



**SUPER**  
Menzen Style  
Mahjong

*A Surprising 22% Call Rate!!*

Respond Flexibly With Accurate Reads

Top Tenhou Player Reveals  
「How to Win Without Calls」





Translated and formatted for the  
English mahjong community by  
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## Foreword

My Tenhou ID is “Ritsumisan”, and I mainly play hanchans at the houou table. While the average houou hanchan call rate is 35-40%, my hanchan call rate is about 22%. As of April 1, 2019, I have played around 2,100 games in Houou and my stable rank is roughly 8.9 dan. I am ranked 14th out of the 596 players with a long term record exceeding 2,000 games.

I am not a mahjong pro, nor have I ever worked as a jansou member. I am an amateur in the mahjong world. However, I have been able to grow strong because I have taken the game of mahjong seriously. Whether it is sports, study, or games, the most important part to improving is the approach you take. I want to show you how I approach the game of mahjong. I emphasize how to respond to players. As a result, I call less. I tend to step back so that I can adapt to the other players. I hope to contribute to the improvement of your mahjong ability through the menzen style approach to call judgment and push-pull.

-Ritsumisan

## Contents

Foreword	3
Introduction	6

### **Chapter 1: Menzen Style Call Judgment**

Menzen Style Call Judgment	10
Column 1- Me and mahjong part 1	38

### **Chapter 2: Reading**

What is reading	42
Reading shapes	43
Reading from taatsu drops	61
Reading yaku and score	66
Wall reading	77
What does it look like? #1	90
The pros and cons of camouflage	92
What does it look like? #2	96
How to deal with ambiguity in reading	98
Column 2- The era of data supremacy is coming	108

### **Chapter 3: How to Face Mistakes**

Why do you make mistakes	112
How to reduce mistakes	119
“I thought this would happen”: Hindsight bias	123
Column 3- Me and mahjong part 2	130

### **Chapter 4: Menzen Style Hand Building and Push-Pull**

Menzen style hand building	134
Flexible taatsu drops	144
Push-pull	153
Push-pull on the dealer turn	154
Situational judgment	161
Push-pull from reads	177
Reading ahead	210
Afterword	220

# Introduction

This is a tactical book to help you improve your mahjong. In particular, it focuses on how to think and play mahjong. The game of mahjong is a one that is difficult to evaluate correctly, and it is possible to make choices that are close to the correct answer and thereby fail, or, to make wrong choices and thereby succeed. That's why it's important to think and work in the right ways. It is a game where beginners can beat experts. This makes it very easy to misunderstand, and we need to be careful about overestimating our skills and saying things like "I am strong". For example, about 70% of drivers claim their driving skill is above average.

Each individual game is a game where luck plays a large role. However, **our long term performance reflects our ability**, so our goal is to do well in the long run. That is what it means to be a strong player.

The "setting" for this book is online mahjong on Tenhou. You can keep track of your long term results and game records. You can also look at these things for other players. In addition, the houou table has a very high skill level. One drawback is the rules. While most mahjong players aim for first, Tenhou rules encourage avoiding last. Being able to adapt to rules is a necessary skill since there is no unified ruleset.

In general, "What would you discard?" books aim to narrow down choices, but **the ultimate goal of this book is to expand the reader's options**. It is a book to suggest ways

of thinking and learning about mahjong, and to make the reader realize that there are other options. **Appropriate situational judgement and reads will widen your options.**

It must be said that this book is not for beginners. The most important things in mahjong are tile efficiency and tile logic. Learning reads and push-pull is all a bit fuzzy if your tile efficiency and logic are fuzzy. This book is not about simple tile efficiency and logic. Instead, it **focuses on judging and reading the situation around you**. I especially want people who have been playing mahjong a long time and are struggling, or players who want to become even stronger but don't know what to do to read this book.

In this book I will show various situations **from real games** and explain them, but we will rarely encounter problems where there is a single interpretation. I use many expressions like "I cut this, but what about cutting that?". As I explained earlier, the purpose of this book is to expand the reader's options for becoming an advanced learner, not to force forward one single option. Since I put a lot of emphasis on the playing to the situation, we will be going over many of these game diagrams.

Chapter 1 introduces **menzen style call judgment**. It is not a deep study of call judgment, but instead intended to give you an overview of how I judge calls and what menzen style players thinks about.

Chapter 2 will explore **reading**. I am most well known as a menzen player, but I also teach reading in my videos. This chapter will explain in detail the basics and applications of reads. My goal is to show you how far you can go with reading.

Chapter 3 has a slightly different type of focus. **The theme is one that likely bothers you. Mistakes!** Are you annoyed by the number of mistakes you make? I discuss how to deal with mistakes to reduce them. I think this chapter is the most important one. It will give you an idea of how to improve your mahjong by dealing with your errors.

Finally, chapter 4 will examine **menzen style hand construction and push-pull judgement**. The content here is very comprehensive, and the topics covered are broad. I hope this will give you an opportunity to expand your options.

# Chapter 1:

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## Menzen Style Call Judgement

## Menzen Style Call Judgement

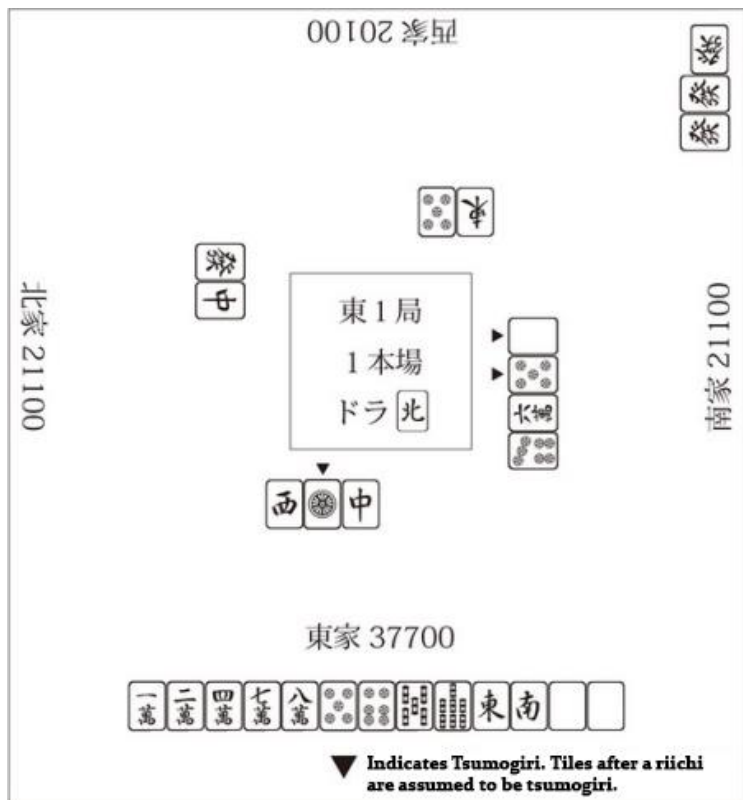
What comes to mind when you think of menzen style play? On Tenhou, players of this style are in the minority. It is difficult to understand menzen mahjong and its quirks with writing alone, so I will explain the playstyle by showing actual game decisions. Using the diagram on the next page (11), let's

 cut.


Advantages: Confirms yaku and speeds up our hand.

Disadvantages: Removes safety, and our defensive strength against a riichi drops. The hand score is low and hard to improve.

Mahjong is a game where there are four players but only one can win. When you win a hand, it prevents the other players from winning that hand. Therefore, winning 1,000 points is worth more than 1,000 points because it prevents you from losing points and your opponents from gaining them. But how far can you go if you call for this particular hand? With the call, you'll lose your pair, and even though the hand has enough taatsu, there will be lots of bad shapes. There's also no dora. If you take two calls, your safety will get even worse. In mahjong you have three opponents, not one. If you try to win by force every time, you will not be able to succeed.



Next let's look at the score situation. This is not a situation where you want to take high risks to win 1,500 points while in first. If someone was closer pointwise, you might call. Whether to call or not is a **matter of balancing attack and defense with the score and situation**. You don't call  for this hand because you want to play defensively, but that doesn't mean you suddenly lose the hand. It's important to maintain defensive strength and not lose first place chasing small wins.

On the next page (13), a menzen style player would not move to call the  cut by kamicha. You might be tempted to call the ryankan and move to iishanten for 1,000 points. However, **look around**. Kamicha and shimocha are opening. The dealer (toimen) has cut the dora. It feels proper to let kamicha and shimocha kawashite to end the hand.

However as West, I would not aim to kawashite with my own hand. If things turn out to move slowly, you can be ready to riichi in the late game and aim for higher value. If the dealer riichis by then, you can simply fold. Since kamicha didn't call the North dora and no one else dropped it, there's a higher chance it's still in the wall for you to pair up. It's worth noting that it's still difficult to aim for tenpai in the late game if you don't call here. With kamicha and shimocha opening, how far can you go freely cutting tiles? I feel it's better to simply go for the closed win, and if things look bad, fold.

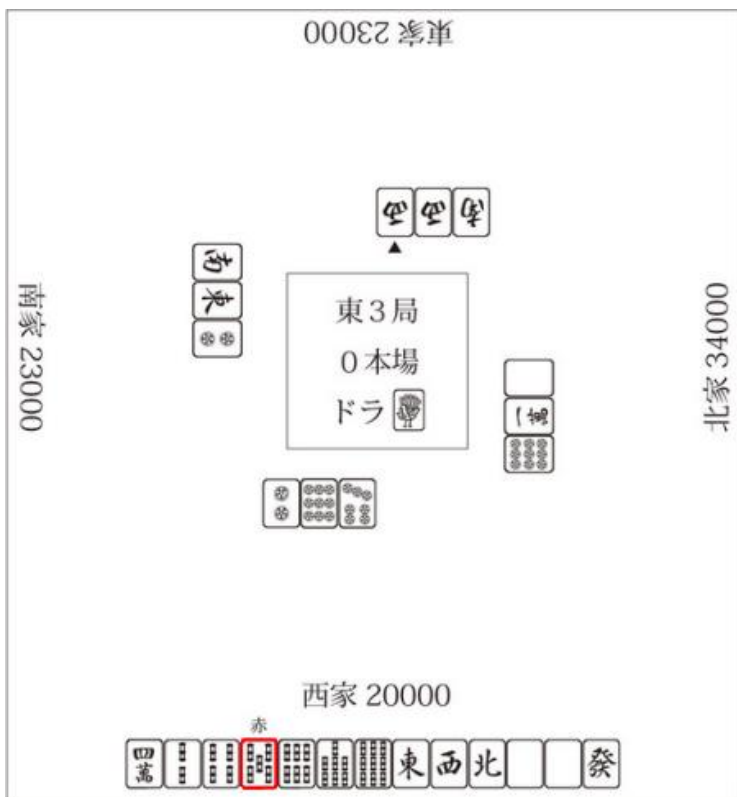
If kamicha or shimocha were the dealer, you wouldn't want them to win so there you might call. If it were the South round, you could call depending on the score, and if you weren't in last, you'd be more likely to call. **The fact that this is still the East round is important**. Of course, winning for 1,000 points is nice, but in this situation it's still better to aim for a mangan class hand. In the East round, we aim to win a certain number of points to gain placement advantage. Passing is crucial to our hand value, and more importantly our defensive strength.







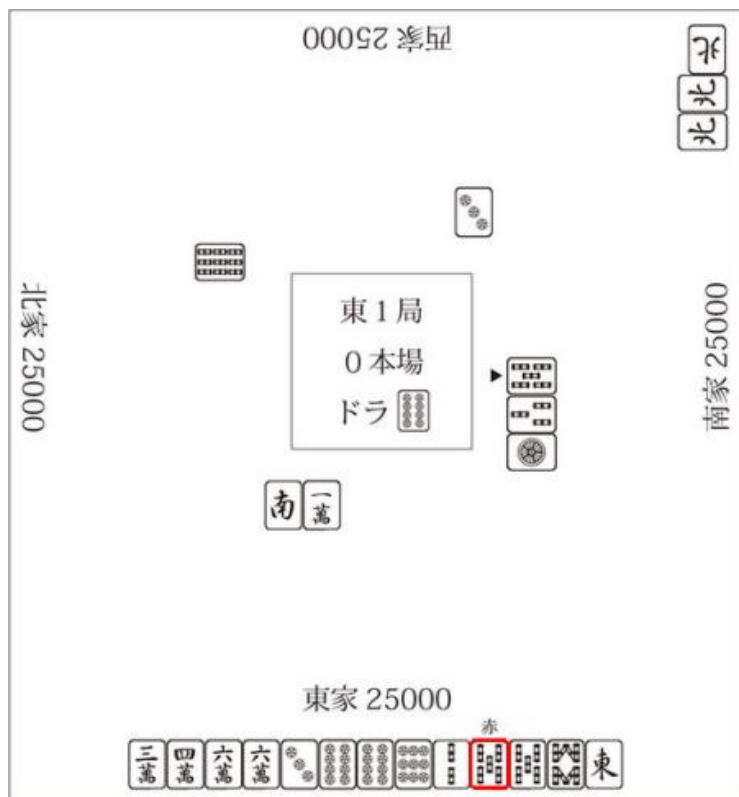





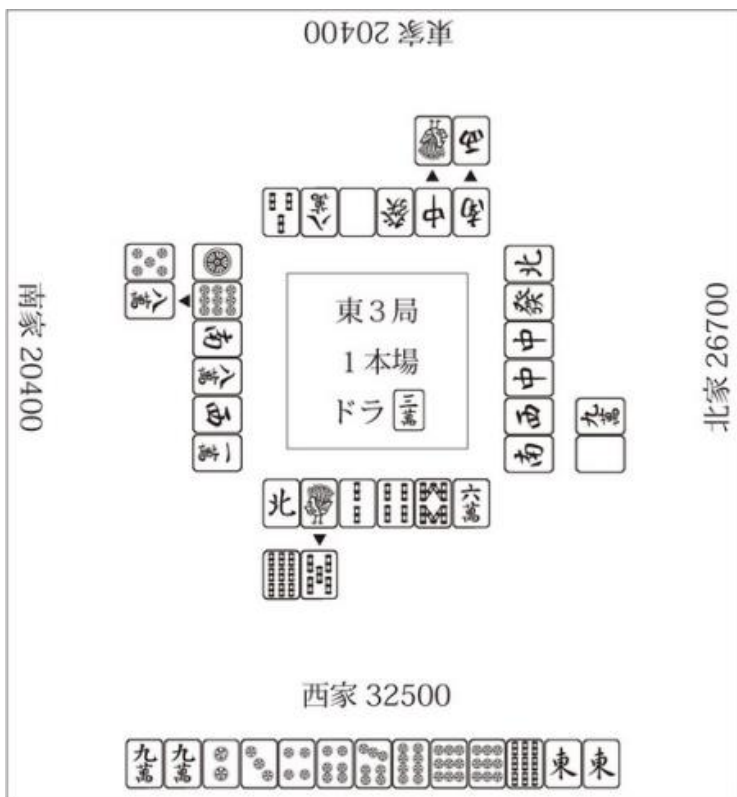
This time, shimocha's  can be poned without fixed shapes. There's no other pair, but you can see a mangan. You also have good defensive tiles. Call and cut  for honitsu. If the red  in this hand was a normal  and the dora was , you might pass and look to draw the dora for a riichi. In that case, the  wouldn't be cut. This hand has no pair, and its shape is not fixed, but you can call because it has **high potential value and defensive power**.





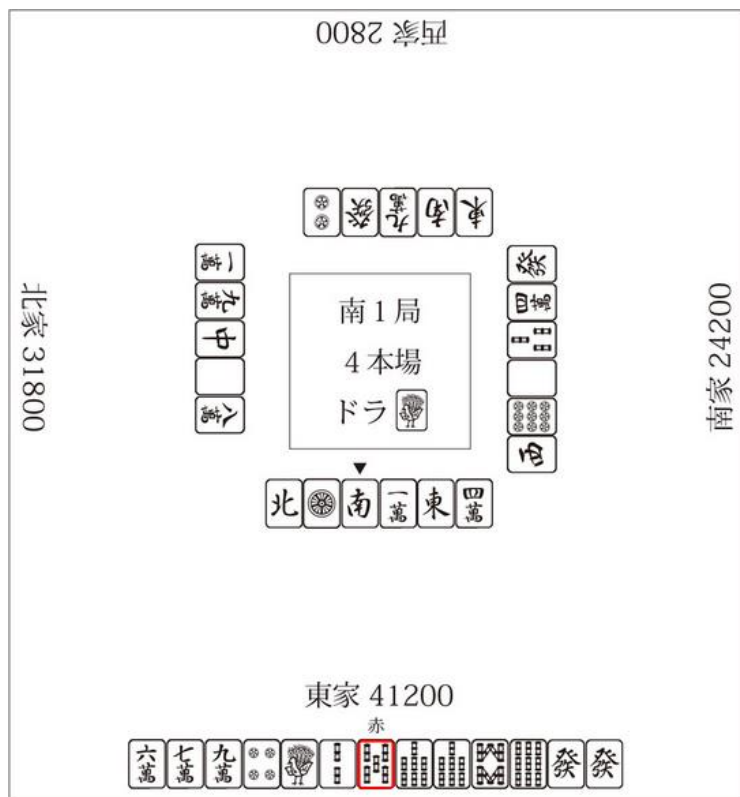




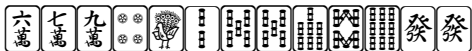
It's far away but here you can see a mangan and call shimocha's . This isn't great defensively but you're the dealer. The dealer focuses on offense. The dealer wins 1.5x as many points but pays the same as a non-dealer on a ron. If someone tsumos, you pay twice as much as a non-dealer. We should attack more than a non-dealer when it makes sense to. Play aggressively for dealer wins, especially in the East round with flat point situations.



Here you can pon shimocho's 九萬. The riichi takame would be 2,600 points but it's unnecessary. If you win here you'll get 1,000 points plus honba and if someone calls riichi you'll be ready to fold. Of course, with this 九萬 pon everyone would naturally be wary of atozuke. Being easy to read can be a disadvantage, but here's it's only a small disadvantage. This is because **the players cannot rule out you having a yakuhai ankou or know for sure if you're even tenpai yet.**

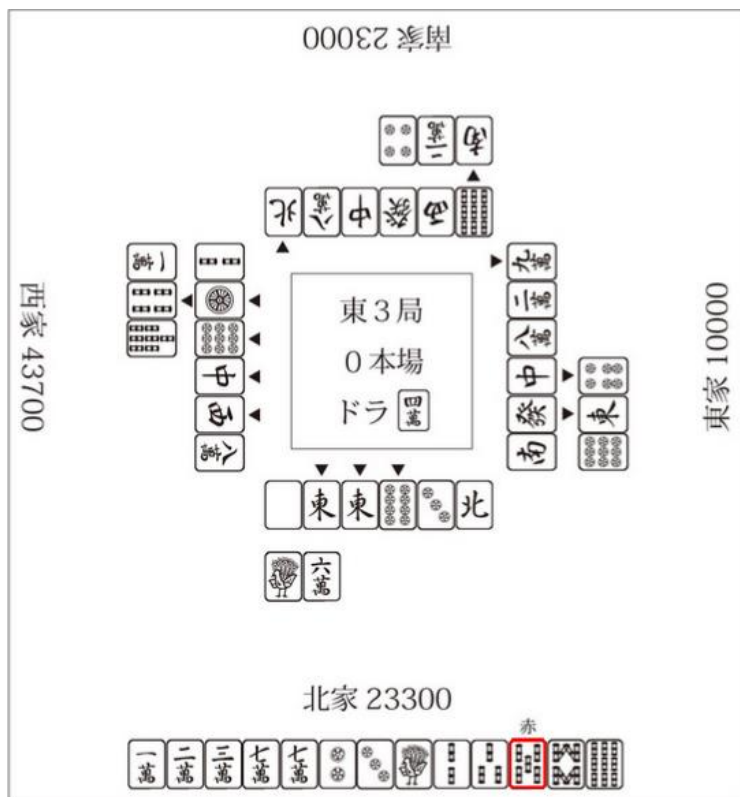






In the above situation you can pass the second  discard. Wait around and leave  as a safe tile pair. Even in the lead, you can aim for a sensei riichi, although it's certainly not a situation where you'd want to have to riichi. If you had a hand like  you'd call here and go for the fast win. That hand would be easy to call with because it has an extra pair and fixed shapes.





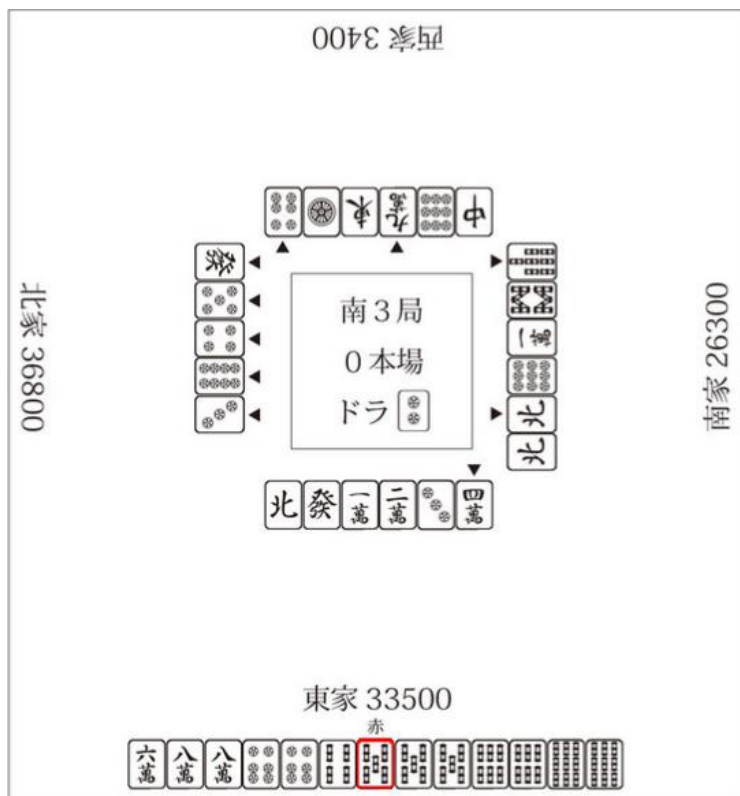


What about a hand like this one where you can call for 1,000 points or go for more value? The  call leaves you atozuke on the  but you can take the chii. It'd be nice to get a closed tenpai if the ukeire wasn't narrow. You probably wouldn't call if you were in last, but in most cases this is a basic chii. The hand score here is less important than the chance to keep others from winning. Kawashite like this is important, but must be done safely.



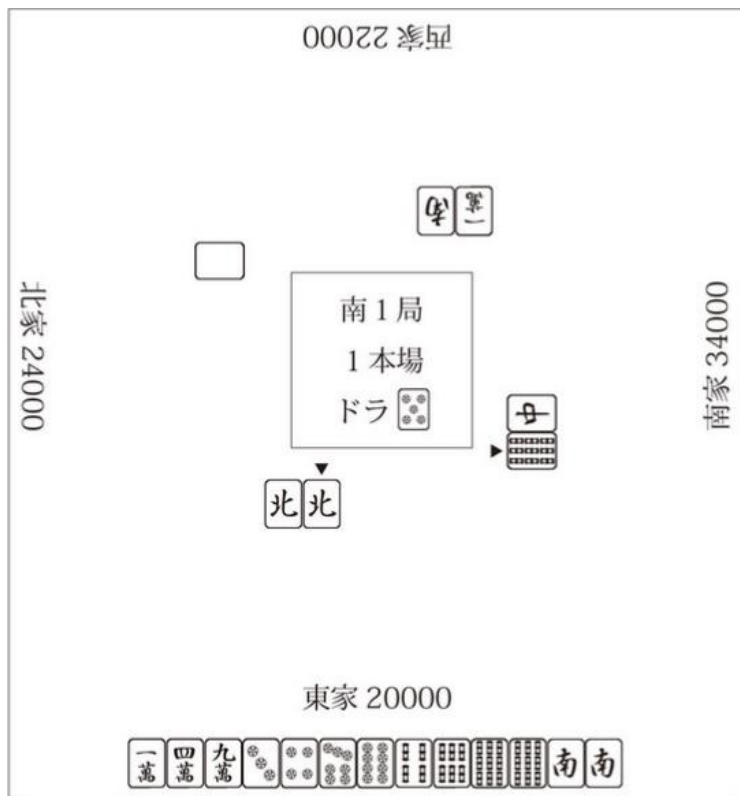




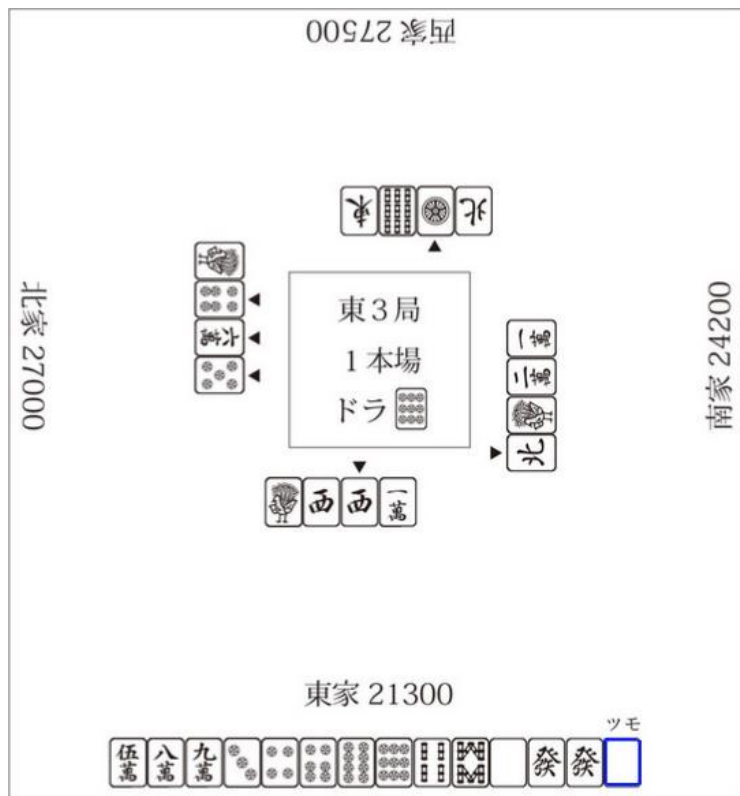


Toimen's cut is a pon here. You have 2 pairs that are relatively easy to call: . This is a situation where you want to fight for the lead and aim to win. Chiitoitsu can't call so it's harder to go for keiten aiming for it. In this situation it seems like fixating on chiitoi is not good. There are many times where I'm unsure about choosing between toitoi and chiitoi. If the pairs are easy to call, it's good to go for an aggressive toitoi.

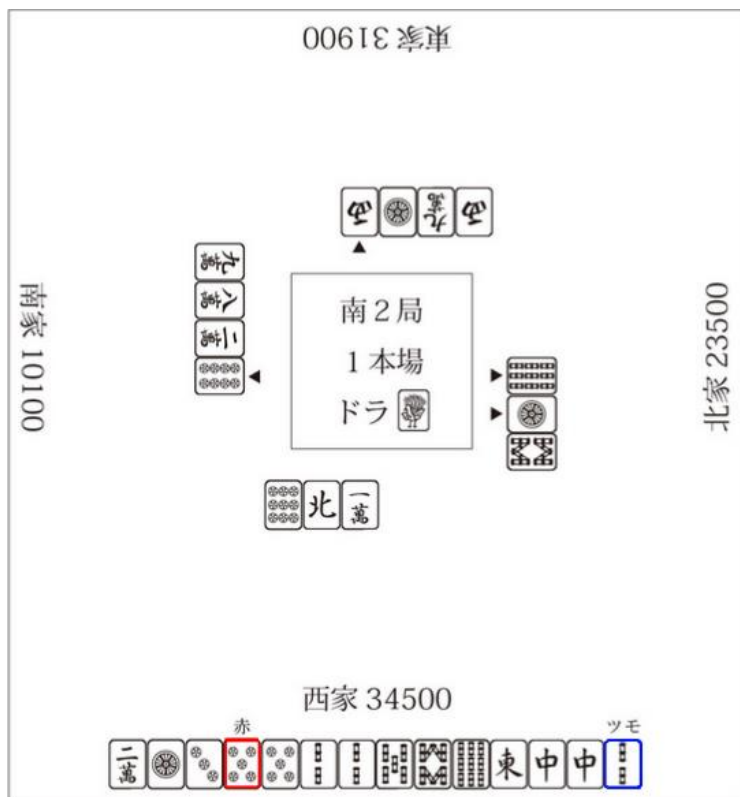










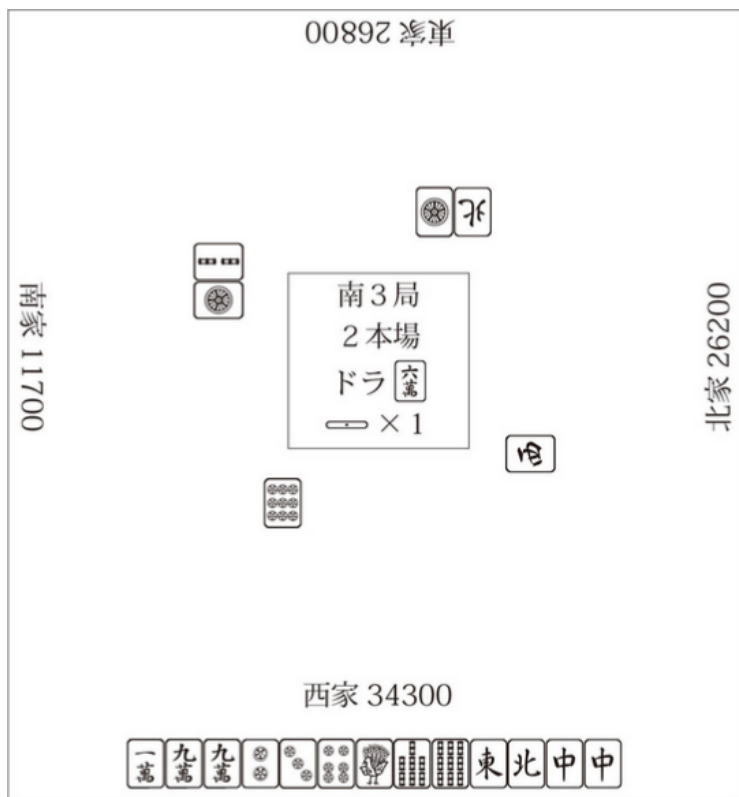
Pon toimen's **南**. Don't worry about getting stuck here. It is the South round and you are in last place. It is a cheap hand but call aggressively and head for the win. The dealer values attacks. However, if this were the 7<sup>th</sup> turn, I'd find it more difficult to call **南**. With this hand it's also ok to take **南** as your first call but the menzen style wouldn't do that.





Above we see a hand that wouldn't call before but can now. Take this  draw and your dealership as the signal to turn off the “no calls” button. You'd like to start with a strong  or  call. If you have the option to call both 發, do it even if you have no extra pair or 中. It is important to put pressure on the other players.




This hand also turns into a calling hand with this  draw. It was difficult to call the  until this  came. Let's look at the point situation. You are first in South 2 with 34,500 points. Winning here will give you an almost guaranteed first or second. After drawing this  you want to call  or .



If you've read this far, then you know that the  is not called here. But let's look at the situation. You're in first with 34,300 going into South 3. If you win for 1,000 points, you will enter South 4 with a boost from the riichi stick and 2 honba, putting you in a position to not lose first even to a mangan tsumo from toimen. The value of 1,000 points in this situation is very impactful. If I win this, first is waiting for me.

Many people would easily call that . If you call, you will be close to winning and topping the game, but there is a big risk of dealing into an opponent's riichi if your hand gets stuck. On Tenhou where we want to avoid lasts, it's more difficult to make calls that constrain our defensive strength with hands that easily jam up.



If the hand was like this, then you'd call the . In this situation it doesn't matter if there is value or not, the question is whether the hand can easily win. **It's important to think about what will happen to your score when you win this,** and what happens if you deal into someone else.

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 So far, I have shown you various call judgements of menzen style play and I hope you now have a clearer picture of the playstyle and its basic tenets:

- \*Do not take risks for cheap hands
- \*It is better and easier to call when your shapes are fixed
- \*If you have good value, you can call
- \*The dealer should focus on offense


It is simply a balance between risk and return. It's important to take appropriate risks in everything, not just mahjong. The key to learning and making sound decisions is to try and fail a lot. It's hard to identify failure in mahjong as it is results oriented, but there are many things you can do.

Try to make calls that you normally wouldn't take, and try not calling in areas where you usually would. When you do, you will see things. You may be surprised at some of the wins you can make closed, or at how you can call and not deal in very much.

Of course there will be drawbacks. Knowing your strength and weaknesses will increase your accuracy. **The results may inevitably lead to bias, but it is up to you how you evaluate the results and the process.** Try doing things differently and you'll be a little weaker at first. **Failure is essential for growth.** If you become weak temporarily, consider it part of the process of getting better. To make a big jump, you first have to crouch low.

What impression do you have of menzen style play after reading this chapter? Some people tell me "I can win without calling!" while others ask, "Can I really win without calling?". There is always something I think about when considering call judgement. It's the strength of the people I'm playing with. The strong people around you have a high capacity to win. There are a lot of quick riichis. Strong players are very good at holding winning tiles and making it to tenpai without dealing in. It's hard to visualize players stronger than yourself so imagine yourself as a virtual opponent to improve your push-pull, tile efficiency, logic, and reading with.

## Column: Me and Mahjong Part 1

My first encounter with mahjong goes all the way back to elementary school. I first saw it in a video game on my friend's SNES while over at their house. I'm not sure why I chose it, maybe I just wanted to play something more mature. It was 2 player mahjong. We found out that if you pressed start, select, left, and right all at the same time, you could mess around and give yourself whatever tiles you wanted. I don't remember the name of the game as my memory is poor. I used to play it to see how many yakuman I could combine. For example I could make all the tiles in my hand into  though it wouldn't let me win. I don't remember how I learned the rules of mahjong. By the time I entered junior high school, I understood most of the rules and yaku. The learning ability of children is terrifying.


After I entered junior high, I became addicted to a game called SUPER Mahjong Tournament, a release for the SNES published by KOEI. I'm not sure if any of you have ever played it before. The opponents were all historical figures. Tokugawa would say something like "if you can't call, wait until you can" or, Nostradamus would say "My prophecy is absolute. Don't you get excited just thinking about it?". The goal of the game was to unify the country by bankrupting the historical figures. I think I played this game for a long time without ever getting tired of it, even through my high school years. This may have been the basis of my current tile efficiency.

When I entered university, I was fortunate to have a few classmates who could play mahjong. The first thing we did was to buy mahjong mats and tiles and bring them to a friend's house where we would set up our stuff and play. During the summer vacation of my first year at university, we would meet in the evening, play mahjong until morning, and then go home to sleep after eating Yoshinoya brand gyudon.

Mahjong was also popular in the university club activities, and I often played mahjong with the club seniors and got taken out for drinks. My mahjong which they nicknamed “old man hunting” was already stronger than that of my seniors. I owe it all to the SUPER Mahjong Tournament. And of course from there, the next step would be...

**Free mahjong.** I didn't know how strong I was, and I wanted to test my strength. Playing with strangers was new and nerve-wracking. In the beginning, my hands were shaking to pick up the tiles. The first time I went to play, my friend came along. When I had a hand like dealer daburii tanpin akadora he smugly said “Kyuushu Kyuuhai!” and showed his tiles. But to my surprise there were only 8 kinds of tiles and it was a chombo. I remember that to this day.

It was common for me to go out playing in the morning when I had exams in the evening. I was happy to go and play because I loved the environment so much. This was especially true when there were tournaments, since I wanted

people to think I was a strong mahjong player. I practiced how to discard nicely. I used erasers and practiced during my classes at the university to figure out how to discard in a cool way. If you like mahjong, you've probably experienced this. I made vertical lines on my eraser and practiced as if I was cutting . I practiced various riichi motions to see if they would look neat. I also practiced moupai and learned to use my thumb and middle finger to feel the tile patterns.

Wanting to look even stronger, I trained myself to discard as quickly as possible. Even in situations where I had doubt, I tried to play as if I had no time to spare. I thought that people who could attack back against a riichi were strong, so I focused on the steps to counterattack. I also thought that people who could build big hands with good shapes were stronger, so I became more of a menzen player aiming for those things. Mahjong is not a game where the strongest player can always win, so image was important to me.

After graduating from university, I went on to graduate-school. Just when I thought it was time for me to stop playing free mahjong, I came across the internet mahjong site Tenhou and its ranking system. I never imagined that this encounter would have such an impact on my mahjong life.

(Continues in Me and Mahjong Part 2)