drew a mangan, earning another turn as the dealer. I had the following hand during continuance 2. The player to my left had just discarded , so how would you play?

South-1, North Seat, 2 Continuances, Turn 2, Dora

red

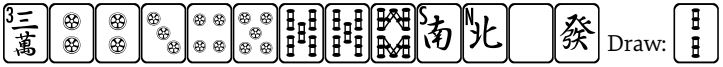
 Draw:

Essential Play 88

Don't copycat

South-1, North Seat, 2 Continuances, Turn 2, Dora 北

red



Answer: Discard 南

I've demonstrated many cases of copycat discards for dora honor tiles, but here it wasn't necessary to copycat.

It was still turn 2, and since the dora was 北, it was a guest wind to everyone except for me.

If someone were to later pair up 北, they wouldn't get a yaku from ponning it.

Importantly, if I copycat 北 here, it would only put everyone else at ease.

Since there was nothing beneficial to me in that, I deliberately did not copycat it and discarded a different honor tile instead.

This is the same reasoning as when I cut the double 東 early in the East round, so I discarded double 南 here.

I had a red dora in my hand and it was pretty well put

together, so rather than folding partway through, I wanted to play to win that hand. I chose to discard at that time since I would end up discarding it eventually anyway.

In this hand I declared riichi with a middle wait for 3-4-5 *sanshoku*, but ended up dealing into the player across from me for 2,000 points.

The next example is from 2 hands later, in turn 3.

What do you think I considered and how did I play from here?

At this point, there was one on the board and no other tiles related to the hand had been discarded.

Was I aiming for a *chinitsu* (perfect flush/full flush) in the *souzu*? Or maybe triplets, hoping for *sananko* (three concealed triplets) or *suank*o (four concealed triplets)? Was my main aim for *chiitoitsu*?

I believe people will have different opinions about this hand.

South-3, South Seat, Turn 3, Dora

Essential Play 89

Commit to chiitoitsu

South-3, South Seat, Turn 3, Dora

Draw:

Answer: Discard

Here, I discarded from the triplet and committed to *chiitoitsu*.

This might be a bit unconventional.

For example, if I had a pair of dora, then it would be perfectly fine to commit to pairs and discard a tile from a concealed triplet.

The maximum acceptance for a *chiitoitsu* that's 1-away from tenpai is 3 types/9 tiles, but that already isn't a lot, and if one of those pairs is actually a triplet, it drops to 2 types/6 tiles.

Therefore, if I wanted to win with *chiitoitsu*, including with a pair of dora, it was better to cut the triplet. However, if any of the other pairs were to triple up after cutting the first triplet, it would be a massive regret, so most people keep the triplet unless they have a pair of dora.

This hand had only one red dora, and there is no pair of the normal dora, so the typical discard would have been or .

So, why did I discard here? It's because I had five of the *suji* pair. When you hold a lot of one *suji*, it means your opponents don't have them, so they're much more dangerous. This is a sort of theory that has been around for a long time. When you think about it, doesn't it seem obvious?

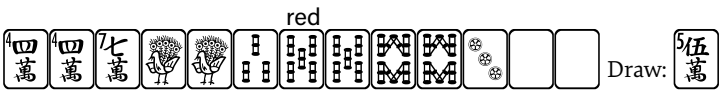
If we get tenpai immediately there's no issue, but in the process of dropping and waiting to draw or , to triple up or , or to pon , an opponent might declare riichi.

If we get a *chiitoitsu* tenpai at that time, will we be able to discard ?

Once I had thought that far, I thought drawing red gave me the perfect timing to discard .

After that my hand turned out like this, but how should I have played this?

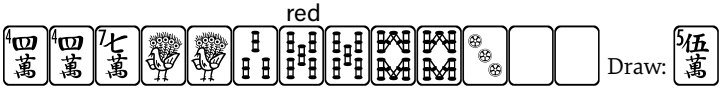
South-3, South Seat, Turn 7, Dora



Essential Play 90

Keeping 5 for chiitoitsu

South-3, South Seat, Turn 7, Dora



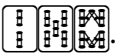
Answer: Discard

I was still 1-away from *chiitoitsu*, but I discarded here. The reason is similar to the previous one; was a pair, and if I held onto its *suji* for too long, it was likely get dangerous later.

Based on the board, there was not a big difference in danger between and , so I decided to discard it right then.

Also, in these rules, keeping is basic strategy. When aiming for *chiitoitsu* when there are red fives in the deck, try to avoid discarding 5 as long as possible. If there is one red five in each suit and you have a normal 5 in your hand that pairs up, there is a 33% chance that the 5 that paired it will be red. Since the possibility is relatively high, it's better to keep the 5 unless there is a good reason not to.

In the actual game, I paired up the red on turn 12 for tenpai and ended up riiching with a single wait. In the same turn, the player across from me declared riichi, but they ended up getting the and dealing into my mangan hand.

Actually, after checking the hand histories later, the player across from me had a three-sided (*sanmenchan*) wait for . The player to my right was folding, but they still had potential acceptance in their hand.

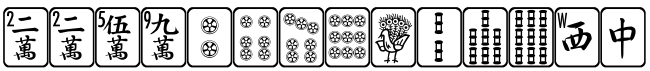
This time, since I made it to tenpai first, they would have dealt into me either way, but it was a good reminder that holding five of the same *suji* can be dangerous.

With this win, the player across from me busted and I finished in second place.

We are coming to the conclusion of this book, but I want to go over one more game before I finish.

This is my starting hand as dealer in East-1. The hand was sort of a mess, but how do you think I played it?

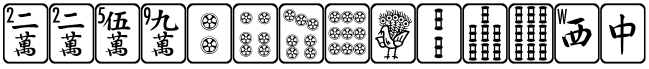
East-1, Dealer, Turn 1, Dora



Essential Play 91

How to play as dealer

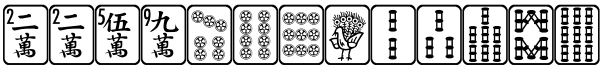
East-1, Dealer, Turn 1, Dora



Answer: Discard

At first glance, it's easy to be pessimistic about this hand, saying it looks like it won't win, or even get to tenpai, but it's not good to make such assumptions from the start.

For example, if you draw , , and , it will look like this hand.



This is 1-away for a 7-8-9 *sanshoku*.

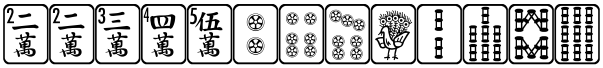
Of course, it is rare to draw this perfectly. Otherwise you would get *suanko* every hand.

That's why moderation is important. It's not good to just expand the hand as much as possible without thinking, but it's also not good to give up excessively from the deal.

Especially when you are the dealer, try to play normally, just at the beginning. From this hand, I discarded and

waited to see what would happen.

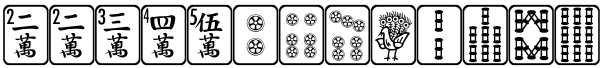
In the next turn, I drew and discarded . After drawing and discarding , I drew and discarded . Next, I drew an and discarded , giving me the following shape:



At this point, the player across from me declared riichi.

The tiles above were the discards, and I only had one safe tile left, . Directly after the riichi I drew . What do you think I discarded then?

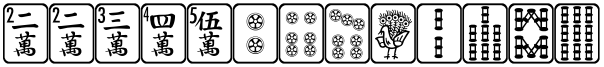
East-1, Dealer, Turn 6, Dora

 Draw:

Essential Play 92

Don't fold halfway

East-1, Dealer, Turn 6, Dora

 Draw:

Answer: Discard

Don't be afraid of dealing in.

With these problems, I've provided you with a playbook. Anyone can learn these lines of play and master them by practicing through many games.

But what about after that? Many people get stuck with how to push or fold when faced with aggression from opponents, but most people (1) fold too much to riichi, and (2) push too much against *dama* and called hands.

Riichi feels scary because it's a definite tenpai, but we have no idea what that tenpai looks like. Of course, advanced players can read the situation to some extent, but even then most cases are not known.

In that case, when your hand reaches a certain level, you need to push. If we have to win and lose in mahjong, we may as well increase the probability that we'll win. To do that, you

must be aggressive.

If that leads to consecutive losses, instead of folding more, brush up on your reading skills and learn ways to counterattack without dealing in. That is the key to becoming a strong mahjong player.

For example, if you find yourself with a hand like this, as dealer, go ahead and ignore the riichi, discarding on the *ippatsu* turn. If that deals in, your next task is to figure out how to play the rest of the game.

In the actual game, I drew red the next turn, then declared a chasing riichi with .

The result was that the player to my left dealt into the player across from me, but that is nothing but one outcome. Sometimes I will deal in, and sometimes the opponent will deal into me. In some cases I'll get *ippatsu* too.

Just like in life, the future is completely unseen, but I believe that is what makes this game interesting.

I hope you enjoyed this introduction to lines of play. Thank you for sticking with me to the end.

I believe that modest knowledge and work are important. I hope this has been of some help in improving your mahjong skills.

More than a decade ago, a young man with a handsome and sweet face joined the Japan Professional Mahjong League (JPML). The first thing I noticed about this young man was not his handsome features, but his robust greetings to others. With a big smile and a loud voice, he always said, "Good morning!" (in mahjong, we use a morning greeting no matter what time of day it is). He was always full of energy, and cheered up the venue.

As time went by, that young man gradually became a central figure in JPML and was entrusted with being an examiner for the professional test (including serving as an instructor for trainees). In the training sessions for the new recruits who passed the test, the first lesson was where each instructor spoke about their mindset as a professional.

While most instructors conveyed important things to become stronger at mahjong and how a professional

should behave, Kotaro Uchikawa's speech is the only one that I still vividly remember.
He said, "Good morning!! Make sure you are all greeting each other cheerfully and with enthusiasm."

This was an eye-opener even to me, even though I've worked as a teacher for many years. It should be obvious, but this is the most effective way to communicate.

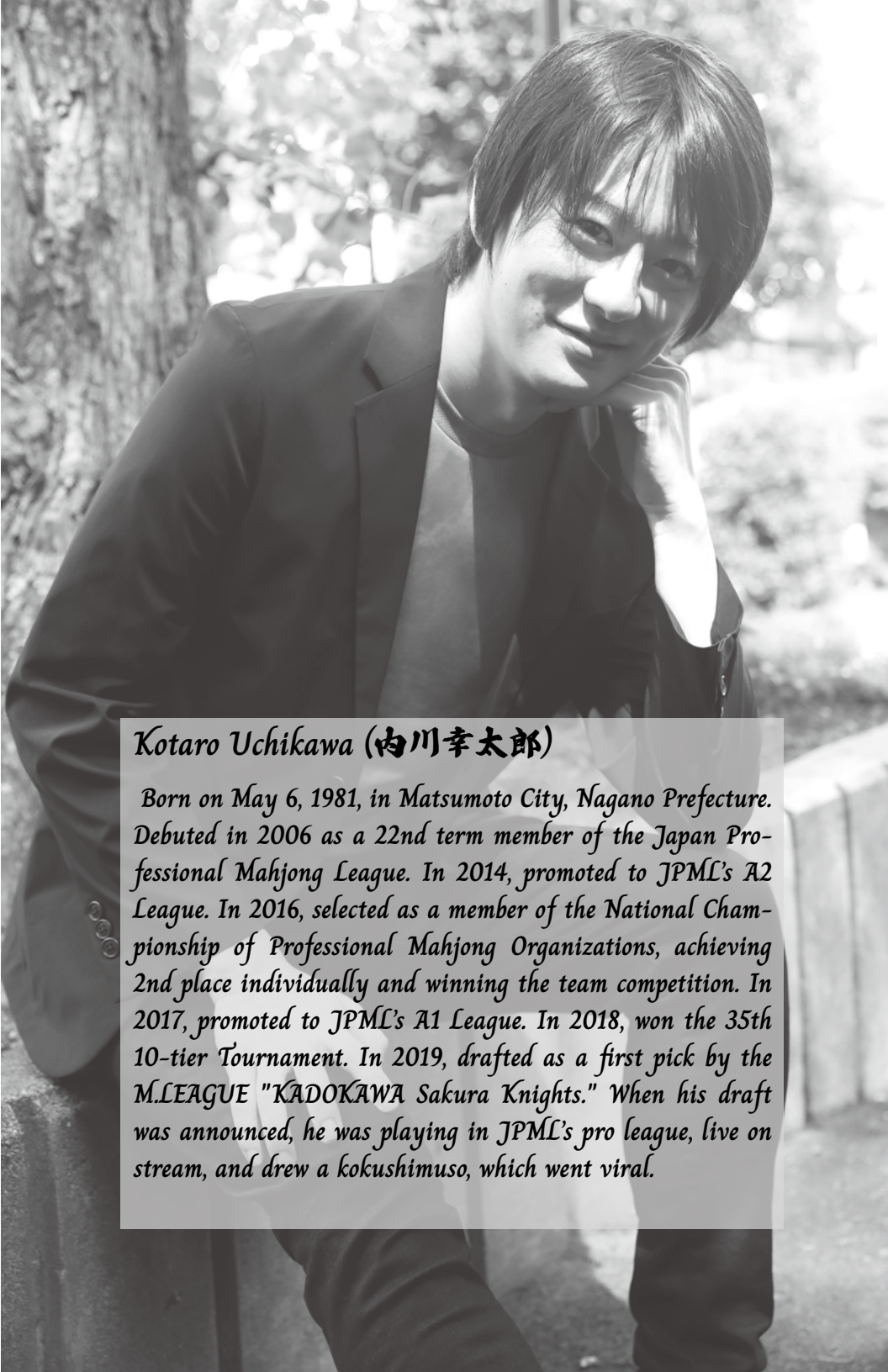
Enthusiastic greetings. Uchikawa first conveyed to the newcomers the simplest and most effective way for people to communicate with each other.

I think it is very characteristic of Uchikawa to focus this book on the most important lines of play in mahjong, and at the same time, it makes sense that he is a popular mahjong instructor.

If you really master the basics, any application will be effective. It's the same in human relationships. If you give a pleasant greeting in the morning, it leads to getting through even difficult issues at work much smoother.

Uchikawa's continued emphasis on the importance of greetings and fundamentals is a clear demonstration of his success, and I firmly believe that anyone who can master the basic procedures in this book, will significantly improve their mahjong skills. I hope that you'll value these lines of play.

Naoki Setokuma
Japan Professional Mahjong League



Kotaro Uchikawa (内川幸太郎)

Born on May 6, 1981, in Matsumoto City, Nagano Prefecture. Debuted in 2006 as a 22nd term member of the Japan Professional Mahjong League. In 2014, promoted to JPML's A2 League. In 2016, selected as a member of the National Championship of Professional Mahjong Organizations, achieving 2nd place individually and winning the team competition. In 2017, promoted to JPML's A1 League. In 2018, won the 35th 10-tier Tournament. In 2019, drafted as a first pick by the M.LEAGUE "KADOKAWA Sakura Knights." When his draft was announced, he was playing in JPML's pro league, live on stream, and drew a kokushimuso, which went viral.

WORLD RIICHI

Founded in 2014, the world riichi championship has offered a forum for competitive riichi mahjong players from across the globe in the World Riichi Championship once every three years. Our goal is to continue the growth of competitive riichi mahjong play as a mind sport.

Compete locally. Rank globally. The WRL organizes a series of Minor (one-day) and Major (two-day) events. Players accumulate scores across these tournaments, with top performers advancing to a season finale.

WORLD RIICHI
LEAGUE

WORLD RIICHI PROFESSIONAL MAHJONG

For some, mahjong is more than a leisure activity, it is our life. Launched in 2025, WRPM is a group for dedicated riichi mahjong players to grow their game, promote riichi mahjong and contribute to the wider community. Sign up for our next exam and join the ranks of international professionals!

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