



RIICHI
MAHO
ON
ZEN

*BALANCE
YOUR GAME*

YOSHIHIRO MATSUMOTO

松本吉弘



WORLD RIICHI PUBLISHING



Yoshihiro Matsumoto



is known as “The Hitman” in the mahjong community. I think it’s mostly because of how he presents himself: cool clothes, cool hair, and a strong presence, like he could mess you up. And he will...but only on the mahjong table, and he’ll still be a gentleman about it.

His teammate, best friend, and rival, Sho Shiratori, wants everyone who picks up this book to know that Matsumoto is the perfect example of a mahjong player you should copy. He has an orthodox approach to the game, and studying it will definitely make you a stronger player. Even Shiratori, who has a longer professional career than Matsumoto, takes advice from him regarding M.LEAGUE rules, since they’re very close to what is used in the Nihon Professional Mahjong Association (the organization Matsumoto belongs to).

Although my interactions with Matsumoto mostly come from social media, he remains a player that I look up to and aspire to emulate, both on and off the table.

While translating this book, I cried for the young Matsumoto in his essays, celebrated his first tournament win in the Ryuou tournament, and most of all, learned a lot of mahjong strategy that I will be applying to my own games. I hope you do the same.

Jenn Barr, Japan Professional Mahjong League

RIICHI MAHJONG

Balance Your Game

Yoshihiro Matsumoto

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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. 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.



Foreword

Do you have a mahjong mentor? I started playing mahjong 10 years ago, but I believe that everyone I've met during that decade is my mahjong mentor. Let me explain.

I've had opportunities to gain a lot of valuable experiences compared to other professionals my age, from winning the Ryuo Tournament, to playing in the RTD League and M.LEAGUE. I'm often asked, "How do you do it?" I answer that it's thanks to observing many different people play mahjong and making a conscious effort to replicate all the good elements of their play. I've seen it all: aggressive players, defensive players, and players who played mostly closed or mostly open. However, what I realized along the way is that the strongest mahjong is a perfect balance of the good parts of each of those styles. That balance is what defines me.

To put it very simply, mahjong has no one correct answer. It is a game of many possible answers. You need to look at everyone else's answers to build your own individual style of mahjong.

Even this book is just my own answer key and you don't need to take it as absolute truth. I hope you will

view each piece of advice as one of the many possible approaches and use them as some of the building blocks in developing your own style of mahjong.

In the essays I talk about my own journey. I hope that new generations of mahjong players will be inspired by this book and be encouraged to do things that support the mahjong community from the bottom up.

I was blessed to have a lot of help in writing this book. First of all, I need to thank Susumu Fujita, the representative director of CyberAgent and general manager of Shibuya ABEMAS, who has guided me in M.LEAGUE. Takaharu Ooi and Sho Shiratori, my Shibuya ABEMAS teammates are always ready to give me advice, for which I am grateful. Finally I want to express my gratitude to Satoshi Fujiwara, former member of Nihon Pro Mahjong, who helped me with the overall structure of the book and the example hands you'll see throughout it.

Yoshihiro Matsumoto
Nihon Pro Mahjong



**First-year
M.LEAGUE
Draft Pick's
Riichi Mahjong:
Balance Your Game
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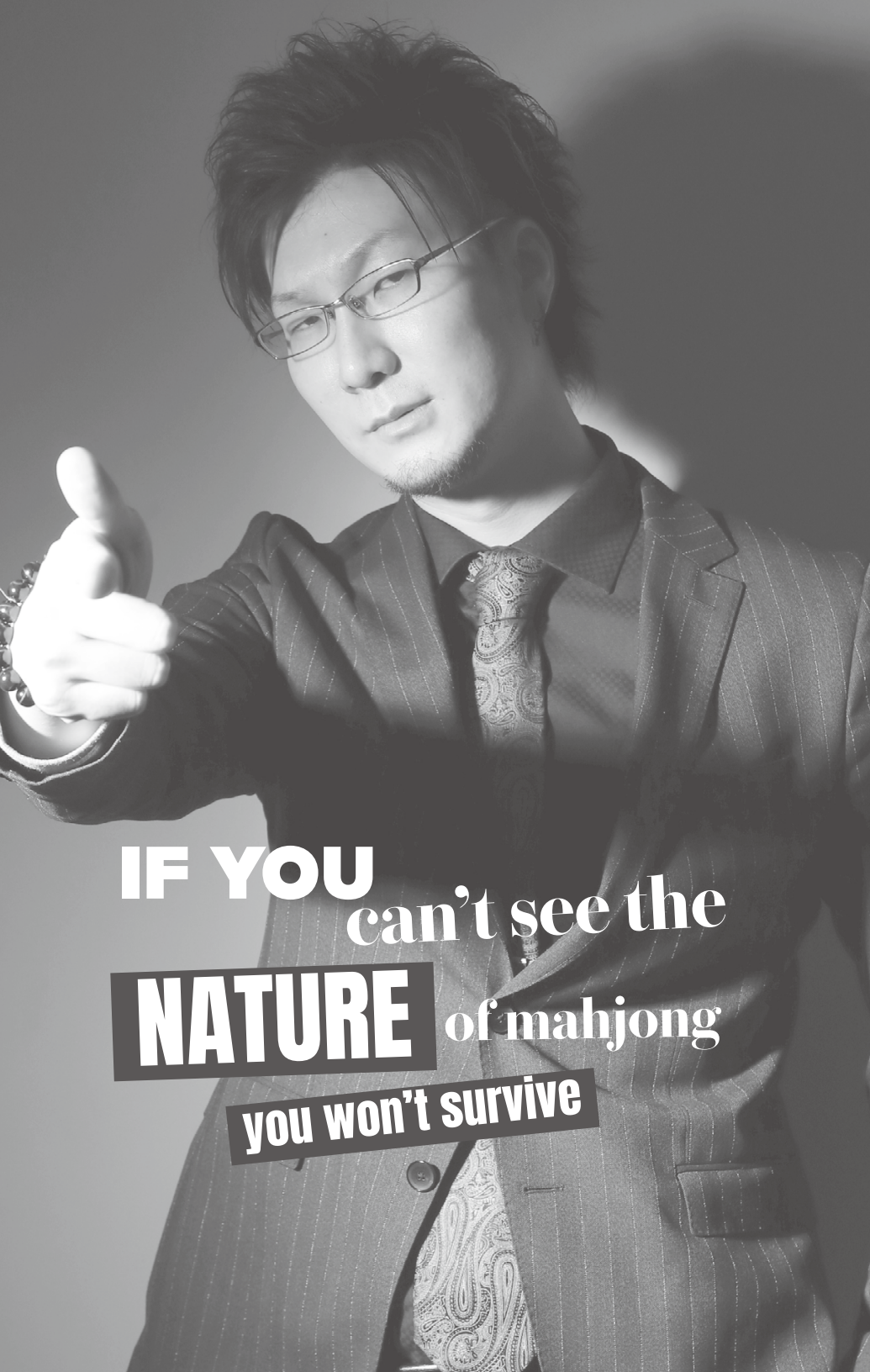
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**Part 1:
Best Offensive Balance**

**Modern
Mahjong Tactics**



IF YOU can't see the

NATURE of mahjong

you won't survive



M's Best Balance

What You Need to Understand First

I imagine everyone picking up this book will come from diverse backgrounds. Some are just starting their mahjong journey, some play many hours online, and some play mostly with their local clubs. I am often asked by different people, "How can I get good at mahjong?" This is how I respond:

- (1) Keep a clear goal in mind**
- (2) Understand the nature of the game**
- (3) Understand the fundamentals**
- (4) Start by applying yourself**
- (5) Don't get hung up on preconceptions**
- (6) Disregard unnecessary information**
- (7) Keep your cool**

I've listed seven things here, so let's go through each of them.

(1) Keep a clear goal in mind

Do you play other games or sports besides mahjong? Personally, I've played baseball since I was a kid, and I've learned that every game and sport has certain objectives. In professional baseball, the objective is to win the pennant race, and each team aims to win each game in order to realize that goal. The means to achieve that could include things like hitting a home run, stealing bases or striking the other team out.

Let's think about this in mahjong terms. For most people, the two main objectives in mahjong are:

1. Achieving good results over time (in free play, private games, online, etc.)
2. Winning tournaments (getting first place overall in a predetermined number of games)

I am most people too. Therefore, I aim to have the most points at the table by the end of each game. The means to doing that are all related to gaining points (winning hands) and avoiding loss of points (folding).

Even with equal hands and equal conditions, your choices may change according to the two main objectives above. For example, chasing a dealer's riichi with a poor wait and no dora would normally be a negative EV (expected value) decision, and in most cases you



would choose not to riichi if your focus was Objective 1. However, if your focus is Objective 2, where allowing the dealer to complete that hand would more than likely secure their win in the game, you may choose to chase the riichi anyway despite the negative EV for that particular hand.

In mahjong, it's important to be aware of these objectives, the appropriate methods to achieve them, and how those methods should be prioritized. Winning big hands, collecting tenpai payments on a draw, properly folding, and assisting other players are all methods to achieving these objectives. You must never confuse these methods to be objectives in and of themselves.

For example, let's imagine the player to your right is calling for a *honitsu* (common flush/half flush) and your own hand is weak. One possible strategy that comes to mind is to squeeze (hold onto tiles that may be helpful to that player) and stop that player from completing their hand. But what about a South-3 scenario as described below:

Dealer: 32,500 points

South: 46,800 points (you)

West: 8,700 points (with calls for a *honitsu*)

North: 12,000 points

When you started the hand, the top priority was

to win the hand. However, if that no longer seems realistic, the next priority is ensuring that someone other than the dealer wins. In this scenario, it's better to help the West player's open *honitsu* hand so they can end the dealer's turn for you. If you get into a mindset where you always squeeze against open hands, then you'll lose out on the ability to be more flexible in situations like this one. When you consider that your actual objective is not to win a certain hand or to prevent others from winning hands, but instead to achieve strong results over time (or win tournaments), then you can also see that sometimes allowing someone else to win a hand can be a route to that objective.

From this point on, the choices discussed in this book will assume Objective 1 is the focus; achieving strong, long-term results.

(2) Understand the nature of the game

Mahjong is a game where every play can be an intentional choice, yet the ultimate results are governed by luck. To put it another way, no matter how good your decisions are, there is no guarantee that the results will be good. Conversely, you may make terrible mistakes and still win, despite your opponents making the right decisions. A common complaint is, "I'm not doing anything wrong, but I can't win." This is very

plausible and, by the same token, missing an opportunity with one hand doesn't mean you won't get another chance the next hand. Before you continue with this book, I want you to understand the nature of the game as I described it above.

If you want to really be a strong player, it is important that you don't become fixated with the results, and instead objectively review your decisions. For example, even if you happen to deal in with a decision that is positive EV in the long run, you should not necessarily judge that decision to be wrong (although there may be aspects other than the deal-in to reflect on). Conversely you need to review hands where you shouldn't have pushed so hard, even if you happened to not deal in.

Everything that happens on a mahjong table is affected by your decisions, but it is very tricky to accurately determine what events on the table were caused by your choices or by factors outside of your control. It is important to not overly focus on the results, and instead reflect on whether a decision itself was beneficial (positive EV) in the long run.

(3) Understand the fundamentals

This is two-fold:

1. Understand the underlying nature of mahjong's various strategic elements
2. Understand the strategic implications of the differing rule sets

Let's break these down too.

1. Understand the underlying nature of mahjong's various strategic elements

There are many different strategic elements in mahjong. For instance, a dealer hand receives 1.5 times the number of points of a non-dealer hand, and pays double for a non-dealer tsumo. The reason players are wary of challenging a dealer riichi is that dealer wins are 1.5 times more expensive. However, if there are other factors that can take priority, you should not hesitate to take certain risks, regardless of a dealer riichi.

A dora is a bonus tile that gives you an extra han for each one you use in a winning hand. Naturally, people often try to build hands that can accept and make full use of dora, meaning the dora becomes more dangerous than other tiles. But the significance of dora stops there.

You'll often hear people say, "I can't cut this because

A was prettier than hand B, be careful. When facing aggression from an opponent, there may be cases where you would fold with A, but keep going with B.

At their core, yaku are simple tools for gaining points from a winning hand. Each yaku has its own degrees of benefit but beware of romanticizing them beyond that. The objective of mahjong is not to build beautiful hands (although some people play mahjong because they want to build beautiful hands); the objective is to make appropriate decisions while taking the nature of each yaku into account.

2. Understand the strategic implications of the differing rule sets

A typical uma is usually around 10-20 or 10-30, but at a study session I played in recently we changed it up a bit.

30,000 start, 30,000 break-even (no oka)

1st: 50P

2nd: 20P

3rd: -30P

4th: -40P

※ 1P = 1,000 points

The total for nine games was added together to determine the overall winner. Given this uma structure, where should your strategic awareness be when you take a seat at the table? Think about it for a minute be-

fore reading on.

The impact on points for each improved placement is as follows:

4th → 3rd: +10P

3rd → 2nd: +50P

2nd → 1st: +30P

As you can see, the return rate of going from 3rd to 2nd place is the largest, and the loss rate of dropping from 3rd to 4th is the smallest. That is to say, when you are in 3rd place, it is correct to aim for 2nd place, even if it means taking some risk of dropping to 4th. Also, dropping from 1st place to 3rd place is an 80-point loss, so the 1st place player needs to play more conservatively in hands where there is a high risk of dropping to 3rd.

This is an extreme example, but all rule sets (beyond just the uma and oka structures) have an underlying nature and strategic principle for winning. You need to have an awareness of that for each hanchan you play.

(4) Start by applying yourself

If you want to get stronger at mahjong, I believe the most important thing is to find time you can dedicate to playing. You can study all you want, but understanding concepts academically is different than

successfully applying them in a match. Even if it's a process of trial and error, what matters is applying yourself with the true objective – the conditions for victory – at the forefront of your mind.

(5) Don't get hung up on preconceptions

A generation ago, conventional mahjong wisdom held that you shouldn't riichi until upgrading a middle (*kanchan*) wait to a two-sided (*ryanmen*) wait. Even with dora in your hand, it did not justify an instant riichi declaration. Modern theory has flipped that. It is now widely accepted theory to instantly declare riichi with a middle wait if there are no other riichis on the board.

What is important to discuss here is not to dogmatically declare riichi on a middle wait because you're first to it but instead grasp the strategic purpose underlying the approach and make your own decisions based on the priorities you're faced with in that moment. Mahjong strategy is constantly evolving. If everyone starts insta-riiching on even a middle wait, new strategies will emerge to exploit the gap in that trend. I want you to avoid formulaic thinking where you always take the same course for similar situations.

(6) Disregard unnecessary information

Mahjong is an information-heavy game: round context, score situation, tile efficiency, waits, hand

value, strategic direction, opponent quirks, table situation, discard context and much, much more. If you try to process all of this information constantly with the same level of urgency, your brain will go into overload.

The trick to improving at mahjong is to disregard unnecessary information and automate actions that you can systematize. For example, riiching for pinfu+dora 1, or immediately folding to two riichis unless you're tenpai. Doing this means you just need to identify exceptions that justify deviating from the rules.

Especially watch out for whether discards come from the hand or are instantly discarded from opponents to whom the following apply:

- An opponent who has called tiles
- An opponent who has dropped partial sequences
- Discard tiles that don't appear to make sense

Discards that seem inconsistent should make you question what the underlying logic is behind that player's choices. For example, if a player who discarded  and then discarded a safe tile later, now discards , you need to consider why  would be kept longer than both  and a safe tile, and deduce that the player held    , drew  and discarded  to shift the group. If you can tell a discard was a shift, then you know the   two-sided wait is safe (unless it's a single wait). A

two-sided wait of  would mean the player has  in their hand. If the player held   , drew  and discarded , then the *souzu* (bamboos) in their hand must be       and the player would be furiten.

Keep in mind that advanced players may turn this logic against you, retaining the reasonably safer tile  in order to create the appearance of a shift.

(7) Keep your cool

Let's say it's South-3 and you are in last place with 13,000 points. This is your hand turn 10 as the dealer.

               Dora: 

This is a good hand that is potentially mangan. What if you haven't drawn a single useful tile since the first turn, so all your tiles were discarded from the wall (*tsumogiri*) and now it's turn 10; will you be able to keep your cool?

Make note that whether your hand started like this or you went from 4-away (4-*shanten*) from tenpai to 1-away between turns 8 and 10, the reality is that this is your hand at turn 10; the destination is the same and the journey does not matter. There are only 6 types and 20 useful tiles in total for this hand, so it isn't as easy to get tenpai as it looks. 10 discarded draws is not unheard of in this situation. If you start to lose your cool, it gets harder to accept this fact objectively. We cannot

choose the tiles we draw in mahjong. That's a reality of this game. Instead of bemoaning your unlucky draws, use this opportunity to gather information from other players' discards and behavior.

Now, do you know how often probability unfolds according to expectations? As a non-mahjong related example, in a 1/100 drawing, the probability that a winning ticket will be drawn in the first 100 draws is only 63% (so 37% of the time there will be no winner). If you keep this in mind, you'll be less inclined to complain that the probabilities aren't working out for you and will be better equipped to avoid tilt when the useless tiles just keep coming.



M's Best Balance

Best Balance in Hand Building

Look at the Bigger Picture

Mahjong is a four-player game. Calculated simply, including exhaustive draws, the game should give you a good result one in every four or five hands. The key to maintaining good long-term outcomes is deciding how to play the other three or four hands. Even the most casual player can win when dealt a good hand. What sets strong players apart is how they handle the weak deals.

Rather than thinking in terms of each discard of each hand, you should take a holistic approach to your choices over an entire hanchan and consider how those choices move you closer to victory. For example, consider the following conditions for South-2.

Dealer: 23,000 points

South: 17,000 points

West: 48,000 points (you)

North: 12,000 points

On turn 5 your hand is:



It's not a promising hand and there is a good possibility that it will take too long to build, so you should keep tiles that are safe to your opponents. That is a two-dimensional approach.

Next, look at your opponents' discards. The dealer's hand looks slow, and the player to your right (*shimocha*) in the North seat is going for a *honitsu*. Instead of just holding onto safe tiles, the better approach would be to feed the player to your right the tiles they appear to want, help them complete their *honitsu* and break the current dealer's turn for you. That is a three-dimensional approach.

Finally, let's consider the scores if the North player wins a self-drawn mangan hand.

South-3

Dealer: 15,000 points

South: 46,000 points (you)

West: 20,000 points

North: 19,000 points

The gap in scores between the 2nd-4th-place players narrows and since you are the next dealer, there's a chance the other players may decide that contesting 1st place is unrealistic and battle between themselves for 2nd-4th. Think about the choices you should make for

that scenario. That is a holistic approach. You can think of it as anticipating for the hanchan as a whole.

When you are in first place, it's easy to fall into the habit of making the theme of every hand in South-2 and South-3 winning the hand as quickly as possible. However, if you take a holistic approach, you will discover that even more strategies open up, such as allowing other players to win hands. This is what I mean by focusing on the bigger picture and it is one of the important perceptions in mahjong.

Identify a Theme for the Hand

Take a look at this starting hand:



We'll use this hand to start talking about how hand building differs according to the theme of that hand.

If you are in last place and need points, discard . If you are in first place and are looking for speed, discard . If you just want to avoid losing points, discard . When you need more points, the goal of this hand is *honitsu*, so you can't just discard the guest wind all out of habit. On the other hand, if this is a hand where you need to avoid losing points, start by discarding and see what you get, aiming for a yaku that doesn't

require riichi (such as a *yakuhai* (value honor tiles) or *honitsu*).

What I want you to take away here is that you can't make suboptimal discards that deviate from the goal of the theme of your hand. Except in cases where either choice doesn't make a big difference, it is vital that you are clearly conscious of the goal when building your hand.

I mentioned that mahjong is a four-player game. Naturally, your three opponents are each repeatedly making decisions that will return the best results for their individual goals. Only concentrating on your own theme and circumstances when making these repeated decisions can actually lead you further away from achieving your goal. In actual matches, you want to aim to grasp your opponents' strategies before considering your own hand and turn that into decisions that give you the best balance.



Hand Value

Build hands with value

When you receive your deal, you should decide on a goal according to the theme of each round and hand. Hand-building means a series of discard decisions that move you toward your intended goal whilst taking into account the speed and intentions of your opponents.

There are rules in hand building. You are aiming to build hands with value.

What I mean by value here is variable. When you need points, value lies in the scoring potential. When you need speed, the value lies in the momentum. When you need to avoid losses, then defensive flexibility is the hand's true value.

When I first see my hand, I give it a rough evaluation with a number score.

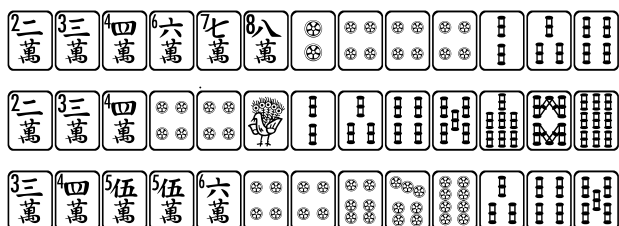
For example, take this starting hand in the West seat during East-1.



It's 4-away from tenpai for a standard hand shape, there is one dora, a possibility at *sanshoku* (mixed se-

quences/mixed triple sequence), *ittsu* (full straight/pure straight) in the *souzu*, or *tanyao* (all inside/all simples) with pinfu. I evaluated this hand at 60 points out of 100.

It's the first hand of the game, so my theme is going to be, "Win with mangan or more." Following that theme, we have to get this 60-point starting hand up to a 100-point complete hand, so we'll aim for one of the following final shapes:



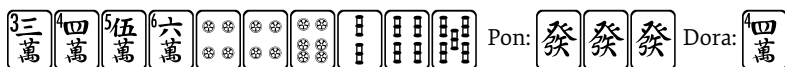
Next, we'll map out a route for our hand to reach that goal, while monitoring the speed of our opponents. The trick here is to leave as many options open as possible. With the starting hand shown above, you might get *ittsu* in the *souzu* depending on the direction your hand develops, so don't discard  or  too early and start by discarding the honor tiles instead.

Incidentally, if this were South-3 instead of East-1 and you were in first place, then your discard choice would change to match your themes of winning quickly and not dealing in. A hand that combines both speed and safety is a hand with value for that round so you would discard  and , and hold onto the value

honor tiles, aiming for either a *tanyao* or a value honor triplet as a yaku.

Build hands you can fight back with

Another benefit to aiming for hands with value is that you can build a hand strong enough to fight back with. For example, suppose that it is East-1 with the starting hand from page 26, the hand progressed normally, and you drew a second 發 and then ponned for the triplet.



If another player immediately declared riichi here, would you really want to push on with this 2000-point hand? The defensive balance with this hand is not great and if you just move ahead with hands like this without thinking about it too deeply, it's very likely you will find yourself in this exact situation.

But what about if you didn't call the 發 after it paired up?



Depending on your next draws, if you drop 發 and 西 then you can start to see *tanyao*, pinfu and *sanshoku*. That means even if your hand is slower than the others, you keep the possibility of discarding the 發 and 西 whilst building an expensive hand with a great shape

that's worth fighting for. Most strong mahjong players are skillful in the mid-game and endgame of hands. Aiming for strategic value will make it easier to fight back even under pressure.

A hand with value does not mean expensive

For example, look at this hand:



We see three two-sided waits and a pair of 發. So do you call a 發 that's discarded on the third turn? What I want to stress here is that you should pursue a hand with strategic value and not just aim for points value. A hand with value means the best hand for winning according to your theme for that round. In some cases that will be an expensive hand, but in other cases it will be a fast hand or playing the hand tighter.

For this hand, even if you complete it concealed and call riichi, there is a high probability that it will only be worth 2,600 points: riichi and 發. So the value in this hand is found in stopping the hands of your opponents and the goal is to commit to and win the 1,000 point hand.



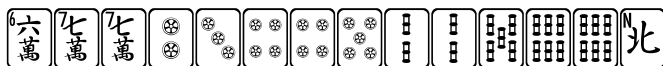
M's Best Balance

Building Hands and Safe Tiles

Slim down or go wide?

Each situation in a mahjong game changes with every draw and discard. I've reiterated that playing to a theme is important, but the next problem is whether to play the hand slim or wide. Playing it slim refers to keeping only the essential shapes and holding onto safe tiles while playing wide means to keep as many shapes as you possibly can without a thought to the risk.

For example, consider this hand:



The slim play at this point is to discard  or , and discarding  is the wide play. Besides your theme for the round, the following are important factors in deciding whether to slim the hand down or widen it:

- (1) Score if the hand wins
- (2) Speed of other players

Let's look at each of these points in order.

(1) Score if the hand wins

Let's say you have the hand above, and  is the dora. Anticipating an expensive hand, you want to do anything to win this hand, so the discard should be  for the widest acceptance possible.

(2) Speed of other players

The decision whether to make the hand slim or go wide will be based on the speed of the other players at the table. If your opponents' hands seem slow, going wide with your hand is an option. However, if it seems they could riichi at any moment, you should slim it down.

This will result in you balancing between (1) and (2) according to the hand theme while building your hand.

Once you decide to slim down

Suppose you have decided to slim the hand down. Perhaps you are trying to judge which of two tiles is superior. How would you approach the decision?

(1) Tiles left in the wall

(2) Risk level of tiles discarded after tenpai

We'll go through these points one by one.

(1) Tiles left in the wall

We'll talk about reading the wall more later in the book, but when playing the hand slim, you choose tiles that are more likely to remain in the wall. With the hands above, if the *manzu* look to be in low demand and the *souzu* look to be in high demand, you can lock in the *manzu* shape by discarding  and hold onto all the *souzu* since they may be more difficult to draw yourself.

(2) Risk level of tiles discarded after tenpai

What if there is a player going for a *manzu honitsu*? As long as you think they're not tenpai yet, you should discard *manzu* first and start with . This way you can avoid dealing in when you have to choose a *manzu* to discard for tenpai.

The advantage of slimming down is that it has the effect of increasing your immediate safety, but it also has the effect of allowing you to push back against pressure from your opponents. If you cut   in the above hand and hold onto two safe tiles, you might be able to push back against opponent aggression with a hand that is 2-away from tenpai, without cutting any dangerous tiles. This is a significant advantage you can't ignore.

On the other hand, in situations where it is necessary to win at all costs (hands where you don't need to worry about defense), you need to take a wide stance

and not fear the risks. Ultimately, I want you to take away that the balance between these approaches should be determined based on the strategic theme of the hand and the other factors I discussed above.

Teachings of the Tabletop Hitman
Don't Slack on These!

HIT POINT



- **If your hand looks expensive, then you can go wide**
- **If you can stay ahead of the other hands (speed), then you can go wide**

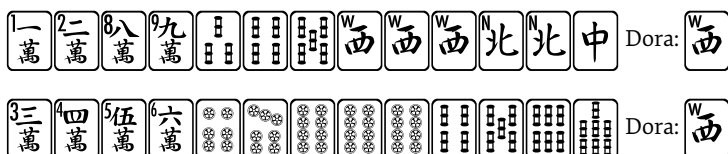


M's Best Balance

How Many Away and Hand Building

Do not fixate on the *shanten* number

Now take a look at the following two hands.



Both are the same distance away from tenpai. However, it should be clear which of the two is closer to winning. The first hand only makes tenpai by drawing which is 2 types/8 tiles, while the second hand, including all the potentially poor waits, gets to tenpai with to manzu, pinzu and souzu, totaling 18 types/61 tiles. Incredibly, the difference in speed is about eight times.

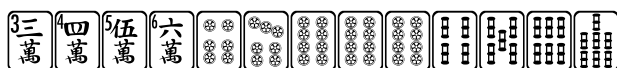
This comparison is an extreme example, but the important thing when discussing speed is not how many away from tenpai (the *shanten* count), but the quality of the shapes and the number of tiles that can be accepted. For instance, let's say another player calls riichi when you have the first hand, and you are in the mindset to push your own hand to a certain extent

because you're 1-away with a concealed triplet of dora. However, with the first hand, the probability of achieving tenpai with each draw is only about 7%, so you need to carefully consider if that probability is worth pushing all the dangerous tiles that you may subsequently draw.

Always be thinking of your final shape

There are different sorts of value in hands that can lead to winning, and one of those important factors is the 'final shape.' In mahjong, tile acceptance decreases the closer you get to tenpai and the final acceptance is the final shape. Often, strengthening the final shape by narrowing the acceptance at the 2-away or 1-away stage can help increase your win-rate.

Let's take the second hand as an example:

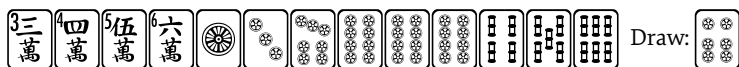


This hand gets to tenpai with 18 types/61 tiles, but among those, 4 types/16 tiles will result in tenpai with a bad wait (middle wait). With the above hand, you will end up with a bad-shape tenpai once every four times.

If it's still early in the hand, rejecting a tenpai with a poor wait is also an option. Even if you end up furiten because of it, the above shape often turns into a three-sided wait, so furiten riichi is viable depending on the situation.

It's important to hold onto valuable incomplete blocks that are likely to contribute to a strong final shape.

To illustrate this, let's look at the same hand, but a little bit earlier in the round:



Instead of discarding  just because it's tenpai, consider cutting the  to open the possibility of strengthening the final shape.

The key to strengthening the final shape is to hold onto the following shapes as long as possible:

- Four consecutive tiles (*yonrenkei*): 3456
- Bulging shape (*nakabukure*): 4556
- Pseudo two-sided (*aryanmen*): 4456

Each has its own characteristics. The order of usefulness in strengthening your final shape is:

Bulging shape > Four consecutive tiles > Pseudo two-sided

The order of efficiency in aiming for a tenpai shape with no concern for yaku is:

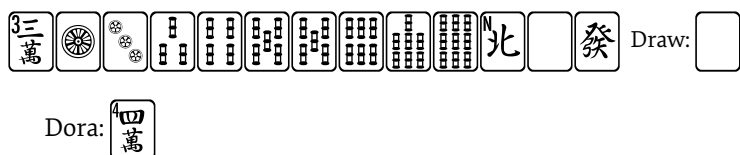
Four consecutive tiles > Bulging shape > Pseudo two-sided

Note that among the three shapes above, the weakest is the Pseudo two-sided, so if you are in doubt, the

best option is usually to discard the extra tile from the Pseudo two-sided shape. These shapes appear frequently, so it is important to keep this advice in mind and be on the lookout for them.

Don't kill potential mangan hands

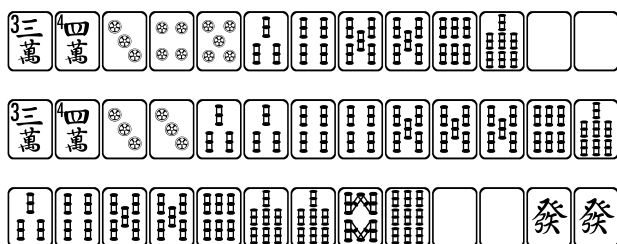
Let's assume it's the last hand of the South round. The West player has to self-draw a mangan to get first place and is dealt the following hand:



At first glance, there are many *souzu* tiles, and a pair of value honors, so a *honitsu* looks close. However, does that mean you should discard   straight away?

There is a *pinfu*, *tanyao*, *dora*, and *sanshoku* hiding in this hand. However, it's also not better to start with cutting honor tiles and reduce your chances at the *honitsu*.

Visualize the goal of this hand one more time:



These are some of the options. The one tile that is

unnecessary in all these hands is . Start by discarding  and then adjust your goal based on what you draw next. Don't self-sabotage your shots at mangan self-draw (*tsumo*).

Teachings of the Tabletop Hitman
Don't Slack on These!

HIT POINT



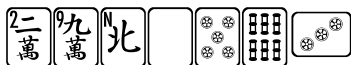
**Always be thinking of
your final shape**



Camouflage and Hand Building

You're not building a pool

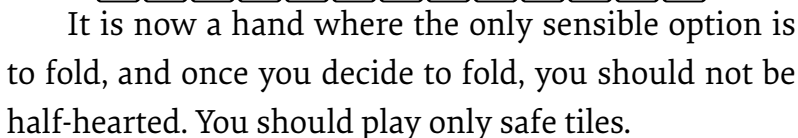
There was a time, not so long ago, when winning on a discard with a pond or discard pool like this was praised as skillful.



This strategy weaponizes a common principle that tiles on the outside of an opponent's early discards are more likely to be safe. It is known as camouflage. These days, it's more common to prioritize your own hand goals over camouflage and there are many factors that are considered to be more important than building your pool.

I am also the type of person to focus on acceptance and other factors without worrying too much about camouflage. To put it bluntly, whether you use camouflage or not, there will be times in mahjong where your winning tile will be discarded and times when it won't. Additionally, when you're 1-away, there is no telling

For example, if you were faced with an opponent's riichi with the discard pool at the top of this section, what would you do with the hand below?



²二萬 ²二萬 ³三萬 ³三萬 ⁴四萬 ⁴四萬 ❶❶❶❶ ❷❷❷❷ ❸❸❸❸ ❹❹❹❹ ❺❺❺❺ ❻❻❻❻ ❼❼❼❼ ❽❽❽❽ ❾❾❾❾ ❿❿❿❿

In other words, whether your opponent's hand is terrible or great, there are many cases where discard choices are made regardless of any camouflage. Camouflage is meaningful only when one or more other players happen to have a hand that could go either way or are struggling with safe tiles, and only when their hand contains a .

Keep the following in mind:

Do not apply camouflage to the extent that it significantly reduces your tile acceptance/efficiency.

--The goal is not to create camouflage, but to increase your chance of winning by on a discard, and you should not create camouflage to the extent that it reduces your tile acceptance/efficiency disproportionately to its benefits.

Camouflage is not something deliberately created. Ideally, it should emerge naturally as part of the process. Even if you do try to construct your pool, it is meaningless unless your final wait is relevant to your trap. There are many factors that take precedence over camouflage in mahjong.

Be conscious to not let the camouflaged target wait be on the cheaper side.

--There is always a target wait to camouflage. In the earlier example, that target was . If that  is the cheaper side of the wait, it defeats the purpose, so you need to be careful.

Example:



Do not use camouflage when you want to win with a self-draw

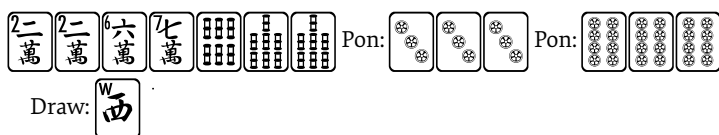
--Camouflage is a tactic that increases the rate of winning off another player's discard and in turn lowering the possibility of a self-drawn win. It's better to take

a straightforward approach when you want to draw your own winning tile, such as in a hand that only has power when self-drawn (i.e. *sanankou* (three concealed triplets)).

Do not fear the hard read

There aren't a lot of cases where you can make an accurate read in mahjong, but the most popular 'rule' among intermediate players and above is, "Next to chiten, there is sobaten," meaning the wait will be next to the discard after a chi into tenpai.

For example, let's assume the following is 1-away from ready.



The dora is  and there are three  discarded on the board. If you are the dealer, in last place in South-3, then the discard here should be . In a situation where you need points and also want to continue as dealer, you can't afford to narrow your acceptance by discarding .

However, the disadvantage of playing your hand wide like this is that when your left player lets you call  , the other players will be able to fairly accurately read your wait.

They see you, after two calls, discard the safe 西, then you chi and discard 四.

Logically thinking, if you had or , then you would discard , but since this is a *tanyao* hand, is not likely to be helpful. In other words, if it is a two-sided wait, the hard read would be .

Of course, there is also the possibility of discarding  from  or . However, this read is based on the premise that it is indeed two-sided wait, so while it won't be 100% accurate there is a high probability that the wait is .

If these were the discards below, then it's an obvious hard read.



Both the middle  and middle  waits have been discarded and two tiles from the  dual acceptance shape was discarded with a safe  cut from a draw between them. Once you know the draw that made the hand tenpai (, then you can read the final wait with 100% accuracy ().

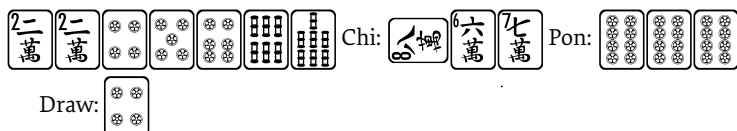
Camouflage with a switch discard

There is not really any need to be hesitant about making obvious calls like this. You don't need to worry about being seen or be afraid that your opponents are reading your hand. Any player would do the same in this type of situation. It's just playing logically.

However, there is a way to provide misinformation

to you opponents without compromising the efficiency of your build. That's the empty cut (*karagiri*) or switch discard.

An empty cut means that instead of drawing  and just discarding it, going out of your way to discard the  from your hand, switching it with the drawn tile.





M's Best Balance

Squeezing and Hand Building

Should honor tiles be cut or squeezed?

Let's review the nature of honor tiles. Honor tiles only gain meaning when you've collected three. It's hard to complete a triplet of them and that means they are inevitably easy to discard. They do happen to be highly compatible with high-scoring hands like *honitsu* and *chanta* (common outside/half outside hand), and often have the potential to transform into big hands. Based on this, let's talk about squeezing.

It's becoming increasingly common to early discard tiles that you would not want your opponents to call, such as double winds, effectively burying them. It is a fact that the probability of honor tiles being called is highest at the 7th discard. Naturally, when comparing a random 13 tiles and a random 20 tiles (13 in your starting hand + 7 drawn after), it's more likely you'll have pairs in the 20 tiles.

Now, take a look at this turn-1 hand:



There is no pair in this hand and it's not yet devel-

oped. Calling gets it closer to tenpai but also lowers the acceptance.

Perhaps that way of thinking has led to squeezing (*shibori*) being undervalued in modern mahjong. Squeezing is the art of holding onto tiles so that other players can't use them. In essence, squeezing tiles slows down both the hand of the squeezing player and the player waiting to call, giving the other two players an advantage.

But does it follow that we should never squeeze? For example, let's say this hand belongs to the top player in the last hand of the game.



Naturally, the most desirable call is and we'd like to avoid calling from anywhere else if possible. So what if the player is allowed to call on turn 1? This immediately makes the player's position much more comfortable and the maximum acceptance can be maintained.

Honor tiles have to be used in threes, so they can quickly become a friction point. If you let someone easily get past that friction by feeding into them, you're making things considerably easier for them.

That said, if we squeeze on absolutely everything, our own hand will inevitably suffer in terms of speed.

Next let's look at a North player's hand in East-3

with almost even points across the board. The dora is . Should you squeeze or cut the double  from each of these hands? Try to answer yourself first.

- (1)                  

hand and so you end up having to fold.

Or, times when you opted for a two-sided (*ryanmen*) wait instead of a double pair wait on an honor tile you weren't able to call, only to see the honor tile immediately came after you give up on it.

Squeezing honor tiles allows you to slow down opponents' hands. When I want to fight with a high-scoring hand, squeezing up to the very last minute and then finally discarding can help protect my position.

Instead of discarding any honor tiles you don't want to be called on turn 1, squeezing them until you can't anymore is a viable option for hands you want to make sure to win with.

Teachings of the Tabletop Hitman

Don't Slack on These!

HIT POINT



**The more you want to win,
the more you should squeeze**

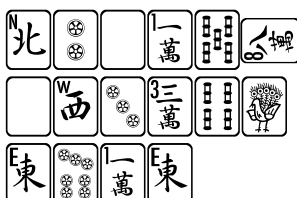


M's Best Balance

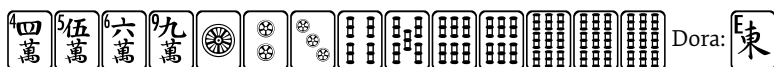
Best Balance in Yakuless Tenpai

Balance with yakuless tenpai shapes

Let's say a riichi has been declared by the West player, who has the following discards:



We, as the North player, drew some dangerous tiles and were playing around those, but then ended up with the following hand:



Discarding  or  achieves a yakuless tenpai. According to the *suji* count, 8 of the 18 *suji* pairs are still dangerous to the riichi. In order to get tenpai, either  or  has to be pushed and neither of these *suji* pairs have passed.

That means, if we assume the opponent's riichi is a two-sided wait, there are 8 *suji* pairs that haven't passed, so the simple calculation is that these tiles have

a 1-in-8 chance of dealing in. The average score for a non-dealer win on a riichi is approximately 5,000 to 6,000 points.

In other words, in exchange for losing about 6,000 points once every eight rounds, you will gain 1,500 points seven times out of eight (assuming you are the only two players in tenpai).

The formula for calculating return for the hand (return per round) is $-6,000 \text{ points} \times 1/8 + 1,500 \text{ points} \times 7/8 \approx 563 \text{ points}$, meaning that in the long term, pushing will yield an average of 563 points per round.

Therefore, pushing  or  is correct... Or is it? The above calculation is missing two important considerations.

One is that the danger level of the tiles you want to discard has not been taken into account. We will go over the 'density of the 18 *suji* pairs' in another chapter, but the level of risk is not equal for all dangerous *suji* pairs, and both  and  in the hand above are categorized as the most dangerous based on the pond. For example, discarding a somewhat safe tile like  based on the opponent's discards is completely different than discarding  and  and that risk factor changes the average points per round.

Another point is that there are placement points (*uma* and *oka*) in mahjong. Even if you gain 1,500 points seven times out of eight, if you lose 6,000 points

once in eight rounds resulting in dropping from second place to last, it translates into a significant loss.

Therefore, I personally would not push 九萬 or 四四 in the above hand. When taking a yakuless tenpai (*keiten*), I want you to make the decision while balancing the risk level of the tiles you want to push, how many turns are left in this hand (ideally, you won't have anymore draws left), and whether dealing in will significantly affect your placement at the end of the game.

Teachings of the Tabletop Hitman
Don't Slack on These!

HIT POINT



**Aim for a yakuless tenpai
while ensuring safety.**

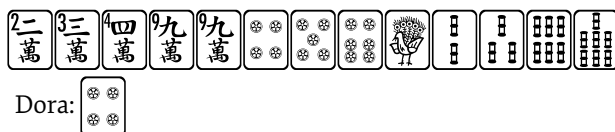


M's Best Balance

Best Balance in Riichi

Should I riichi or *dama*?

Let's say we got the following tenpai. Would you riichi here?



This is a hand with pinfu and one dora. Looking at this alone, many might answer, "I would riichi 100% of the time." Now, what about if there are five of the  already discarded? Depending on how they were discarded, if I've judged that the remaining three tiles are unlikely to be left in the wall, I might go for *dama* (take the tenpai without declaring riichi). Now, what if  have been discarded five times, but it's South-3, we have no more dealer turns and we are in last place with 10,000 points? This is a situation where it would be meaningless to win 2,000 points with a concealed hand, and even if there are only a few remaining tiles, more people would be inclined to riichi. Now, what if the dealer declares riichi while in 3rd place holding only 12,000 points, and that dealer has discarded ?

If I deal into a dealer mangan, there is a risk that I could bust and end the game, but if I can pick up , which is safe to the dealer, I will jump up to 3rd place, so I could see myself not riichiing.

I've been going back and forth, saying to riichi or *dama*, but the point I want to make here is that there are so many factors underlying a riichi decision and it is through the accumulation of these small factors that the final choice to riichi or not is made. The decision is not a simple one where I riichi by default when I have riichi, pinfu and one dora. I weigh all the different elements and in this example those elements are: tenpai with pinfu, dora 1, three remaining winning tiles (five of the  wait tiles out already), the fact that I badly need points, and the fact that I'm waiting for a tile that is also in the discards of the 3rd-place dealer in riichi.

Think in Terms of Relative Speed

As mentioned in the previous section, there are various factors that help you decide to riichi or not. There are straightforward factors such as a high point increase (like 3,900 $\rightarrow$ 8,000), whether or not your own discard pool is strong and whether or not you have a good shape. There are also more complex reads, such as when your winning tile seems likely to be left in the wall, and the likelihood an opponent will discard it due

Among the many factors when judging whether or not to riichi, I put particular emphasis on speed relative to the other players.

一萬 三萬 伍萬 八萬 八萬 八萬

Dora:

Now, look at the same hand from a slightly more three-dimensional perspective rather than a flat one. What if your opponents' discards look like this?

East player:

South player: 

West player: (your)

North player:      

054

At this time, each player's hand was as follows:

[illegible]

一萬 九萬 四萬 三萬 二萬 東 東 南 發 中

⁴四萬 ⁶六萬 ⁶六萬
 
 
 
 
 
 
 
 
 ^W西 ^N北

Now, consider the same hand but with the following discarded tiles:

East player:      

South player: 

West player: 

North player: 

Part 1: Best Offensive Balance

also started with a guest wind tile, then a value honor tile, and has discarded tiles between 3 and 7, playing aggressively against a fast dealer—even discarding a dora. Either of these two players could declare a riichi at any moment, and they may already be tenpai.

The North player has an ominous discard pattern, making it difficult to gauge their speed, so if they push back, there is a risk that the hand is expensive.

First-to-riichi is a strong move in and of itself, but in this situation the other players may immediately contest with their own riichi.

Therefore, in this situation, I would discard  and go for a concealed tenpai. I would maintain close attention to the behavior and safe tiles to my opponents. However, this would be my judgment if my own hand score was between 1,300 and 2,600. If my hand was worth 5,200 or more, the high-scoring factor would hold more weight so in most cases I would discard  and call riichi. This is where the balance of riichi lies.

M's Essay 01

• Prologue

'Yoshihiro. Are you being serious right now...?'

The coffee in my father's mug rippled slightly. A heavy silence hung in the air. My father's eyes, which expressed a mixture of confusion and anger, were piercing. I looked up to meet his gaze and inadvertently clenched the fist of my hand that was resting on my knee.

Get into a good school, get a good job, and lead a happy life. That was the track my parents laid out for me, and now I had derailed from it. This was the day I mustered the courage to tell my father for the first time that I had become a professional mahjong player.

"A professional...mahjong player...? Such a profession does not exist in Japan! Stop this nonsense!!"

My father is taller than me so his voice mercilessly rained down on me. I expected as much, but I never imagined how painful it would be for my own father to deny the life I had chosen.

Even so... I was determined and did not waver.

• Discovering Baseball

This story goes back to my childhood. From a young age, my parents were very strict. Since I have never compared us to other families, I don't know if others would actually consider it to be a strict household, but at the very least, I was never spoiled in any way.

I was especially disciplined about my posture. "You are tall and stand out. If you slouch, it looks sloppy, so you must always maintain good posture." This was drilled into me so thoroughly that I still have dreams about it. Humans are funny. When you live with good posture, 'greetings,' 'respect,' 'morality,' and 'gratitude' naturally seep into your body. Looking back, I am very grateful to my parents for teaching me many important things for living as a human through that strict upbringing.

Meanwhile, it's probably the case in all strict families, but in the Matsumoto household, there was an expectation of attending prestigious schools, getting into a good university, and securing a stable job. Looking at my family and relatives, it's like a parade of respectable professions that include doctors, lawyers, and tax accountants. And my parents laid a clear path for me to follow in that tradition.

My older sister is six years older, and my older brother is four years older than me. By the time I started ele-

mentary school, both of them were busy studying for junior high school entrance exams. On weekdays, the only sound that could be heard from their respective rooms was that of pencils moving. In hindsight, it was not uncommon for us to go an entire week and barely see each other. My father was busy with work, and not around much, and my mother worked too. I was left alone a lot and didn't know how to play at home.

This was when I discovered baseball. My father and brother sometimes played baseball, so we had equipment at home. That said, I was shy at the time and did not have the courage to gather my kindergarten friends to play baseball with me. I just threw the ball against the wall by myself, imagining what it would be like if we all could play baseball together.

The ball always bounced back from the wall energetically, filling the hole in my heart that was loneliness, my only companion at the time. Even alone, baseball was fun. It was a gentle comfort, as I struggled to find any fun at home.

But then my father noticed. Yoshihiro, who always looked lonely and bored, was putting everything into baseball. After that, even though my father was rarely home, he somehow made time to play catch with me.

When I made a good throw to his chest, my father smiled broadly and praised me. It made me so happy

that I'd want to throw an even better ball the next time. I practiced and practiced and I improved rapidly. When I hit my seventh home run in the elementary school club tournament, I had become so famous that there was hardly anyone in the neighborhood who didn't know of me.

• Future Dreams

In the 2017 ranking of future dreams as reported by elementary school students, the top two dreams for boys were: 1st: soccer player, 2nd: baseball player. 3rd and below included doctor, game company employee, and architect.

One day in the upper grades of elementary school, there was a calligraphy class where we were to write our future dreams. The sheets with the calligraphy we wrote were displayed at the back of the classroom and would be seen by parents during the upcoming open house. "Now, please begin writing," the teacher instructed while looking at the clock. As everyone simultaneously dipped their brushes into the ink, I placed my brush beside the ink stone, looked down, and thought hard.

I had no future dream. Of course, not everyone in the class had a future dream, and I understood even as an elementary school student that some people had a default, future dream, just for occasions like this. But I



didn't even have a default answer. Ten minutes passed while I kept my brush down.

I guess I could just write baseball player. However, while I liked baseball, I understood that I had been set on a track to enter a good school and secure a stable job. I could not imagine a destination of becoming a baseball player on that track. Seeing that I was not making any progress, the teacher gently said, "Matsumoto-kun, you can write whatever you'd like." 'No, that's not it, teacher. It's not that I can't write what I like, it's that nothing is coming to mind at all.' But I didn't say that. Instead I swallowed it. I didn't want to make anyone upset.

After 50 minutes, the bell rang. In the end, I sheepishly submitted my calligraphy paper blank. I could have just written baseball player, doctor, or police officer. But this time, my courage to submit a blank sheet of paper won over the courage to write something I did not truly think.

My teacher that year was kind. Instead of getting angry at me for submitting a blank sheet, he told me to write the character for 'dream' (夢) on that white piece of paper. Having a dream is a wonderful thing. At the time I thought maybe my dream for the future would be to actually have a dream. While dreams like police officer, cake shop owner, and pilot were displayed at the back of the classroom, my calligraphy paper with just one big

character: 夢 stood out.

Now though, I do have a dream. My dream is to make a world where more children can proudly write 'M.LEAGUER' on that piece of calligraphy paper, and something their parents can be proud of too. I can't think of anything that would make me happier than M.LEAGUER being included in that list of high-ranking professions someday.

If I could go back and talk to that teacher now, The dream from that calligraphy came true. Thanks to him, I was able to finally have a dream, and it's a big one.

•Discovering Mahjong

Looking back, I think the time that I was the smartest in my life was actually in the sixth grade of elementary school. Unlike the university entrance exams where everyone around me studied together, only a few kids in my class were studying outside of school for junior high school entrance exams. The study is rigorous, so you have to be really motivated. While my friends were all playing, I was solely focused on studying with a double combo of cram school and private tutoring.

To be honest, I hated studying. However, in the sense that I wanted to faithfully follow the tracks my parents laid out for me, I was actually very motivated. At the time, I was simply happy to be praised and recog-

nized by others. If I could get into a prestigious junior high school, my parents would surely praise me and be proud. In retrospect, it was that thought, that kept the cram school studying that I initially found completely incomprehensible, and the all-nighters I pulled before the mock exam, from becoming a burden.

However, my results in the last mock exam of the sixth grade only showed my probability for getting into my target school, Asano Junior High School, at 5%. In the column with my 'E' grade¹ on the mock exam results, I was gently reminded, "Your efforts so far are certainly not in vain, but changing your target school is also one option." Put in mahjong terms, 5% is the same as the probability of drawing a two-sided wait at any given, specified turn, which, as you have all experienced, is quite low. Miraculously, only the content I had studied just before the actual test showed up on the entrance exam. I achieved an uncanny win in a clutch situation—drawing the 5%-probability *ippatsu-tsumo* with a two-sided wait and was accepted to Asano Junior High School.

Both my father and mother, as well as my older sister and brother, who were already high school students, were overjoyed that I had been accepted. Seeing my mother beaming through her tears, after many months

¹ Mock entrance exams give results depicted with a letter between A and E where A predicts passing and E predicts not passing.

of making rice balls for me while I studied all night and staying on those nights that I stayed up, I realized that all that hateful studying was worth it. I truly felt that in my heart.

After starting junior high school, I became even more dedicated to baseball. As expected, I hated studying, and once the entrance exams were over, I no longer studied just to satisfy the expectations of my family.

Asano Junior High School was a combined junior and senior high school, so I didn't have to take another exam for high school. If the time I studied the most in my life was in the 4th to 6th grades of elementary school, then perhaps the time I played around the most was in 8th and 9th grades. After school, I tried out all the typical pastimes of junior high school students: karaoke, bowling, and game arcades.

But it didn't take long for that to get old. It was always the same people and the same activities, and there was always nothing to do once I got home. Baseball was already a part of my life, and I worked hard at it, but I had completely lost excitement in other areas of my life.

Though it may be presumptuous to say, I was pretty good at any sport or game that I tried. Every time I tried a new activity, I quickly learned the tricks, and to put it negatively, would soon get bored of it.

Like other public schools, Asano Junior High School

held a cultural festival every year. Did I mention that it was an all-boys school? Except for the visitors from the girls school who came searching for good-looking boys, there were only boys and their families in all directions at this festival.

While I was munching on a hot dog I bought at one of the food stalls with my friends, an upperclassman from the baseball club tapped me on the shoulder. He said one of my friends and I were to go to the club room. We got along with all the upperclassmen and I couldn't think of any reason I should be scolded. As I nervously opened the door to the club room, the boy who had called us in was sitting at the club room table with another upperclassman. The boy who called me spread some things out on a cardboard box that was leftover from the cultural festival. They made a clattering sound as they fell out on top of each other. I knew that these pieces belonged to a game called mahjong. However, I had no idea about the rules at all.

"Listen, there are three suits of numbered tiles from 1 to 9, which are called *manzu*, *pinzu* and *souzu*, and there are seven types of honor tiles. Using these, you create melds and a pair, and compete to see who can complete their hand the fastest."

Even with this explanation I had no idea what any of it meant. However, I had no choice but to sit at the table. It

wasn't like TV shows or manga. I wasn't bullied or made to pay money because I lost or anything like that. The upperclassmen were very kind, and they were purely enjoying mahjong as a game. When I think back, I have no idea if we were even following actual mahjong rules, but I lost terribly in my first-ever mahjong match.

I've always hated losing. I had never lost in any sport or game before, and it was very frustrating to lose and not even have any idea why I lost.

After that, I decided to study mahjong on my own. Since I did not have a computer at home that I could use freely, I researched and studied the rules of mahjong during IT classes at school. I only brought up the programming page (which was the content of the class) when the teacher came to check on assignment answers. I actually spent the entirety of class time searching topics like 'mahjong rules' and 'tips for winning.'

Gradually, I began to learn how to win and memorized the different yaku in mahjong. Once I understood the hands, I was able to comprehend the stories in mahjong manga. The feeling of leveling up my game was like an RPG, and as my knowledge expanded suddenly from a point of having known nothing, my sense of adventure was also piqued. With my newfound knowledge, I challenged the same baseball club members to a rematch in the clubroom.

The result was...another crushing defeat. I lost again and again after that. As I started each game thinking, "This time I will win, this time I will win," I did not realize I was gradually falling deeper and deeper into the depths of the game of mahjong, feet first.

Until that time, I had faithfully followed my predetermined path, even while wavering. Test scores were completely based on ability, and there was hardly any element of luck involved.

This encounter with mahjong was the first time I experienced such a game this irrational that was so heavily influenced by luck and didn't go as I wished. On the other hand, the thrill of winning a hand was incomparable to the pleasure derived from other games. Being someone who likes to stand out, I loved showing everyone my winning hands.

In between baseball practices, I devoted myself to studying mahjong. By the time I graduated high school, I had become a consistent winner in our clubroom mahjong games.

• Goodbye Baseball

The baseball I continued from elementary through high school was very enjoyable, and I learned many important life lessons. I had reached a level where I was being personally coached by a former batting coach of the

Yomiuri Giants, and there were times when professional scouts came to watch.

But when I finished my last summer as a third-year high school student, something inside me felt empty. I was already deeply immersed in mahjong, but still, my feelings were largely occupied by the desire to become the best baseball player in Japan.

My last at-bat in high school was a fly out to left field. As I followed the high-flying ball with my eyes, a kaleidoscope of memories of my baseball life from the day my father bought me a glove for my fifth birthday until that moment flashed through my mind. After this ball landed in the outfielder's glove, I wondered what I should do next. Forcing myself to run to first base, I alternated my gaze between the falling ball and the left fielder, all while contemplating these things in my heart.

The work of the glove and bat that had served me for many years was complete, and they disappeared into the back of my closet. After that out, I swiveled my metaphorical chair around and faced the desk again. The twelve years I spent playing baseball were fun. Next, I had to study for entrance exams. My next task was to enter a good university and then a good company. Although there was a fun stop called baseball on those laid tracks, I now had to transfer to the express train. Not one to make half-hearted efforts, I had firmly decided to

devote myself to studying for entrance exams after giving my all to baseball.

My beloved mahjong would also be put on hold for the time being. Even though I had resolved to not play, I knew that if I was around it, I would want to play, so I threw everything related to mahjong out of my room.

I set myself to working out problems from past exams. One fateful day, I was sharper than usual. When I finished checking my answers on the mock exam questions, I absentmindedly spun the eraser around with my right hand. To be precise, I spun it all the way around. Without realizing, I had spun it like a mahjong tile. I was alone in the room, but even if someone had been watching, they may not have noticed it as a particularly strange action. However, I stared at my right hand like it wasn't me controlling it, astonished... It was unmistakable. I had just discarded that eraser.

I will say it again. I don't do things half-heartedly. Therefore, I was supposed to have driven mahjong out of my head and brain until my entrance exams were over. Yet, my body had already ingrained mahjong into its coding. I waved my right hand, which looked innocently back at me as if nothing had happened, up and down vigorously.

But once I noticed, it wouldn't stop. From the day I started playing with that eraser, it did not take long for

me to become a regular at the mahjong parlor. Of course, I knew this wasn't a good thing. I resolved that at least when I was at school, I would think only about studying. That was the one rule I absolutely had to follow, but I also started to moderately allow my brain, which desperately wanted to play mahjong, to do so. I resolved within myself that this was different than a partial effort. I decided, in order to study comfortably, I needed to have a good relationship with my desire to play mahjong, which would swell if I let my guard down.

•University acceptance, and then...

In February 2011, I was accepted to Aoyama Gakuin University as a full-time student. It was not the Waseda or Keio I had aimed for, but my parents, sister, and brother were all happy enough for me. Even my homeroom teacher choked up and cried, saying, "Matsumoto, after spending all that time playing mahjong, you still got into such a famous school... I'm really glad." Any ordinary high school student at this time would be lying in bed, flipping through college brochures, imagining what their university life would be like. But not me... My heart was already filled to the brim with the desire to play mahjong.

Unable to suppress my eager feelings, I went for a part-time job interview at the mahjong parlor immediately

after my high school graduation ceremony. I had already decided that after graduating from high school, I would work part-time at a mahjong parlor. My first day at work was on March 11, 2011, the day of the Great Tohoku Earthquake, making it an unforgettable day for multiple reasons.

I retired from baseball, my entrance exams were done. I found myself spending more time alone, which, in turn, increased the time I could engage with my beloved mahjong. During the day, I worked part-time at a mahjong parlor, and at night, I recorded the day's mahjong events in my journal. Before I allowed myself to sleep each night, I would scatter the mahjong tiles by my pillow, practice identifying each tile blindly, with my thumb, putting the correct ones in a box and returning the incorrect ones to my pillow, repeating this until I had identified all 136 tiles without looking.

Even with this lifestyle, I made sure to study book-keeping enough to obtain a qualification. In the end, I only reached level 2 (there are 3 levels and 1 is the highest), but when my father saw my certificate of passing, he praised me, his face beaming again. That was moment, I was reminded of how strong my desire was to be recognized and praised by my father.

I had not admitted to my strict father that I was playing mahjong. If he were to find out that I was so deeply in-

volved in mahjong, which still carried a strong gambling image at the time, he would be furious. I meticulously made sure to always spray my clothes with Febreze on my way home from the mahjong parlor. However, looking back, my father must have noticed somewhere that I was obsessed with mahjong. I think he looked the other way, believing that as long as I was progressing in university and obtaining qualifications, I could do as I pleased. That's what I believe looking back now.

•Turning Pro

As I approached the two-year mark of working part-time at the mahjong parlor, I was no longer losing to my peers in mahjong. One day, the company president approached me and said, "Matsumoto-kun, why don't you become a professional? You have a good sense for the game and you're still young, so there is room for growth." Takeshi Igarashi (current representative of Nihon Pro Mahjong) recommended it to me as well. With so much encouragement, while still a university student, I knocked on the door of Nihon Pro Mahjong (NPM) in 2013.

At one time in my life I had aimed to become a professional baseball player. However, I had since shifted that aim to entering a good school and securing a good job with no risk. I was afraid of getting this far and then

derailing from the track that my parents had laid out for me. Surrounded my entire life by family and relatives who held high-status professions such as doctors and lawyers, I felt I could not deviate from the path on a whim. Above all, I did not want to cloud my parents' faces with worry by doing so.

A professional mahjong player. It would be an unusual profession in the long history of the Matsumoto family. At least among my family and relatives, there was not a single person engaged in anything even close to that. Still, it was the first profession I genuinely wanted to pursue of my own will, and as I stepped through the door of the professional test venue, I felt the wheels starting to derail from those tracks.

"Why do you aspire to join our association?" This was a question during the interview for the professional test. "I want to make the future of the mahjong world brighter," and, "I want to get more employee benefits," were the safe answers that came from the mouths of most candidates. But my motivation was more pure and, I guess, in a sense, impure. I answered straightforwardly, "I want to test how far my skills can go in the professional world."

Don't get me wrong. I genuinely do want to make the future of the mahjong industry brighter. I also believe that I am thinking clearly about what I should do for that purpose. However, at that time, my desire to test

my skills in the professional world of mahjong, the first thing I had ever devoted myself to by my own will, was stronger. Maybe it was because I was so young.

The acceptance notice was sent by snail mail to my home. When I cautiously opened the letter and found the word 'Accepted' in the middle, I thought, "Yes!" I shouted it out loud in front of the mailbox. However, in the next moment, I wondered how I would break the news to my father. I couldn't believe he would ever accept me as a professional mahjong player. I decided to first produce results, even if he didn't accept it. I would do what I could until he accepted it. That meant I wouldn't tell my father just yet.

•Hired at a Trading Company

If I couldn't cut it in the professional world, I would gracefully retire. That was my resolution when I passed the professional test. Fortunately, since joining, I had been promoted continuously in the league and made it all the way up to B1 league without stopping. At that time, I had also already received a job offer to start at a major real estate company after graduation, but I declined it because my days off would have been Wednesday and Thursday. In my mind, participating in pro league had already become my priority, and jobs that did not allow that were not an option. Of course, during job inter-

views, I spoke candidly about my affiliation with NPM. Some interviewers looked puzzled, but in most cases, they viewed it positively, seeing it as wonderful to have mastered a hobby.

Before long, I secured a job at a trading company that dealt with furniture. The president did not know about mahjong, but he found it interesting that this professional world existed. I think there are often cases where companies dislike employees juggling both salary-man and professional mahjong duties, but in my case, the president gladly allowed it. My superiors were very warm, and on Mondays following a victory in a weekend match, they celebrated with me as a department. Until now, I had been focused on mahjong solely for my own sake, but seeing my colleagues share in the ups and downs of my match results made me feel that it was not just my battle, which tickled me.

• The Death of my Grandfather

I was promoting at the end of each pro league season. I was fortunate to have a good workplace. It seemed as if everything was falling into place. So when my father called me during work one day, I was cheerful.

However, the calmness in my father's voice grounded me. It was more of a forced calmness.

"Yoshihiro, your grandfather has passed away. Come

home immediately." Then he hung up. I was at work, but my mind went completely blank. It was the first time I lost a close family member, and I didn't know how to process this emotion. In a trembling voice, I told the company president, I was sorry but needed time off because my grandfather passed away. He told me not to worry about work and granted me some extra time off.

The ceremony ended without incident and I left the funeral hall. I thought about my grandfather, now turned to ashes and rising to the sky. I tried to think about what I had been able to do for him in his life. My conclusion was, my grandfather passed away while I was off doing what I liked, somewhat derailed from those tracks. As I looked up at the sky, my father patted my back.

"Would you like to help with our family business?"

I think my father was feeling lonely after losing his own father. I took in his words, unable to think clearly about anything else. Originally, I did have a desire to help with the family business after graduating. With my bookkeeping qualification, I started as an accountant. Although I didn't work in the same office as my father, I had more time with him than ever before in my life. In my memory, my father was only scary when he was angry and would grin and praise me when I could catch the baseball well. I have hardly any other memories of him. This was because my father was rarely home due to

his busy work schedule.

Working together, I found it interesting to discover a side of my father and quirks that I had not known before. Perhaps my father felt the same way. I believe that seeing the adult version of me, which my father didn't know yet, surely brought vitality and color to his work.

However, I still hadn't told my father that I'd become a professional mahjong player. Waiting for the right moment, I kept thinking that I would talk to him someday, and that someday got later and later.

That was when I achieved victory in my first title, the Twin Cup. While holding the heavy trophy, I realized that it was impossible to remain silent any longer about this world of professional mahjong that had completely consumed me.

•The Day I Broke the News to my Father

I took a shower and put on decent clothes. Gathering my courage, I decided to tell my father for the first time that I'd become a pro-



fessional mahjong player. My father is what people call a straight arrow. The same goes for my family and relatives; none of them had ever even played mahjong. From his perspective, my whole life I had faithfully followed the tracks he laid out for me, without deviating. Becoming a professional mahjong player would surely not be accepted. No matter how many times I ran through the scenario in my head, the father in my mind never nodded with approval.

Even so. I thought back on the days of my father raising me. He never stopped me from doing what I wanted to do. He told me to play baseball or do karate, or whatever I liked. Maybe that also extended to professional mahjong... Perhaps I was just overthinking it. I opened the heavy door to my father's room, praying that my worries would turn out to be unfounded.

I have a dream. To make a living through mahjong and to make the profession of a mahjong player someone else's future dream. I aimed to become a mahjong player as a means to that end and passed the professional test. I was so nervous that I don't remember exactly how the conversation went, but I think I told him these things. Maybe somewhere I was hoping he'd say, "I understand. If you're serious, then do as you wish. I'll be here supporting you, son."

I quietly looked down and waited for what he would

actually say.

However... Just like with mahjong, the tiles that seemed unlikely to pass did not pass after all. A few seconds later, I gathered my courage and looked up. My father's mouth was trembling.

"Yoshihiro. Are you being serious right now...?"

The coffee in my father's mug rippled slightly. A heavy silence hung in the air. My father's eyes, which expressed a mixture of confusion and anger, pierced straight through me. I inadvertently clenched the fist of my hand that was resting on my knee.

"Yes."

For the first time in my life, I, who had lived without deviating even a millimeter from the laid tracks, was honest with my father about my desire to change course.

"I see..."

My father looked at the ceiling. It may sound strange coming from me, but I believe that memories of raising me with care and the great expectations he had for me were swirling in my father's mind as he stared upward. I think it was those expectations that made my father's voice rise even more.

"A professional...mahjong player...? Such a profession does not exist in Japan! Stop this nonsense!!"

The voice of my father, who is even taller than me, resonated from above, mercilessly pouring down on my

head. I expected as much, but I never imagined how painful it would be for my own father to deny my life choices.

After my father's angry shout, a long silence ensued.

But I had made up my mind...

I was determined and did not waver. While watching the rippling coffee in the cup, I opened my mouth.

"Even so, I want to play mahjong."

My hidden will took over and the words fell from my mouth. I had never gone against my parents before, so I surprised even myself. But my father was downright taken aback.

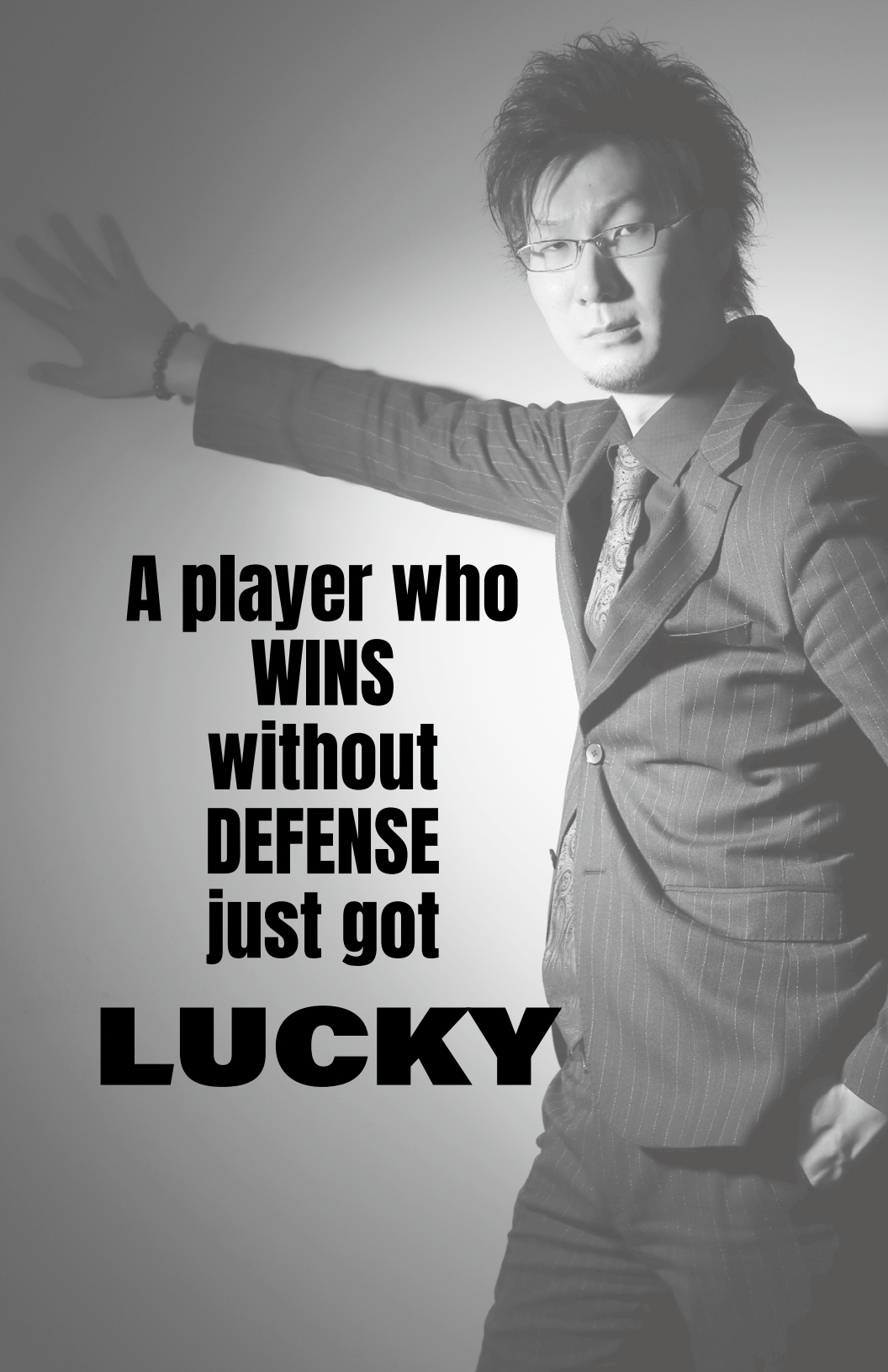
"I don't care anymore! Do as you please!"

The coffee cup I held in my trembling hand made a strange sound as it rubbed against the glass table as I set it down. I bowed my head slightly to my father and opened the door without looking back. I was thinking, "Once I leave this room, for the first time in my life, I will be running on my own track, not laid by anyone else." From my father's perspective, surely it was a derailment, not just a change of course. Until he could accept me, there wasn't much I could do about that. I decided then to keep the disappointment in my father's eyes and this pain in my chest close to my heart.

A black and white photograph of a man with dark, spiky hair and glasses, wearing a pinstriped suit jacket, a dark shirt, and a patterned tie. He is looking down at a smartphone held in his right hand. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

**Part 2: Best Balance in
Calling and Defense**

**Locking in the
push-fold balance**



**A player who
WINS
without
DEFENSE
just got
LUCKY**



M's Best Balance

Best Balance in Calling

The 4 'Highs' of Calling

A call is an act of using another player's discarded tiles to form a meld for yourself. Calling can serve multiple purposes, such as to advance your own hand, break an *ippatsu* (unbroken), shift who draws the final tile, intimidate other players, or skip your own draw.

As a basic principle for calling, call tiles for parts of your hand that are difficult to complete, and don't call for blocks that seem likely to be completed on your own (like those from suits that still seem plentiful in the wall). The ease of reaching *tenpai* with a closed hand and the theme of the round are also factors in deciding whether to call or not.

There are 4 'Highs' you should keep in mind when calling. This is taken from the Japanese bubble economy's term '3 Highs' that described what women looked for in men at the time (high education, high income, high height/tall). Not that I was alive during the bubble...

High score

High shape (good wait)

High speed

High safety (high defense)

If you have one of these 'Highs' (for example, extremely high points or speed), it is worth calling. If there are two 'Highs,' it is worth calling; and if there are three to four 'Highs,' you can call without even thinking about it. Among these, I put even more emphasis on 'high safety (high defense)' for a well-balanced call. The tiles that are part of the called meld cannot be used for defense, and as the melds accumulate and the hand shortens, the risk of dealing into someone else increases. When there is no value in pushing your own hand, it is important to prepare to retreat based on the behavior of your opponents.

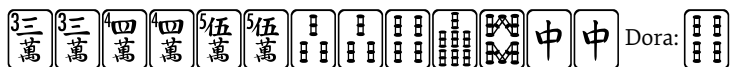
Note that there are exceptions to the above. One exception is when you're very close to riichi.

For example:



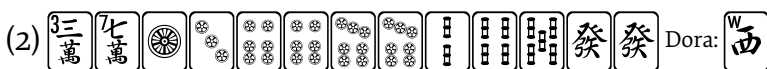
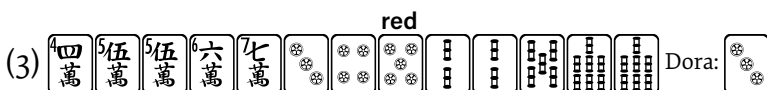
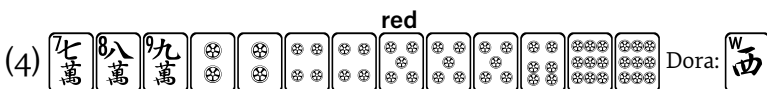
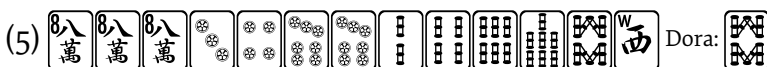
This hand is high speed and has a good wait. However, since the hand is already sufficiently speedy without calling, you should keep it closed unless just winning this hand will get you top in the game.

Another exception is when calling significantly drops the score. For example:



A hand like this has high speed, a good shape, and high safety, but the moment it is called, the points drop significantly. Calling isn't worth it if it considerably lowers the value of the hand.

Look at the hands below. Which would you call and with what tiles would you call? For all scenarios assume East-1, West player, 5th turn.



*There is already one (Wind) on the board

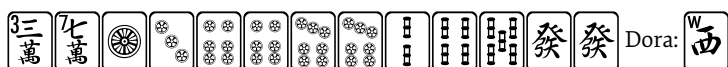
Let's examine each one individually.

(1) High score and high safety



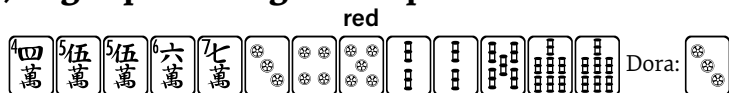
Since it satisfies both high score and high safety, call tiles as they become available. However, if you call 東 (E) and then immediately call 北 (N), your defensive power will drastically decrease, so wait to call 北 (N) until your hand is more put together.

(2) Zero 'highs'



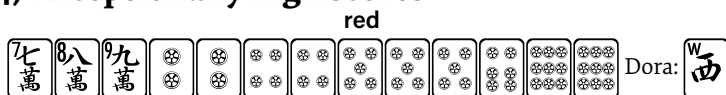
This is a typical example that does not satisfy any of the four 'Highs,' so 發 (F) should not be called. Depending on the draw, you can aim for a *tanyao* (inside hand/all simples) and pinfu, and keep 發 (F) as a safe tile instead of calling it. Calling 發 (F) might make it possible to see a distant *pinzu* (dots) *honitsu* (common flush/half flush), but chasing distant points while reducing your defensive power to zero is unbalanced.

(3) High speed and good shape



If you keep the hand closed, there is still a possibility of a closed haneman, but if you draw first, you will end up with a bad wait, so you can call (but don't call). This is an example that satisfies both high speed and good shape. Although, safety is not guaranteed, that fact is not changed from calling. Weaponizing speed for a quick win also helps prevent point loss.

(4) Exceptionally high scores



If you proceed like this and win with the more expensive *iipeiko* (twin sequence/pure double sequence) side, you will also get a high score, but there are many cases where you end up with a riichi and a bad shape tenpai for nothing but 2,600 points. Therefore, call (pon) and (chi to use with and red), and), but don't call here. Then discard the *manzu* (characters) blocks for a *chinitzu* (pure flush/full flush). Although this hand doesn't have high speed, a good shape, or high safety, this is a case with an exceptionally high score.

(5) Don't get too attached to high scores



There is already one of your middle waits on the board and the question is whether to call or not. My conclusion is to call the middle and let go. This hand is actually hiding a mangan value and you shouldn't chi , as that would completely negate the value (bad wait and only 2,000 points at tenpai). On the other hand, if a is discarded from the player to your left, it will be the second , and passing on this will make it difficult to win, so I believe the best balance is to call it and forget about the high score.



M's Best Balance

Best Balance After Calling

Calling requires skill.

They say the best mahjong players are good at calling. Since after declaring a riichi, you must discard all tiles except your winning tile, the hand building and decisions you make until that riichi help to measure skill. On the other hand, since calling tiles doesn't lock you into discarding all remaining discards, you are forced to balance your pushes and folds every single turn, and there are many technical factors such as what to call, what not to call, and how to make it more likely an opponent will discard the tiles you want to call.

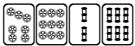
Let us assume that on turn 6 of East-1, the West player called 中 as follows:



Dora: 北

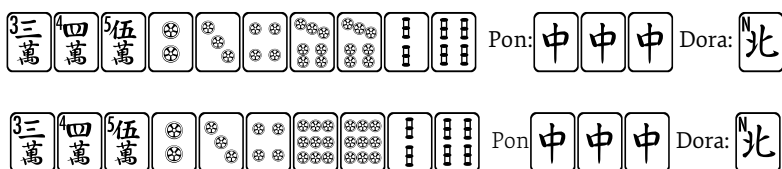
With the exception of 中, unless that player has a 234 *sanshoku* (mixed sequences/mixed triple sequences) in the hand, it's a 1,000-point hand. How should you play if the related tile on the board is just the one 中

discarded by the dealer?

The discard options are probably . Typically, it is considered better to keep pon options when you've decided to call for your hand, so the first discard options look to be . However, there is also a strategic theory that you should keep weaker partial sequences in groups of odd numbers of tiles, so let's compare  and  discards instead.

Since one  has been discarded, we would like to keep  , which can be ponned as a priority, just in case the  pair up later. That said, I personally would keep  and discard .

Let's jump ahead and imagine the hand progresses, we get to tenpai, but the dealer calls riichi in the last row. In that case, which of the following two hand shapes is preferable?

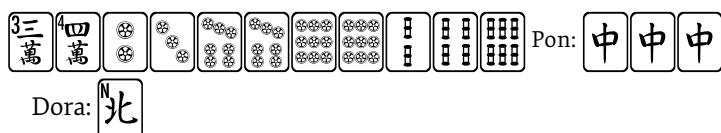


Since I do not want to face a dealer riichi with a middle wait and a measly 1,000-point hand, then the second hand, which contains two safe  tiles is way better if I draw a non-suji tile.

Now, what if the dora was  instead of ? In this case, it might be good to cut  depending on the changes and the strength of the river (although that is

a subtle line). Unlike a riichi, not all called hands must be pushed to the end. You need to continue to monitor the risk level while considering speed and points to achieve the best balance for called hands.

While we're here, let's also go over the theory that you should keep weak blocks in groups of odd numbers of tiles.



Let's imagine discarding 8 條 from the hand above. Excluding the two-sided block, the weak blocks include four tiles with the 1 花, 2 花, 3 花, 4 花, and two tiles with the 1 條, 2 條, both of which are even groups. If we progress one step from here, no matter what we discard, there will be surplus tiles. For example, if I cut 8 條 and then pon 1 花, I think I will end up discarding 1 條, 2 條, but the moment I cut 1 條, 2 條 will become an extra tile. I want you to remember that by keeping weaker partial groups in odd-numbered configurations, you create shapes that are less likely to produce surplus tiles when your hand progresses a step.



M's Best Balance

Best Balance in Push and Fold

What is push and fold?

I mentioned that the purpose of mahjong is to 'achieve good results in the long term,' but the two major factors that affect mahjong results are gaining points (winning hands) and avoiding loss of points (folding). Push/fold judgment is a technique that involves electing either to aim to gain points or avoid loss and developing a balance between those two. It is considered to be the most difficult aspect of mahjong, the hardest to systematize, and also the most important part of the game.

First of all, the current rules of mahjong state that 'the person who deals in bears all the responsibility and pays the points.' Let's say you declare riichi with a three-sided wait on turn five. If a player allowed their right-hand neighbor to call four times, resulting in a naked single tile wait, and you end up drawing that winning tile, it would result in a loss of 12,000 points for only you.

Read that again. The player who allowed the calls pays nothing and you bear all the obligation to pay those 12,000 points, just because you drew the tile.

This scenario illustrates the extreme result but since mahjong is a game where only the player who dealt in pays, it inevitably requires the skill of not discarding a winning tile when an opponent has a hand waiting to win, as well as the skill of not allowing other players to reach that state of waiting to win.

It is often misunderstood that gaining points always means pushing and preventing losses always means folding (i.e. completely giving up), but there are cases where pushing can actually prevent losses, so this equation doesn't always hold true.

For instance, there are cases where you can prevent loss by pushing with a 1,000-point riichi against a dealer's 12,000-point called hand.

The saying 'offense is the best defense' applies here.

In this case, the skill of 'reading' helps determine how far you can push back on the 12,000 points with your 1,000-point riichi, and the skill of push/fold is to judge which is more beneficial based on that reading.

'Reading' is also a very important element in terms of scoring points or preventing loss, but more importantly, the aspect of push/fold directly relates to the final results of 'gaining points' and 'losing points,' so honing the best balance for push/fold judgment is the most crucial factor that directly affects your performance in mahjong.

Teachings of the Tabletop Hitman
Don't Slack on These!

HIT POINT



**To avoid loss, make sure
to follow-through with
the hands that can win!**



M's Best Balance

Systematizing Your Push/Fold

Stop relying on vague hunches

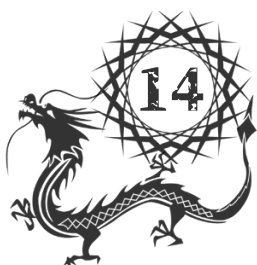
While systematizing push/fold is difficult, there are still aspects that can be systematized to some extent. Since mahjong is a game that requires processing a lot of information, it is better to automate the parts that you can, as it allows for additional brainpower allocation elsewhere and reduces mistakes in critical situations. Below are some general examples.

- Always push mangan tenpai with a good wait.
- To chase a dealer's riichi, you need at least 2 han and tenpai with a good wait.
- If you're facing riichi from two players and are still 1-away from ready with dangerous tiles, fold no matter what.

And so on. Those who are considered be strong mahjong players basically systematize push/fold and differentiate their approach based on the situation. If there are strong mahjong players around you, you should try asking about their push/fold strategy. It might be beneficial to ask not just one person, but sev-

eral, as you search for your best balance.

The main goal of systematizing a push/fold strategy is to eliminate moves made for no particular reason. For example, when you have a poor wait with a low hand value, it is generally advisable to fold immediately against any riichi, but if you haven't systematized it, you might end up cutting  for no particular reason except that it's *suji* to . The probability of  dealing into any riichi as *suji* to their discard is about 3-4% and you might experience a painful loss due to that 'no particular reason' once every 25-33 times.



M's Best Balance

Best Balance Based on Your Hand

Read the richness of hands

There are various factors to consider when making push and fold decisions in mahjong, but the first priority should be the quality of your own hand. Depending on the theme of each round, there will be situations where you must just avoid giving away points. Let's imagine it's South-2, we are the leader with 38,000 points. The last place player calls a riichi with only 15,000 points behind, and you are looking at this hand:



Although our theme for this round is 'not giving away points to the last-place player,' winning with the above hand could be a decisive blow for the entire game, so it would be natural to push  with that hand, even though you have  as a safe tile.

However, a riichi is a threat in itself, and in actual play, there are rarely cases where someone calls riichi with little value and just a poor wait. When you're faced with a riichi, you should generally assume that your opponent's hand is not weak.

In this book, I recommend reading the 'richness' of the opponent's hand when there is a thin line between the balance of push and fold and you can't decide solely by the quality of your own hand. Reading the richness of the opponent's hand means assessing how bountiful their hand is (such as having a good waits or a high-scoring hand).

One method for reading richness is to pay attention to pairs being discarded or partial sequences being dropped. Discarding pairs or partial sequences indicates that there are enough blocks for four groups and one pair, and those discarded pairs or partial sequences can give you clear hints to the strength of the hand. A ranking is presented here of richness based on what partial blocks of tiles are being discarded.

Rich



The not-yet-cut 2-8 tiles that are strongest to the board

Not-yet-cut value honor tiles

Other not-yet-cut 2-8 tiles

Not-yet-cut guest wind tiles

Not-yet-cut 1 and 9 tiles

Once-cut 2-8 tiles

Once-cut honor tiles

Once-cut 1 and 9 tiles

Twice-cut 2-8 tiles

Twice-cut honor tiles

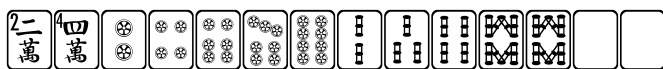
Twice-cut 1 and 9 tiles

Not rich

I would like to add to the above.

The reason why the twice-cut honor tiles are richer than twice-cut 1 and 9 tiles is that honor tiles have a higher value in terms of safety compared to the 1 and 9 tiles. Among not-yet-cut honor tiles, the value of the value honor tiles is higher than guest winds because when the value honor tile pairs are dropped, it is often the case that the hand has speed or a high score without relying on those value honor tiles, and it is rare with such discards for the hand to be left with only

middle (*kanchan*) waits. As an exception to the rule:



There are cases like this where the pair of  would be discarded left with a middle wait, but in this case, a high score can be expected.

Among not-yet-cut number tiles 2 to 8, the dropped pairs of strong tiles on the table are the most concerning cases. For example, if the upper *pinzu* are cheap on the table and it seems no one is using them, but if a pair of not-yet-cut  is discarded, you should interpret it as: If they're discarding a pair of , which would be useful for these strong  or  draws, then they must have 13 other tiles that are even better than that one. This, therefore deserves the utmost caution.

The same applies to the description of the richness ranking for dropped incomplete sequences. We'll use terms like 'outside' here, which means 1 is outside to 2 (9 is outside to 8) and 'inside' where 2 is inside to 1 (8 is inside to 9).

Rich

A middle wait drop from the inside strong to the board

Any other middle wait drop from the inside (2-8 tiles)

A middle wait drop from the outside (2-8 tiles)

A middle wait drop from the inside (related to 1 and 9)

A middle wait drop from the outside (related to 1 and 9)

A side (*penchan*) wait drop from the inside

A side wait drop from the outside

Not rich

The thinking here is the same as for pair drops. Unless the reason for discarding is clear, such as a weak shape with useful tiles mostly out already, it is generally the case that there are enough blocks in the hand, and good shapes remain, so you need to watch out here too.

However, since there are also often pair or partial sequence drops aimed at forming a certain yaku, the above doesn't necessarily always apply, and that means you need to carefully observe the discarded tiles to be aware of what your opponents are aiming for.



Getting Unstuck

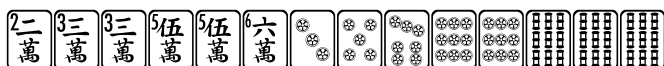
Don't fear dealing in while folding

Assume that there is a dealer riichi with the following discarded tiles:



All tiles except for 發 came out of the hand (*tedashi*).

We were discarding only safe tiles after the riichi, but now we're out of safe tiles.



What would be the best tile to discard once your hand reaches such a deadlock?

First, my hand is in a state of limbo between a pin-fu and *chiitoitsu* (seven pairs), and its value is very low. Saying 'If there are no safe tiles, I will push straight ahead' only increases the chances of point loss, while providing almost no opportunity to gain points, which is not balanced play. Here, even if there are no safe tiles, you should find the safest tile possible from the hand

and persist.

Typically, the probability of increasing safe tiles with each round of riichi is about 40%. Considering the probability of the riichi player drawing and discarding tiles that increase safety for other, not-safe tiles (for example, drawing/discarding , so  looks safe), if you can get through just this one discard then some safer tiles might be revealed and you can safely fold to the end.

With this hand, you can look at the  discard on turn 1 and the honor tile discarded from the hand on turn 2, and discard  hoping that it is already in their hand, or you can drop the concealed triplet of  there on the edge. While there may be some resistance to dropping a concealed triplet, there is no way dropping a terminal concealed triplet will deal into a double pair (*shanpon*) wait, and these outside tiles are among the safer of the non-*suji* tiles, so they can come in handy in a jam.

Even if you end up dealing in, there is no need to reflect too deeply on it. Choosing even slightly safer tiles from such a hand and opting for a passive play is a beneficial choice in the long run, and nothing can be done about momentary deal-ins.

appear expensive. When I look at my discarded tiles from the perspective of other players, discarding the dora indicator tile  on turn 4 suggests that I have removed a middle wait *tanyao* sequence from the inside, suggesting the rest of my hand is hiding a good shape with a high score. I'll use this to reduce the number of opponents threatening me.

By holding onto  and starting with the  discard, then calling riichi with my straightforward hand, it narrows the shape of my hand down so they think, "When he discarded  his four blocks were already decided, but he needed  to support one of those blocks. I don't know how much his hand is worth, but it could be cheap." This could be my chance to catch them off guard. If I discard   in succession, it becomes a blind spot when I end up waiting for , and beyond that, there is no way a weak hand could challenge my riichi. Moreover, when you see other players pushing against these discards, it's clear that they are playing a strong hand. This is not just a mere camouflage to obscure my wait, but a technique to create an illusion for other players that I have a superior hand in relative speed and score. It won't hurt to have this technique in your arsenal.

One trick to make your hand look expensive and fast when your hand is actually cheap is to drop your incomplete sequences in smooth succession. For exam-

ple, if you are discarding an overlapping sequence, like , cut them smoothly, one after the other. Of course, this depends on the usefulness and safety of the tile you draw after discarding , but if there are no particular issues, it is better to discard the sequence continuously to put pressure on your opponents. If your opponent slims down their hand thinking, "Ah, I should hold on to a safe tile to play against this person," that is exactly what you want.

When you have a strong hand, the opposite is true. If you discard these in succession in the same order, it will reveal your high points, so you should try to keep one of the tiles in the block you're dropping longer to avoid it being noticed as a discarded sequence. If the sequence is a strong one for the board (especially in cases such as discarding  when  looks good on the board), it will put others on guard, so you need to be careful.



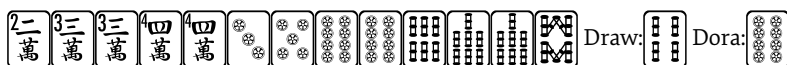
M's Best Balance

Counting Survivors

vs. How many villains ?

In actual play, knowing how many villains there are in each hand is very important. As I mentioned earlier, I believe the ideal situation in mahjong is a solo journey, but in reality, such hand journeys are rare, and it is often the case that you are facing at least one other pushing player.

Let's say that it has passed the middle stages of the hand and your (non-dealer) hand has become a decent 1-away shape.



Also assume that there is a riichi from the player to your right (also non-dealer) with the following discards:

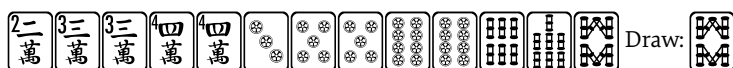


All discards before riichi were from the hand (*tedashi*), and after cutting a  (which looked like a pretty good wait on the board), a safe tile came out for the riichi, so it looks like a fairly good wait and high

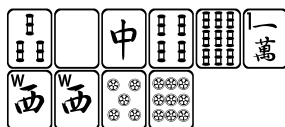
score if it's a sequence hand. As for pushing and folding, we have one very safe tile with , but since we have nothing to follow it up with, it seems best to play straight with  first. If  passes,  will also pass easier, and the left-hand player might let us call with a middle  later.

In the next turn, the player across from us, who already dropped a pair of honor tiles, suddenly cut  from the draw (*tsumogiri*) which hadn't passed yet. After that, they discarded a safe  from their hand so it became clear that  was a straight push (since they chose to discard in the order of  before safe ).

Honestly,  is a quite scary tile against the discards of the right-hand player. Immediately after, my hand turned into this:



The player across has these discards:



If it were only the riichi of the right-hand player, it would be a straightforward decision to cut the tile we just drew, but the push from the player across made me so nervous that I discarded the  that was safe to both of them. After that, the player across continued to push against the right player's riichi with non-*suji* tiles, so I decided to completely fold, afraid the player across

from me was waiting for one of the riichi player's safe tiles. At this time, the player across was tenpai with *tanyao*, *pinfu*, *iipeiko* and red dora, waiting for .

I refer to anyone who is not folding and still participating in the attack as 'survivors on the battlefield.' In this case, we see two immediate opponents, so there are two survivors on the field. It is important to always be aware of how many players are still on the battlefield when deciding whether to continue with your own offense or not. For example, with this hand, I intended to push to some extent if I was only battling one other player. However, the moment it became two active opponents, my hand was left with a bad middle wait and definitely at a disadvantage. Considering only the left-hand player was folding and the player across was aggressively pushing, I chose to retreat.

At the same time, even if I take myself off that battlefield, it is important not to simply withdraw quietly, but to make the other players think I am still in the game. This is a way to induce mistakes from the other players.

For example, when I have a triplet of the perfectly safe tile , four  and three , instead of just laying out all three of the s in a row, discarding one  and then smoothly mixing in a  discard from my hand will make them think, "Matsumoto is still in it," even if I'm actually folding.



M's Best Balance

Push/Fold by Conditions

Push gain and push loss situations

In mahjong, the decision to push or fold is generally determined by the quality of the hand. However, in actual games, there are situations on the table where it is better to push and situations where it is better not to.

One situation where it is advantageous to push is when there is no concern about dropping in game placement.

For example, in the following point situation it is acceptable to shift the balance to be a bit more aggressive than usual against the North player in riichi.

South-3

Dealer: 8,000 points

South: 40,000 points (us)

West: 10,000 points

North: 42,000 points (riichi)

Even if we deal in 12,000 points to the North player, we won't drop to third place and we still have our own dealer turn in the final hand. Of course that doesn't mean pushing hard from 3-away, but if we're 2-away,

expect a good wait and a high score, or we have even one of those conditions with a 1-away hand, then I believe it is acceptable to push aggressively here.

Conversely, let's think of a situation where pushing would be a loss. Consider following positions in South-1 with one continuance.

Dealer: 18,000 points (riichi)

South: 32,000 points (us)

West: 21,000 points (riichi)

North: 29,000 points

If the dealer or the West player draws a mangan then they'll take first place away from us, but if we deal into a dealer mangan, then we'll drop into last place, and a mangan deal-in to the West player means dropping into third place. On the other hand, if we fold, then the worst we'll get is 2nd place. If the uma is 10-30 and I deal into a dealer mangan, the result is a drop from first to last place with a total loss of -92 points including the oka (20-point ante). Here, even if our hand is tenpai, if we draw a tile that is dangerous to the other two players, the best balance is to completely fold and hope for the West player to win their hand.





M's Best Balance

Squeezing Against the Dealer

Squeezing against the dealer

We learn very early that the dealer's score is 1.5 times that of a non-dealer's score. Inevitably, the average score of the dealer is higher than that of a non-dealer, and depending on how the hand is won, it could be the deciding factor of that game.

For this reason, you must be particularly careful of how you play against the dealer. For example, let's assume that in East-1, the dealer calls a double  and has the following discards.



The discarded tile when the double  was called was . If all tiles are discarded from inside the hand, how should the North player respond?

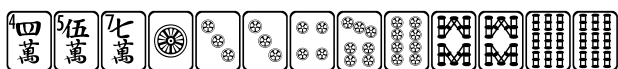
As I mentioned before, it is important to measure relative speed in mahjong, and looking at the dealer's discards, there is a hint on turn 4 that suggests the hand is already well put together.

From the dealer's perspective, if they can combine the double  with two more han, they can get a man-

gan, and they'll be trying really hard to get that man-gan. Therefore, tiles like  or  that can easily build a hand into a mangan are usually held onto when the hand isn't taking shape yet beyond the double . The fact that  were played indicates that the dealer already had a well-put together hand besides the double . Next, tiles between 3-7 (in this case, ) started to be discarded on turn 4, indicating that there were at least enough blocks, and not all the blocks were bad waits. If all blocks were poor shapes, the  would have stayed in the hand longer so they could try to use them for a higher score or to upgrade the shape.

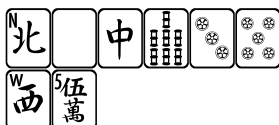
With this read, a playable hand for me in the North seat would have to be 1-away with a score of at least 3,900 to 8,000, and squeezing anything else the dealer might want was the best balance in this situation.

With a discard like this, turn 4 is already mid- to late-hand, even though it's still the first row of discards. In the actual game, my hand was:



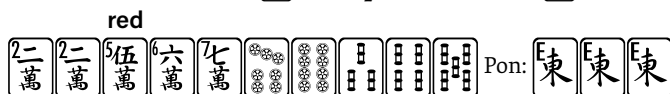
It was an easy fold decision. I didn't have any tiles that I could be sure wouldn't be called, but I started with  since they were outside of  and seemed a bit less likely to be called. In the end the dealer won off of another player with double , one dora, and one red dora for 12,000 points.

The final discard pile looked like this:



(Dora: 伍萬). All tiles except for 西 came out of the hand.

The discard when the 東 was poned was 中)



Win on discard: 1-10000 (一萬)

Here too, after dropping the 1-10000 block and then discarding a safe tile, once there is a discard from within the hand, you should read the hand as tenpai (in this actual game it was a 伍萬 empty cut). A non-dealer would need something super strong to push back.

It's important to notice that anomaly on turn 4, anticipate the result, and then squeeze and fold in response.



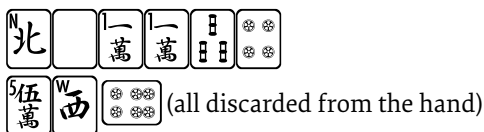
M's Best Balance

Comparing the 18 *Suji* Series

Balance of systems and reading

One day, at a mahjong parlor I visited as a guest, a customer asked me, "Do you have a *suji* count threshold?" I answered that I don't have a predetermined threshold. I decide to push or fold based on the degree of danger of the *suji* that haven't passed yet, rather than on the number of *suji* pairs that haven't passed.

We'll go into it more in a later chapter, but *suji* count (keeping track of how many of the 18 *suji* pairs are safe) is a basic reading technique. I don't have a *suji* count cutoff where I stop pushing. For example, counting  and  as the same level of risk as *suji* pairs that haven't passed in the following discard pile is considered unbalanced from a risk perspective.



Counting the 18 *suji* pairs is a very important skill in itself. My point is that you should assign a level of risk to each of the 18 *suji* pairs. While it depends on what turn it is, if we consider the tiles closer to the like-



























We do have one completely safe $\frac{5}{36}$. However, if we take it from the middle of a sequence, it kills our hand and there's not even a guarantee we can keep folding the next turn. This is where you want to keep going a bit longer.

First of all,  is a discard option and it's *suji* to the , so I think it's fine to push it here. However, since  and  are high-risk tiles, we should generally only push one of them.

At this point, the player who declared riichi drew and discarded . Now we only have to push one high-risk tile, the , and depending on the draw that makes us tenpai, we may not even have to discard , so it's even easier to keep going now.

However, I drew a problematic 九萬 in this hand.

³三萬 ⁴四萬 ⁴四萬 ⁵伍萬 ⁶六萬 Draw: ⁹九萬 Dora:

Looking at the discards, we can guess the hand has a good wait. Counting our own pushes and discards from the other players, there are seven *suji* pairs that

haven't passed, making  nearly impossible to push. If we do push  and then draw a *souzu* tile, we'll then have to push  right after. Pushing two high-risk tiles is tough, so we should start with  since it was just made safe, and see what happens. However, when we do get to tenpai, we will only have to push one tile: either  or . So, as long as it's not too late in the hand, we will still be in a position to push.

Afterwards, I drew a problematic .

 Draw:  Dora: 

Now, our high-risk tiles are , , and : three *suji* pairs among the remaining seven, I decided to discard  again and fold. I started with a  cut to make it just a little bit easier to come back to tenpai later in the hand. If I cut  from , it would break up the structure of the hand without a clear way back to tenpai. By cutting  for now, I might be able to chi  later when , , or  become safe. The result was an exhaustive draw and my opponent had a *man-gan* tenpai waiting for . If I had been overwhelmed by my good shape and pushed all in, I would have dealt in with . Whether I would have dealt in or not is a matter of hindsight, so there is no need to get into that discussion. What I want you to take away from this is that when it is necessary to push two high-risk tiles, re-treating is the basic strategy.

Moreover, even if I were to fold and the hand ended in an exhaustive draw, the dealer could win for 6,000-all the next hand, which happens often enough. Here, I should prioritize my pinfu three-sided wait and be somewhat aggressive. On the other hand, if the *suji* count dropped to 6 not passed (out of the maximum 18), and then I drew a high-risk tile, I would enter the, 'pushing too hard' realm and have to face the risk of dropping out of first place by dealing into a mangan. In that case, I'd need to abandon the coveted three-sided wait and retreat.

Riichi sticks on the table are almost like having an extra dora

If there are two riichi sticks on the table, then with a winning hand you get 2,000 points plus the continuances. Notably, everyone has a chance at that pot. That may be fairly obvious to you, but it's still important to bring up and properly understand the nature of mah-jong concepts we take for granted so there are no misconceptions.

Based on the above, let's assume there are two riichi sticks left on the board and our hand looks like this:



If you call a pon on 中, it is highly likely to yield just 2,000 points, and since it's not a hand that guaran-

tees special speed or safety, it might normally be reasonable to not take the pon. However, when combined with the two sticks on the board and one continuance, 2,000 points suddenly becomes 4,300 points. That's even more than the typical 3,900 competitive threshold, and if something like  is the dora, then there should be no hesitation in ponning .

When there are two or more riichi sticks on the table, other players are also often clearly aware of them, and value honor tiles tend to be squeezed a bit more than usual. When this happens, only the player squeezing and the player whose tiles are being squeezed by them suffer, and the other two players get an advantage. There isn't much point to squeezing tiles if it only keeps one other player from getting those sticks, and it also keeps you from getting them.

There is no need to become overly anxious about speed to the point that it lowers the value of your own hand, just for the sticks on the board. However, sacrificing one han off the score of your hand for speed may be worth it since the extra sticks will supplement that score. That balance needs to be considered when deciding whether or not to play aggressively.

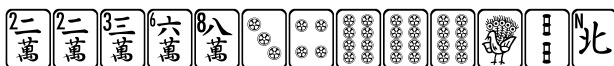


M's Best Balance

Techniques in Folding Completely

Defense techniques that also apply to offense

Our hand looks like this:



And then the dealer calls riichi:



Our hand has a poor shape, is still 2-away from ready and with nothing to fight for, we decide to play defensively. Below are important points to keep in mind when playing defense.

- Save tiles safe to everyone for last.
- Prepare for a chasing riichi from someone. Identify the player(s) who isn't giving up, and don't deplete your safe tiles to them yet.
- Once you decide to fold, don't take a half-hearted attempt to read the riichi hand while you still have safe tiles. There are almost always exceptions to hand reads, and once you commit to folding, you don't want to get caught in one of those exception

traps. Just focus on playing safe.

- Hold onto connected tiles (like 3456) as long as possible. This is to prepare to chi to cancel potential *ippatsu* or last tile wins, or to send a draw to a player who you hope deals in. However, there is no need to compromise your own safety just to cancel *ippatsu* or last tile wins.

This way of thinking can also be applied to reads on tiles left in the wall and 'no-chance' blockers. Imagine there are two players in *riichi* and another player that has decided to completely fold starts by dropping a concealed, safe honor triplet. You can see three  and three  on the board when the folding player discards another . If that player next discards a completely safe tile from within their hand, it means they have  in hand and discarded  because they were sure it was 100% safe.

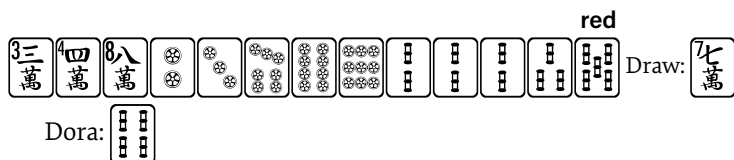
Hedge possibilities

Assume the scenario below with a riichi from the West player while we are in the North seat.

West's discards:



North (us) hand:



The West player is discarding side and middle waits from the inside, so if they have sequences, we can assume they're on a good wait. Our own hand is a rough 2-away hand where we would have to push dangerous tiles to compete, so we should maximize defense and fold here.

Now, what should we discard to fold this hand? The safe tiles we have that are in the opponent's discards are   . This is where we need to consult our surroundings and relative speed. If the only survivor on this battlefield is the riichi player, then we can drop the entire    pinzu sequence and hope for an un-

likely comeback (🀄) should only be cut when it gives a somewhat competitive shape).

This hand becomes significantly stronger if we draw 🀄. The current situation makes it hard to push this hand, but it's not impossible for it to return to a viable hand while we're discarding 🀄🀄🀄🀄.

The key to folding safely while hedging a revival of the hand is choosing your safest block and dropping the entire thing. In this case that would be 🀄🀄🀄. If we drop 🀄 from this hand because it's in their discard pile (*genbutsu*), we'll have to rely on 🀄🀄 unless we get more safe tiles. In the meantime, the 🀄 will end up as an isolated floater and kill the hand. However, if we discard the entire 🀄🀄🀄 tile, then other blocks might be sufficient to complete the hand..

The goal of the hand in this section was originally to maximize defensive strength. If hedging a hand revival compromises safety of the hand at all, then we need to give up on that dream. Remember that if there are other aggressors besides the riichi player, you need to be immediately searching for common safe tiles to all of those players, even if it means breaking up sequences.

M's Essay 02

•Victory in the Ryuo Tournament

Despite the pain of not being accepted by my father, my performance in mahjong continued to be strong. In November 2016, I won the 9th annual Twin Cup, organized by volunteers from Nihon Pro Mahjong and Saikouisen Nihon Professional Mahjong Association, and used a seed from that win to play in the first round of the 25th Ryuo Tournament main event. The Ryuo Tournament has a long history and features a unique system where 2 to 3 games are played between the same four players, and the top two advance. There are 5 rounds in the main event, which feed into the quarter-finals, semi-finals, and finals. Players who are familiar with conditional matches have an advantage, and as you move up through the rounds, you get seated with more well-known A-League players. This particular year I moved up smoothly through the rounds and surprisingly made it to the finals.

Jun Murakami, an M.LEAGUER at the time of writing

this book, was also seated in the finals. The championship is decided based on the total scores after five games, and by the end of three games, I was leading after placing 1st, 4th and 1st in those games. Game 4. Finishing this game in first place would get me that much closer to locking in a victory. I did not intend to allow myself to think about winning the whole thing and let down my guard, but Murakami, a veteran compared to me, brilliantly took first and made sure I was last in that game.

As we reached the final match, the gap between myself and Murakami, who was the new leader, was 50 points. Without any oka (ante), the question was whether or not I could finish two places ahead of him. Since it was essentially a one-on-one battle between Murakami and myself, it was extremely challenging to lower Murakami's placement. In Saikouisen, they call winning the Saikoui, Ryuo and Classic, a Grand Slam. At that time, Murakami had already earned the Saikoui and Classic crowns. Winning this Ryuo would make



The 25th Annual Ryuo Champion!

him the first person to ever achieve that Grand Slam. Social media apps buzzed with Murakami's nickname, 'Zuntan,' emphasizing that he was only one win away from the feat. Everyone was on the edge of their seats.

In the final match, Murakami was the last dealer starting in the North seat, while I started in the West seat. Until the South round started, I was being outpaced by Murakami, but during my dealership in South-3 I rallied for 8 continuances and took the lead with 80,000 points.

In the last hand, with a total point difference of 40,000, Murakami's last dealership ended in an exhaustive draw and he didn't get to tenpai. I had won. I was momentarily stunned. It was my first time to win a big title. However, when Murakami, who must have been more frustrated than anyone after losing to a third-year pro, respectfully extended his hand to congratulate me. That's when it finally hit me that I won. I met Murakami's firm handshake with both of my hands, filled with respect.

Since winning the Ryuo Tournament, things changed dramatically for me. I started getting far more work and broadcast offers, and the RTD league reached out to me. When I'm an old man and someone asks me where the turning point was in my life, my first answer will undoubtedly be the Ryuo Tournament. That is how much of an impact it had on my life.

• Playing as a Pro

Let me talk about baseball again for a minute. The fan base has become so diverse across age and gender, that there are even 'Carp Girls,' (a female fan base known for wearing red and supporting the Hiroshima Carp). Around the time I was born in 1992, baseball was a male-dominated hobby, and I remember it as a sport where fathers cheered their teams while holding an uchiwa fan in one hand and a bottle of beer in the other. Compared to soccer, which has many refreshing and handsome players, baseball is somewhat of a gritty sport and maybe didn't look quite as cool as soccer.

I want to tell you about a certain baseball player. In 1989, this player joined the Hanshin Tigers as the fifth pick in the draft from Nishinippon Junior College High School in Fukuoka. He had never played in Koshien and was not particularly notable, but in 1993, he started in place of the main batter, Thomas O'Malley, who was sidelined due to injury. In his first at-bat, this player hit a massive home run on the very first pitch, becoming an instant rags to riches story. Since then, there has not been a day without him appearing on TV and he won the Mitsui Golden Glove Award ten times before his retirement, continuing as an active star player until 2006.

This player brought the concept of fashion into the

world of baseball for the first time too, significantly changing the 'dorky' image that baseball had until then. I believe that the increase in female fans in baseball today and the expansion of its base in Japan is thanks to the tireless efforts of various baseball stakeholders and local businesses, but I think this player was the catalyst for it.

He even made it to the major leagues in the U.S. for a few years. You may have guessed by now that this player, who stayed in our memories longer than in the records, was Tsuyoshi Shinjo.

Shinjo is someone who loves to stand out, always making fashion choices and playing in a way that attracted attention from those around him. From 1993 to 2006, I don't think there was anyone in Japan who didn't know the name Tsuyoshi Shinjo, even if they weren't baseball fans.

Tsuyoshi Shinjo is the closest person to my ideal 'professional.' Not only was he praised by a major league teammate as being among the top five outfielders, but he also possesses distinctive features and charisma that are easily recognizable to anyone. No matter how good he was, if he had worn a dull polo shirt with little appeal to fans, and simply answered post-game interviews without excitement, even after hitting a decisive home run, he might have ended up just being another outfielder with a

strong arm.

My point is that being strong in the sport alone is not enough. It's important to have a distinctive character that sets you apart from others. Before I'm misunderstood, let's bring this back to mahjong. Picture four people with similar faces in plain suits who answer pre-match interviews with nothing but, "Yes... I want to play without regrets," and then just face the tiles in silence. No matter how good they are at mahjong, unless someone has known that player for a long time, it is unlikely that this appearance will gain them any fans.

The 20 M.LEAGUERS besides me are all naturally top-level mahjong players, but they also each have distinctive characteristics and excel at 'showing off' more than others. In other words, they make you think, "This player is interesting to watch. I want to watch their next match."

I believe that any distinctive feature that people find appealing is enough. Play style, appearance (fashion), personality, speaking skills, writing ability...not to mention mahjong skills. If any of these are perfected more than anyone else, they can be distinctive features.

Among the above, there was something I was able to apply to myself immediately. That was appearance (fashion). While mahjong skills are very important in this world, the fact is that it takes a long time to improve and

those improvements are difficult for others to recognize, so it's hard to make them an actual selling point. I, like Shinjo, have a personality where I like to stand out, and I decided I would start by differentiating myself by my appearance. I intended to further sharpen the intimidating look that some had already described as 'scary.' I wear clothes like an assassin, I'm tall and I always have an intimidating expression. I believed that this appearance would serve as a weapon that others wouldn't forget.

However, I had also strongly resolved to never forget 'greetings,' 'respect,' 'morality,' and 'gratitude' at all times. No matter how one looks or behaves, those who are valued by others and approached by people always embody these four qualities. Sharpen your characteristics, but be gentle and polite in demeanor. In my mind, this is the ideal image of a professional mahjong player.

• RTD League

After the Ryuo Tournament in 2017, President Fujita of CyberAgent asked those around him, "Is there anyone young and promising among the professionals for the upcoming RTD?" At that point, my senior professionals, Murakami, Takaharu Ooi, and Taro Suzuki, suggested me. "He is young and has a strong character. He just won

the Ryuo Tournament."

That autumn, I was approached by Toshimasa Cho, the producer, about participating in RTD.

"Really?!"

Cho spoke calmly, as if to reel in my excited voice. "Which would you choose? Work or the RTD? To play in RTD, you have to commit to it and quit your current job. Are you prepared to do that?"

If I had still been on the track my parents had laid out and could feel the rails beneath my feet, I might have responded cautiously. However, I was in a place where the only path under me was the solid ground I was standing on by myself.

"I will do it! Please let me play in RTD!" I answered without hesitation, and I successfully joined the RTD League. In that place, my appearance and youth also became my weapons. I was the only player in my twenties, which alone became a standout characteristic.

When RTD began, I kept telling myself, "If I lose, it's the end." The other members earned their seats with long years of achievements and experience.

I was allowed to sit here with nothing but youth and character, winning nothing but the Ryuo Tournament and the Twin Cup. If I were to lose badly at mahjong here, they would just dismiss me thinking I was too young, and I might never get this opportunity again.

I had the valuable experience of competing against veteran professionals like Takaharu Ooi (left) and Naoki Setokuma (right) in the RTD League.



In mahjong, it's difficult to visually gauge difference in skill, and it's not easy to escape from labels given to you. Unironically, I believe that's what the world is, and I did everything I could to hang on.

I have never been so terrified playing mahjong. In the finals of the Ryuo Tournament and other broadcast matches, I felt nervous but I was never intimidated. By nature, I am the type of person who enjoys standing out, and when I'm standing at the metaphorical plate and everyone is watching, I get fired up to do my best.

However, in the opening match of the RTD League, something felt different. I was enveloped in a strange sensation, as if my lower body was floating. I think my

body was inevitably lifted by the fact that I was allowed to play mahjong on such an elite stage. I pinched my trembling legs under the table with my left hand where no one could see.

I was the first dealer and in East-1 I won 1,300-all and 6,000-all hands for a strong start, getting over 50,000 points. Looking at my overflowing point box, I was gradually able to relax my shoulders. I took a deep breath, engraving that moment into my being so I would never forget that feeling.

I thought I might be able to adorn my memorable first match with a first-place finish. However, my seasoned superiors were not going to make it easy for me. In South-4, I was overtaken by Go Kobayashi when he won with 4,000-all and 2,600-all hands, putting me in second place.

When I stood up, the trembling in my legs had finally stopped.

Second place was acceptable. What do you know, I was keeping up!

I truly believed this, even though I lost the first-place position. I was relieved that I didn't bust out of my first match. Even though I should have felt frustrated by the way I was overtaken, relief won out over any regrets.

By the time I realized that this mindset was affecting the first half of my league results, it was already too late.

Masato Hagiwara (middle) is a helpful sempai. Sho-chan (right) is my sempai and teammate from Shibuya ABEMAS, but also a friend with whom I can talk to about anything.



I did not play aggressively to aim for first place at all costs, but instead repeated safe and unremarkable plays, with my aim on at least second place. The game of mahjong is not so simple that you can be a winner just aiming for second place forever, and the opponents at the table are not so easily defeated. At some point, I had left the 'greed to win at all costs' in the locker room and was playing defensive mahjong.

In the middle of the season, after once again ending in

an uneventful 3rd place, I went back to the waiting room and someone tapped me on the shoulder from behind.

"Don't you want to win? What game were you playing today? Aren't you playing mahjong to get first?"

When I turned around, Masato Hagiwara (an actor and now member of the Japan Professional Mahjong League) was standing there. Hagiwara usually cares about me and is very kind. He's been in the industry much longer than me and is like an older brother to me. Although he had better results than me, he was also going through a rough patch at that time. Even with his own stuff going on, he looked straight into my eyes with concern about my mahjong game, prioritizing it over his own. I felt as if cold water had been poured over my head.

I took out my iPhone and looked at my scores again. The red text showing -200 points pierced through me. Without realizing it, I was sitting on the border of not getting past the preliminaries. Of course I had the intent to play seriously every single day. Still, I slapped my cheeks with both hands, realizing that I could not continue like this. While tightening focus does not change the dealt tiles, I took the 'greed for first' that I had completely forgotten about out from the back of the locker and put it in my right hand.

Each participant in the RTD League played 27 matches each season. Playing from morning to night, 27 matches

can be finished in one day. I would not forgive myself and would regret for the rest of my life not being able to give 100% in this fleeting RTD League.

By then, 20 matches were over. I had started to win a bit, but my performance was still sluggish as ever. Above all, I felt that if things continued like this, I would have to leave the league after seven more matches, and that made me very sad. At the same time, I felt a desire bubbling up in me to not let it end like this, and wanting to play in this place one more time.

In the 54 total matches of the entire RTD League, I faced Ooi in the 52nd match. At the time he was in 6th place. I was in 7th place, and we had to be in the top 6 to survive. Seventh place would enter a relegation match, and 9th place would lose their right to participate next year, making this my last direct confrontation with 6th place. The 7th place player would play in match 53 and the 6th place player would play in match 54, so there was a considerable advantage to finishing in 6th place in match 52. If I lost here, I would effectively end up in 7th place or lower.

In South-4, Ooi was in the lead with 34,600 points, I was in 3rd place with 25,200 points, and all of us were facing mangan self-draw (*tsumo*) conditions. The previous hand was my last dealer turn where I really didn't want to fold, but was forced into no-tenpai after facing a

riichi from Hagiwara.

In South-4, I got a hand with a lot of *manzu* (character) tiles. On turn 5, after seeing my discards, Ooi attempted to play , which I called with a middle wait.

 Chi:  Dora: 

Since Ooi, in first place, was sitting to my left, there was a high possibility he wouldn't let me call even one more tile. Even so, the fastest mangan for my hand was a *chinitzu* (pure flush/full flush). I decided to go all in with my four *manzu* blocks, as that could easily be my last chance in RTD.

I drew the dora  consecutively, and my hand was now:

 Chi:  Dora: 

Normally, I would consider a pon with  and play . If I wanted to twist it a bit, I could cut  and wait for . I looked over at the pond. Shiratori was leaning towards *souzu* (bamboos), and after Hagiwara drew and discarded  on turn 5, Shiratori played . Unless Ooi had absorbed it,  seemed to be somewhat left in the wall.

In any case, I could not expect a direct hit from Ooi, and it seemed unlikely that any dora would be discarded by the other players. With that in mind, I prioritized the current draw probability and played  to accept the middle .

Honestly, I had done everything I could in that moment. If that didn't work, I would have to place my hopes on the final game. My position and results that day were no one's fault but my own lack of ability, and even if this ended up being the end of my RTD League, I only had myself to blame. That's what was running through my head.

However, as if to interrupt the voice in my head that was getting ready to be upset, my right hand discarded  and began to feel warm. "I know it's not easy...but I want to keep playing mahjong here... Please be in the wall! Draw it!" This was basically a pathetic tantrum in my own head. Casting aside all shame and pretense, my unvarnished desire to keep this seat manifested as shallow breaths drifting across the table.

I felt as tense as I did when waiting for the announcement of results for junior high school entrance exams. I remember being afraid to suddenly look near my exam number, so I deliberately searched in order from the first number on the sheet. Then, when I approached my number, I carefully searched while comparing it with the number on my exam ticket. Speaking of which, my probability of passing that test was only 5%.

I Still Want to Play Mahjong Here

I carefully flipped the next tile, comparing it with the number on my metaphorical exam ticket (my current hand). It didn't take long for the results to come out. The next tile that my slowly extended hand brought had the two kanji on it that read 'pass,' manifesting here as .

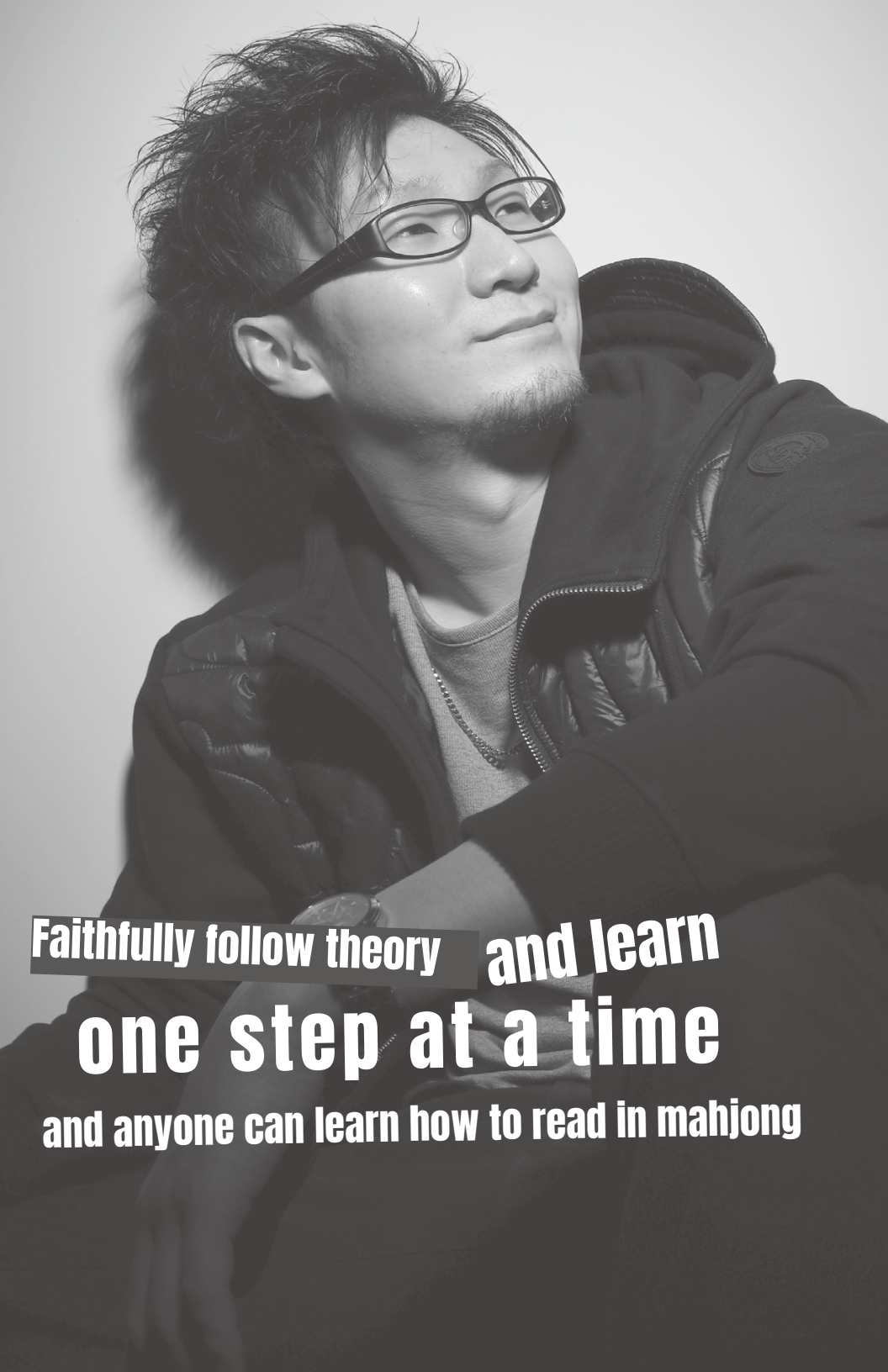
Thus, I managed to remain in the game by the skin of my teeth. It was a significant mangan for me, and an even more significant 6th place. If I had ended up in 7th place instead, I might not have been drafted for the big M.LEAGUE stage. Though there are no ifs in history, thinking about it this way helped me connect my unsatisfactory results to opportunity. That's what I was thinking.





Part 3
Matsumoto's Reads

**Accumulation
of Logic**



Faithfully follow theory and learn

one step at a time

and anyone can learn how to read in mahjong



M's Best Balance

Reads that Balance Your Game

About reading

Mahjong is a game of incomplete information. Unlike games of complete information like go and shogi (where players are given all information equally for every decision), in mahjong, not all information is disclosed. You cannot see the hands of other players or the wall, so a technique called 'reading' is used to infer the hidden information based on the disclosed information.

In mahjong, reading is used in both offensive and defensive strategies. On the offensive side, it is used to increase the speed and value of winning your own hand, or to push back as far as possible when in a disadvantageous position. Meanwhile, on the defensive side, it is used to prevent point loss or to assist other players.

However, reading is based on the premise that other players make efficient choices towards their goals (victory), so it does not work against advanced players who know the efficient choices and deliberately mislead others' reads. You have to keep some humility.

Moreover, there are almost always exceptions to reading, and overthinking can often lead to missing crucial moments when you should push forward, so it is important to view reading as just one tool and not to overly prioritize it over other factors.

Reading can be roughly categorized as follows:

- **Reading hands (concealed)**
- **Reading hands (with calls)**
- **Reading the wall**
- **Anticipating outcomes**

Before explaining each item in detail, it is important to start with the understanding that reading is about inferring what theme the opponent is approaching their hand with based on the circumstances they are in. For example, the themes for the opponent could be 'trying to avoid last place,' 'trying to build points,' 'focusing on speed to win,' or 'trying to assist other players,' and all these factors should change how you approach reading their hands. I would like you to keep this in mind as you read the following sections.

Teachings of the Tabletop Hitman

Don't Slack on These!

HIT POINT



**Reading is not a super power.
If you accumulate knowledge
and practice, anyone can do it.**



M's Best Balance

Reading hands

Reading opponents with silent tenpai (*dama*)

The purpose of reading hands is not to pinpoint the opponents' waits, but to understand the risk level of the tile you want to discard, allowing you to push until the last moment or accurately assist other players.

The basics of reading hands are: a process of elimination, and considering why an opponent held one tile over another. The key is to notice anomalies. Even though all reading is referred to as 'reading hands,' there are actually four types of reading as follows:

- (1) Reading hand composition
- (2) Reading speed
- (3) Reading score
- (4) Reading waits

We'll go through these in order.

(1) Reading hand composition

This is a technique to imagine an opponent's hand based on their discarded tiles and calls. That said, there are few cases where one can perfectly read their op-

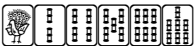
ponent's hand in detail like x-many *manzu* (character) blocks, x-many *pinzu* (dot) blocks and x-many *souzu* (bamboo) blocks. It usually ends up being a read like: they seem to have at least one block in upper *manzu*. If you can read this, you can understand the location of the tiles and use it for both offensive and defensive strategies (such as discovering more one-chance or no-chance opportunities).

Here, I will introduce several typical hand composition readings. Assume that no relevant tiles are on the board. Also, assume that the tiles depicted as  are safe tiles. It's a bit more complicated to explain with numerals in text, so I'll use the *souzu* in all my explanations.

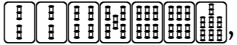
- After the first discard of  (or ) , honor tiles are discarded.

There is a possibility the player has a follow-up  (or ) , and if so, that  (or ) may be isolated (for example, if the player had   or   , the honor tiles are often discarded before ).

-                    

betan) wait is also low (as it is unlikely that  would be discarded from .

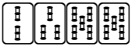
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There are possibilities such as a pair of , a pair of , a pair of , playing  from , playing  from , or a slide after drawing .

- 

There is a possibility that they are holding one  (and possibly holding at least one block around .

- 

There is the possibility that they chose to let an overlapping wait go, drew the , then slid it in for a  discard. Now if the hand has more pairs (vertical¹) then it's possible they had  then discarded .

- 

There is a possibility of  or , and there is a possibility of one block around .

- 

If the player does not seem to be in tenpai when  was discarded, the possibility they are still holding  is somewhat low.

1. Vertical refers to building pairs/triplets while horizontal refers to building sequences



M's Best Balance

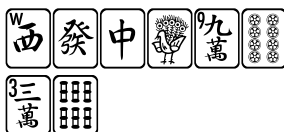
Reading Speed

Reading speed from discards

The purpose of reading speed is to know how close others are to winning, so you can discard the dangerous tiles before a fast-looking player is ready and hold on to safe tiles to avoid giving away points..

In mahjong, the first row of six discarded tiles in any given hand is often roughly classified as early-game, the second row as mid-game, and the third row as end-game, but it is important to consider that depending on the speed of other players, end-game can suddenly show up in the first row.

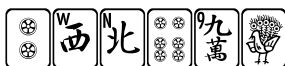
Here, we consider the opponent's speed based on the characteristics of the discarded tiles.



This is a discard pile for a typical hand cut in the order of guest wind, then value honor tile, then numbered tiles. In a typical hand, if two or more numbered tiles between 3 to 7 are discarded, it is advisable to consider that a riichi could happen at any time.



Cases where honor tiles are discarded after 1 or 9 tiles tend to show a slightly stronger tendency toward defensive awareness and are often slower than cases where guest winds are followed by value honor tiles, and then number tiles.



When a 2 (or 8) is discarded as the first tile, it usually falls into one of the following five categories.

- Initial hand is exceptionally good (with all four group blocks and the pair block already established).
- Initial hand is poor (this is usually the case if a value honor tile is discarded after 2 or 8).
- *Honitsu* (common flush/half flush)
- *Yakuhai* (value honor) tiles in the hand.
- Pair hand

Unless the starting hand is exceptionally good, a first discard of 2 (or 8) usually indicates a slow progression of the hand, and it is often acceptable to ignore it.

Typically, if a hand seems playable, honor and terminal (1 or 9) tiles are often chosen as the first discards. Choosing 2 or 8 as the first discard usually occurs when the initial hand is something where a defensive stance is taken while still hedging a *honitsu*, honor tiles,

or pairs, like the following:



Even with similarly poor initial hands, if there is potential for a *tanyao* (inside hand/all simples) terminal tiles are often chosen as the first discards. This explains why the likelihood of having value honor tile pairs is relatively high when 2 or 8 is cut first.

Dropping partial sequences (or pairs) in a typical hand

When a partial sequence is discarded in a typical hand (that started with guest wind, value honor tile, or number tile discards), the speed read changes based on that set of discards. If the hand is not being pushed toward a specific hand or dora, the presence of a discarded partial sequence often indicates that there are enough sequences already, and caution may be necessary depending on subsequent discards.

Strong partial sequences on the board mean those that do not seem to be used by others (that seem likely to be in the wall).

The next page list typical reads for common drops.

- Dropping a pair of terminal (1 or 9) tiles... Not that fast
- Side (*penchan*) wait or middle (*kanchan*) wait of 1-2, 1-3 or 2-4 ... Ambiguous
- Dropping a pair of guest winds... Ambiguous
- Dropping a pair of value honor tiles... Somewhat fast (good shape, often accompanied by high scoring potential)
- Dropping a pair of 2 or 8, dropping 3-5 or 4-6 middle waits, dropping a dora-acceptance partial sequence... Somewhat fast
- Discarding a two-sided partial sequence, or a partial sequence that uses/accepts dora, or discarding pairs of 3 to 7... Very fast
- Discarding strong partial sequences to the board... Either very fast or high-scoring.

Alert Level: MAX

Speed reading yaku

(1) Flush hands (*Honitsu/Chinitsu*)

When an honor tile that wasn't on the board yet (*shonpai*) or a number tile in the same suit as the perceived flush appears, be cautious of tenpai. In cases where two-sided partial sequence of a different suit is discarded, or not-yet-cut honor tile discards are followed by twice-cut honor tiles (safe tiles), it indicates that either the player had enough blocks, or shifted to a *chinitsu*

(pure flush/full flush), and you need to raise your alert level.

(2) *Chiitoitsu* (Seven Pairs)

If a 'perfect single wait' tile (like a *suji* to your discard, a terminal or an honor tile) or a dora is discarded, be on alert. They may have upgraded from 1-away to tenpai. However, in the case of seven pairs, there are many instances where a *riichi* would have already been declared, so you don't have to be overly cautious about a concealed tenpai.

(3) *Kokushimuso* (13 Orphans)

There is no need to be cautious until a terminal (1 or 9), or honor tile shows up in the discards. If they preemptively cut a safe middle tile for the dealer or a fast-looking player, it can be inferred that the hand is mostly composed of terminals and honor tiles. Until there are clear warning signs such as discarding a dangerous tile against a dealer's *riichi*, there is generally no need to be overly cautious.



M's Best Balance

Reading Scores

Reading where Dora is

Whether it's a concealed or called hand, reading the opponent's potential score is extremely important. In the simplest of terms, if you can read that an opponent's hand is weak, it becomes easier to push, and if you read that their hand is strong, you can adopt a more defensive stance than usual.

The fundamentals of reading score are 'reading the yaku' and 'reading the location of dora.' Easily recognizable hands that can be read from discarded tiles include *kokushimuso*, flushes (*honitsu* or *chinitsu*), outside hands (like *chanta*), *sanshoku* (mixed sequences/mixed triple sequences) and *chiitoitsu*.

Below I explain how to read where the dora is.

- **When the dora is an inside tile (2-8), and your opponent calls for inside tiles that look like good potential waits on the board, or calls a two-sided-wait sequence that isn't an overlapping wait, you can assume that player has at least two dora, which could be the displayed dora or red dora.**

If the calling opponent doesn't seem to be in a hurry (their hand theme is not likely 'speed'), then calling a two-sided chi likely means that they have a high-score hiding in their hand.

• **When the dora is a terminal or honor tile, and a player starts with a value honor tile discard, there is a low possibility that they have at least two dora in their hand.**

When dora is a terminal, or honor tile, they can't use it and also aim for a *tanyao*, so value honor tiles are inevitably worth far more than usual. Choosing that value honor tile as the first discard decreases the possibility that they have at least two dora in their hand.

• **In a situation where a value honor tile is dora, if a partial sequence is dropped early among a pond that is headed for a honitsu, there is a low possibility that they have at least two dora in their hand.**

In a situation where the player had two value tile dora, they would be prioritizing speed over the *honitsu* and not dropping partial sequences in other suits.



M's Best Balance

Reading Waits

Hard reads (one-point reads) are unnecessary

In mahjong, there is something called the 'tenpai tile' (*irime/hairime*), and unless you know what tile a player drew to tenpai it is nearly impossible to predict their wait. There are some cases where you can make an accurate read, though mainly when the hand is open. What's important is to know how safe (or how dangerous) the tile you want to discard is. This section covers my tips for reading waits .

Counting the 18 Suji pairs

The fundamental method of reading waits is the process of elimination. For that we use *suji* count and there are 18 *suji* pairs. Assuming the opponent's riichi has a two-sided wait, there are 18 *suji* possibilities: 1-4-7, 2-5-8 and 3-6-9, in each of the three suits. Each *suji* sequence is separated into two *suji* pairs, so 1-4 and 4-7 are counted as two separate *suji* pairs.

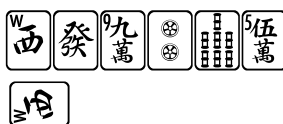
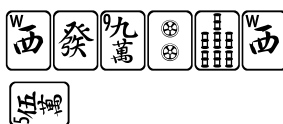
After checking how many of the 18 *suji* pairs are already safe or not, you can lean towards pushing if the safe count is low and lean toward folding if the safe

count is high. As mentioned in another chapter, there are varying degrees of danger even among the 18 *suji* pairs, so there may be cases where you decide to push and some where you don't, even with the same nine *suji* pair count.

However, in actual play, you don't always have enough time to count the exact number of *suji* pairs. A shortcut is to look for 4-5-6 tiles in the discards. Since 4-5-6 each eliminate two *suji* pairs with one tile, if the player has only discarded 4 and 5, it means that the 3-6 and 6-9 of that suit are still dangerous.

Try to guess whether it is a good shape wait or a bad shape wait

Looking at the following two discard piles (all tiles played from within the hand), can you tell which hand is more likely to be a good shape and which is more likely to be a bad shape?



The difference is in the order the  and  discards.

The upper example has discarded  after , and

we can guess that they didn't need any follow-up tiles (so they have a good shape), but the lower hand needed to hold onto follow-up tiles until the last second, so it's possible the wait isn't a great shape.

The possibility of sticky waits

An honor tile as a riichi declaration tile negates the possibility of a sticky one-away shape (two floaters waiting for a useful tile to stick to one of them). A riichi right after dropping a partial sequence also often negates a sticky 1-away shape.

Reading a single wait (*tanki*)

If there is a pair dropped from inside the hand, the wait is almost never a single (*tanki*) wait, although there are a few exceptions. In a hand that seems to be in tenpai after two to three calls, if a partial sequence with a middle or side wait is dropped after those calls, it is highly likely that the wait transitioned to a single tile.

Dropping strong partial sequences

A pair drop of  when *pinzu* are in low demand on the board, or dropping  when  looks like a good wait, requires maximum alertness (although a  drop may also be aiming for a triplets yaku). The key is to consider what one is aiming for while tossing

away such seemingly good tiles.

Read the waits based on yaku

Below, I summarize what tiles are dangerous against the yaku that the opponent is likely aiming for.

Hand: Flush (*honitsu* or *chinit-su*)

Dangerous tiles: Anything in the suit being used, and honor tiles

Hand: *Chiitoitsu*

Dangerous tiles: Tiles that look good as single waits based on discards

Hand: *Sanshoku*

Dangerous tiles: In many cases the numbers corresponding to the mixed sequence numbers are not in the discards. For example in the hand below, be somewhat aware of a 2-3-4 *sanshoku* and be careful of bad shapes in the wait (like middle  or middle  waits).



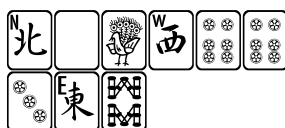


M's Best Balance

Reading Calls

What wasn't called

One of the readings for calls is: What wasn't called. Let's imagine the below is the discard pile for the player to our right. They ponned the  dora and called chi on a  to fill a middle wait, then discarded .



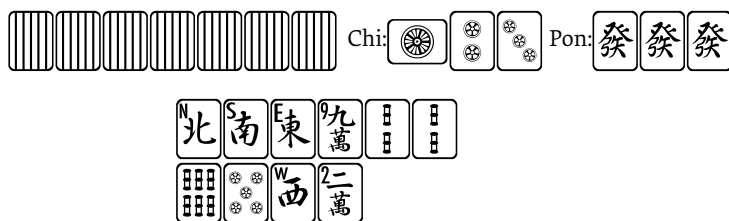
All the tiles except  were discarded from the hand (*tedashi*). At this time, let's assume I wanted to discard . Looking around the table,  has been cut twice, and one turn before the player to my right discarded , the player to my left discarded .

What we can gather here is that the player to my right did not pon , so that means they did not have   in their hand. Since there are two  cut on the table,  cannot be a two-pair (*shanpon*) wait. Since  was dropped as a pair, it doesn't seem to be a single-wait trying to complete a pair. Therefore, we can conclude that  is a pretty safe play.

However, since  was cut after the safe tile , and  seems to be somehow related to the hand, I need to be careful of any *souzu* I draw from now on. Thus, rather than completely reading the opponent's waits, the fundamentals of reading refer to ascertaining the level of safety of tiles we want to discard.

Pay attention to the discards after a safe tile

Another tip to reading calls, is paying attention to the last tile discarded from within the player's hand. The final discard from within the hand after a safe tile is often closely related to the hand shape, providing a significant hint. Of course, we also have to watch out for slides and empty cuts. Take a look at the following hand. This is a situation where the dealer, to our left, has called a pon of the dora .



(All were discarded from the hand except  and .)

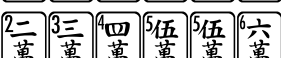
 was poned and  cut. When chi was called on , the  was discarded. As for other relevant tiles on the board, the player to our right cut  and then  on the 3rd turn, while the player opposite us cut  on the turn before  and  immediately after . The dealer

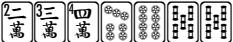
played  after a tile safe tile, so  is almost certainly relevant to their hand. Before the  pon, they dropped a pair of , indicating that their hand was quite well-formed. Our hand looks like this:



We can take tenpai by discarding , but let's consider how likely the dealer is to call . We should be careful of the player opposite us, who let the dealer call the dora and , but in this explanation we will only discuss the dealer's pon. First, they drew and discarded  on turn 4, suggesting that a side  wait is unlikely. Additionally, they discarded a strong pair of , making it hard to believe that a middle wait on the twice-cut  remains. Assuming that the  discard is relevant to the hand, let's consider the patterns where  would deal in.

- (1)      or      + one sequence
- (2)      + one pair + Draw:  or
     + one pair + Draw: 
- (3)      or      + one pair
- (4)      + one pair + Draw that completes a triplet
- (5)      + one sequence + Draw: 
or a draw that completes a triplet

- (6)  + one sequence
- (7)  + one pair
- (8)  + one pair
- (9)  + one pair

First, forget about (1) because a safe tile was discarded one turn ago. Eliminate (2) and (3) because they didn't call  or  when the player across cut them. (4) is also not possible because the player across would have dealt in with . (5) to (8) are all impossible based on the number of *manzu* visible from our perspective. (9) is unlikely as there is no reasonable situation where you would reject a 3-sided wait when  is still available. This means that while not 100% safe,  seems relatively safe to play. This hand is from my actual hand histories and the hand of the player to my left was a slide from  after drawing . Whether you can push a single tile at the last minute or not can be a massive turning point in a battle. In the hand above, I could have given up with the , leading to the dealer drawing 4,000-all, or I could hold fast and discard  to win the hand with  for a *tanyao*, gaining points (and avoiding loss). That's a huge difference. It may not be common in matches to be able to read a hand in this much detail, but include this reading method of imagining and rejecting possible patterns in your arsenal.



M's Best Balance

Reading Stalls

Reasoning out hesitation spots

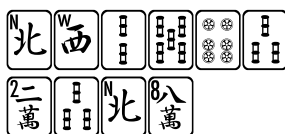
Since mahjong is a game played between people, they will sometimes take time to think. Advanced players understand that even a moment's hesitation can provide information, so they often have already decided what to discard, what to call, and what to discard after calling, before doing it. Even so, in unexpected situations, everyone takes time to think now and then, especially in critical moments. Please see the hand below. The player to my left called a pon of the dora  and you can see the discards below it. That player took a moment to think, looked at the board, and then discarded . Discarding  after a safe tile suggests that they have something related to the *manzu* suit in their hand.

The players across and to the right of me had both already folded, and relevant discards from the player to my right were three , two  and two .

 Chi:    Pon:   

The  was discarded after the  pon and the .

was discarded after the  chi.

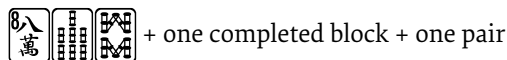


(All were discarded from the hand except  and )

Then immediately after, my hand turned into this:



If I were to discard  or , I would be in tenpai, but the  looked really dangerous to the dealer's discards. However, considering the dealer's moment of thought at the  discard, I determined that at least  would pass (the reason for avoiding  was that it seemed as if they had at least one block in the upper *souzu*, that there was a possibility of a middle or side wait and that the area was dangerous). Then I considered what reason there could be for taking time to think if they were left with a  two-sided wait.



The  came from the hand after a safe tile, so there is no question that  was relevant. Possibilities:



In cases like these, the long thinking could have come from holding upper *manzu*. However, based on the number of *manzu* visible to me, I could reject each of these shapes. It was hard to come up with any other cases where they would think hard over  but be waiting for  on a two-sided shape, and since it was twice-cut, there was no chance of a two-pair wait (even if  hadn't been cut, a two-pair wait would have to have been locked in from a  shape on turn 4, but with so many discards from the hand afterward, that didn't really make sense).

Since I also had a potential winner, the best move was to discard  without a *riichi*. It may stand out that I pushed back against that call, but it still made sense to wait for the  that the dealer had just discarded. Indeed, I was able to pick up  from the player across from me who had run out of completely safe tiles, and I got *mangan* out of it.

The left player had discarded  from  since there weren't many  left, and chose a double pair wait.

Since there are various reasons for a moment of thought depending on the person, you should never put too much stock into it as information. However, when you're walking a thin line with a single tile, exploring the reasons why an opponent took a moment of thought may reveal a path forward.



M's Best Balance

Reading the Wall

The basics of reading the wall

Reading the wall is a technique for estimating which tiles are likely to remain in the wall based on the discarded tiles of other players. Information from just one person is not sufficient to definitively say "This tile is still in the wall," and instead you need observations of tendencies from at least two players for the information to be even somewhat credible. The fundamentals are as follows:

- Tiles around those discarded in the early-game are often still in the wall (especially if an honor tile is discarded after a number tile in the early-game, it is likely that the player is not holding number tiles connecting to it).
- If terminal tiles are discarded mid-to-late-game, there may be cases where a $2/3$ (or $7/8$) has become a pair or a triplet (although there are many exceptions to this).
- Suits in high demand (a suit not showing up much in the discards) are usually not remaining in the wall, while suits in low demand often remain.

Anticipating outcomes

Using all the readings I have explained so far, and combining them with considerations for the theme of that hand for yourself and the perceived themes of other players to guess what will happen next is called anticipating outcomes. Here are some examples of decisions based on reads:.

- Choosing to hold a partial sequence with a  wait because it seems likely that the dealer will riichi within a few turns and when they do, it seems like players A and B, who appear unlikely to push, will discard the  that's safe to the dealer.
- Calling a blocking riichi as a last-place dealer in the south round, because the third-place player to your right has a discard pile that looks like a *honitsu*, and you anticipate the first place player across from you will help with that *honitsu* to try and end your dealership..
- You see a call for an *tanyao* worth about 1,000 to 2,000 points, and you've made a hard read that the wait is likely , but since you have  in your own discards, your dealer riichi will likely entice others to discard those tiles, so you decide not to riichi.

M's Essay 03

• Joining M.LEAGUE

The first M.LEAGUE draft was held in August 2018. In July, just before the draft, Nihon Pro Mahjong (NPM) hosted the 'Phoenix Open' and I was treated to sushi by Takaharu Ooi at an after party.

After polishing off a variety of sushi, Ooi took a sip of tea and started a casual conversation. The draft came up.

"I wonder how the draft will turn out," he pondered.

"I think my chances of being selected in the draft are quite low, but if I were to be chosen, I want to be on the same team as you, Ooi!" I exclaimed.

"I want to be on the same team too. Then I could train you," he answered. "Thank you very much! Please do!" I responded cheerfully and couldn't help but grin. Ooi is usually cheerful and always acts to uplift those around him, but I know how that magnifies for people he is especially close to. That is why I was truly happy that he said this to me. After that, I stayed savoring those words

for a long time, sipping on three cups of tea.

I had a similar conversation during a late-night phone call with Sho Shiratori. During our casual chat, I said, "You'll definitely be selected, Sho-chan! I want to be selected too, but there are so many great mahjong pros, and I don't see how I could fit into one of the 21 slots," expressing my doubts. Sho-chan shot back at me, "No way, Matsu (that's what he calls me), you're wrong. The young guns like us gotta think, 'I want to be selected,' and then we gotta be selected. Being selected, showing up with results and giving even younger guns a dream is how we will build a future for mahjong." Those words felt like they came from a big brother I could count on.

I have always had a good relationship with everyone in RTD League and M.LEAGUE, but I'm closest with Sho-chan. Among the members of the RTD League, which was dominated by professionals in their late 30s to 50s during what was considered the 'peak of mahjong,' at the time, Sho-chan was the closest in age to me. We were already friends when RTD started, but after we started playing, we also began going out to eat after matches a lot more.

I was the youngest in the RTD League, and I found it difficult to catch the older players in the waiting room to discuss strategy after matches. But Sho-chan was different. Perhaps he has an aura that makes him easy to talk

to. I asked him, "Was it better to call on that  earlier?" He just responded, "Yeah, I think it would have been better to call it."

I didn't have many friends who would criticize my mahjong. I don't mean it in a bad or dissatisfied way, but they just found my choices and reasoning to be interesting. Perhaps because everyone was quite mature, they didn't start with rejection.

Of course, I was grateful for that, but Sho-chan was different. "Matsu, you gotta call that ,

 rejecting my choice deliberately. The blunt rejection evidences how close we are. Sho-chan cared about my mahjong as much as his own. That made me really happy. Sho-chan was the only one who would seriously discuss mahjong with me and sincerely tell me I was wrong.

Sho-chan also mentioned my name in an interview as the, 'first pro younger than me who I thought was strong,' which made me incredibly happy. Even though there is a six-year age difference between us, when asked in an interview about my rival in mahjong, I have started to always mention Sho Shiratori.

The time I have spent with Sho-chan since we met is still a short part of my 26 years of life, but he is my rival, my goal, my best friend and my emotional support.

On that day, when my name suddenly appeared in the M.LEAGUE draft as the third pick for the Shibuya ABE-

MAS team, emotions I had never felt before surged. I felt gratitude, joy, surprise, and I was trembling with excitement. Pushing aside the emotions that had gathered in my mind and waiting on line, my foremost feeling was gratitude towards those who had supported me, and the joy of being on the same team as the exact two players that I had dreamed of teaming up with, out of the 2,000 professional mahjong players in Japan at the time.

•M.LEAGUE

"Shall we send Matsumoto for the opening match?" Those were the words of President Susumu Fujita in a team meeting on the eve of the M.LEAGUE opening match. "Surely everyone expects Ooi to play in the opening match. Let's surprise them and go with Matsumoto." He wasn't saying this to create a buzz. I'm sure President Fujita had a clear vision that the team would gain momentum if their young gun went in and won right off the bat. However, to keep me from feeling too much pressure, he made it sound playful, like an elementary school team strategizing for a dodgeball game.

I believe there is another reason why President Fujita chose me. It may sound arrogant, but I did not particularly like being told, "You're strong for someone so young." This turned into a complex for me. In my opinion, when standing on the same stage, age shouldn't

matter. I want to be called the strongest. Not strong for a young player, but just a strong mahjong player. This ate at me. I think President Fujita knew that determination, and by entrusting me with the opening match, he was telling me that I wasn't just a young and trendy player, but a legitimate professional who can be trusted in battle.

On the night before the opening match, I felt strangely calm. I thought I would be overwhelmed by emotion and desperately trying to suppress my excitement, or feeling scared and wanting to run away, but instead, a perfect mix of exhilaration and nerves allowed me to approach the match in a good mental state. The version of myself



I officially became a member of Shibuya ABEMAS.

From left: Sho Shiratori, Takaharu Ooi, Director Susumu Fujita, and myself.

who was afraid of how people saw me during RTD had already become a thing of the past. That night, I covered my head with a blanket and envisioned the next day's opening match. 'Alright, I can do this. I got it!' Like the night before school sports festival when I was a kid, I had a strong desire to meet the expectations of President Fujita and everyone else who chose me. In the pitch-black under my blanket, my heart began to race, and I had trouble falling asleep.

I was able to play in a calm mental state during the opening match, but I fell from second to third place during a lateral payment in South-4. However, unlike the opening match of RTD where I was afraid of going negative in points and ended up finishing second, this was a good third place. "Welcome back!" Despite the negative score in my result, Ooi and Sho-chan greeted me with cheerful high-fives.

After that, Ooi played and earned the Shibuya ABE-MAS our first win. Then Sho-chan took a decisive first and reminded me of his amazing skill. We celebrated together in the room, clapping our hands and hugging, but deep down, where no one else could see, I felt a lingering sense that I had yet to make my mark. I have not yet been able to repay President Fujita for choosing me. I was confident that this impatient feeling would not affect my play, but I still wanted to hurry up and win a game

Watching Shiratori's match alongside Ooi (left) and Director Fujita (right).
Viewing from the locker room.



so I could contribute to the team.

The opportunity came immediately after that. We went into the fourth game with my third and a first place each from Ooi and Sho-chan. It was my turn again.

I faced continuous pressure from Aki Nikaido of EX FU-RINKAZAN, and just when it seemed like this game would also be a failure, I suddenly exploded. With a series of winning hands reminiscent of the final of the Ryuo Tournament, I was able to accumulate points, reaching 60,000 and claim my first win..

Returning to the team's waiting room with a triumphant pose, both Ooi and Sho-chan celebrated as if they had won the game themselves. Seeing their truly heartfelt grins I felt like a real member of the team for the first time. I was Yoshihiro Matsumoto, member of the

Shibuya ABEMAS.

From then on, Ooi and Sho-chan always cheerfully sent me off to the court.

"Matsumoto, if you're not having fun, then it's meaningless."

"Matsu, don't worry about it, I'll win this. Don't worry, Ooi is our anchor."

"Alright! Bring it!"

They knew exactly how to loosen me up when the tension would creep into my shoulders.

So when I dealt into Hisato Sasaki's *kokushimuso* (13 Orphans) hand, taking a major blow to the team, I truly felt a deep sense of regret. As I trudged back to the wait-



A photo taken when Shiratori (left) and I were struggling with our performance.

ing room, they both stood up slowly. They didn't treat me like a fragile statue or smile and say it would all be alright. Their expressions were the same as always and they just laughed and said, "Don't worry! It was a learning experience! M.LEAGUE will be around for decades, but you have the honor of dealing into the first Yaku-man! You're a legend!" I'm really grateful that *this* is my team. I truly felt that from the bottom of my heart.

At the time of writing this book, I have played in 27 out of 80 M.LEAGUE matches, finishing with a very mundane aggregate score of +22.1. However, both Ooi and Sho-chan had a period of poor performance, which never happened to me. I managed to get a first place once every four games. There was no time when I was unstoppable, but I also didn't have any really rough patches. During the tough times for the team, I was able to endure. My results had virtually no impact on the team whatsoever, but that endurance was the one thing I could proudly claim as a member of Shibuya ABEMAS.

I have an overflowing gratitude that cannot be expressed in words for President Fujita, a fellow Aoyama Gakuin University graduate, who brought me into Shibuya ABEMAS.

"Matsumoto, looks great in that leopard-print tie. He knows how to create his own style. He knows what the people want." I got a lot of praise that made me happy.

"He will surely be the Sota Fujii of mahjong. He can become a star." The RTD player introductions gave me way too much credit. They evaluated me not just as a one-hit wonder who suddenly gained attention for being so young, but as a player with a future. I want to live up to even a little of the expectations placed on me. Whenever I head to the playing area, I carry with me the image of Ooi and Sho-chan, hoping for me in the waiting room, and my gratitude for President Fujita who chose me.

• **Reconciliation with my father, and then...**

My personal theory about work and money is that money is something you receive as a reward for making people happy. I believe work is that act of making people happy. For example, why do large companies, doctors, and lawyers earn a lot of money and have good salaries? It is usually because those professions make many people happy or make specific people very happy.

When I confessed to my father that I became a professional mahjong player, he shouted for me to, "Stop this nonsense!" While it may be acceptable in the realm of hobbies, you can't run a household off of mahjong. In other words, "Mahjong is something for one's own enjoyment and not something to make others happy." Therefore, it meant that there was no way to earn a decent liv-

ing from that path.

Even after the day he scolded me, my father remained consistent and refused to accept that I was a professional mahjong player. He called my chosen profession embarrassing and never spoke about it to our relatives. Still, I wanted to prove that I was not playing mahjong just for fun, so I had no choice but to work desperately to show that through results and media presence. Perhaps as a result of that effort, my father's perception of me started to change little by little from the time I won the Ryuo Tournament. I feel like he at least realized, "Ohh, Yoshihiro isn't just playing around here."

One day, I happened to see my father's search history on his computer from behind him. I saw words like 'Yoshihiro Matsumoto, Mahjong,' 'What is RTD?' and 'Abema TV Mahjong.' I realized that my resolute father, who had never accepted mahjong as a profession, was searching for me on the other side of the monitor, and I couldn't help but feel my eyes welling up.

Bringing people happiness through mahjong. There are many opportunities for people to be made happy by mahjong, starting with mahjong classes and broadcast matches, which my father simply did not know about, but with the establishment of M.LEAGUE, even more people now have the opportunity to find happiness through mahjong.

My father, who had no knowledge of mahjong, started taking his reading glasses out of the case and watching my matches on his smartphone. Seeing that side of my father, I resolved to tell him that I was planning to live my life solely as a professional mahjong player and that I wanted to make people in the world happy through mahjong.

*The following is an excerpt from 'Abema TV Hot Battle! M.LEAGUE: The Journey of the Chosen 21 #9' aired on December 2, 2018

Me: I found what I want to do in life, so today I came to tell you again that I want to pursue mahjong in M.LEAGUE. Dad, you're the person I want to watch me the most and the person I want to cheer for me the most!

Father: Well, I figured there was nothing I could do. I hope you have a good life without causing trouble to others. I will be here supporting you. Do your best.

When he said that, my father smiled and the corners of his eyes wrinkled. Those words, "Stop this nonsense!!" had echoed in my head ever since he said them. The pain in my chest from the day he yelled had now transformed into gentle nostalgia.

"Yoshihiro! Good job, that's a great ball!"

Those were the words I heard from my dad the first time he bought me a glove and ball and I threw it right to his chest.

"Yoshihiro! You did well! Congratulations!"

When I passed the entrance exam for Asano Junior High School after a series of all-nighters to study.

"You got the level 2 bookkeeping certification?! Amazing!"

That was what he said when I passed a qualification test during my university years since it would be good for the family business.

My father truly looked delighted with that crinkly face that I love so much. And now, when I see my father smiling and choosing to ask our relatives to support me with that crinkled face, I realized that the whole time I thought I was feeling bad about derailing the Matsumoto family track, I was actually just wishing my father would accept the way I chose to live my life. I was just hoping he would be openly proud of me. The gentle wrinkles at the corners of my father's eyes when he smiles have grown deeper since those days when we played catch in front of the house, and I hope they will continue to

subtly grow. On this path I chose for myself, I want to make my father, mother, sister, and brother, who are all watching from the other side of the monitor, as happy as possible. And I also want to make President Fujita (who drafted me), my teammates, Ooi and Sho-chan, and all the many Shibuya ABEMAS fans who are supporting me through their TV or smartphone screen, happy as well. Today, I will put on my navy blue uniform as Yoshihiro Matsumoto, M.LEAGUER.



I am proud that this trio was able to survive and compete in the finals.
Thank you, Shiratori (left) and Ooi (right)!

Bonus Records: M's Notes

**The M.LEAGUE Final Series battle.
Yoshihiro Matsumoto's mahjong
notes published without post-editing**

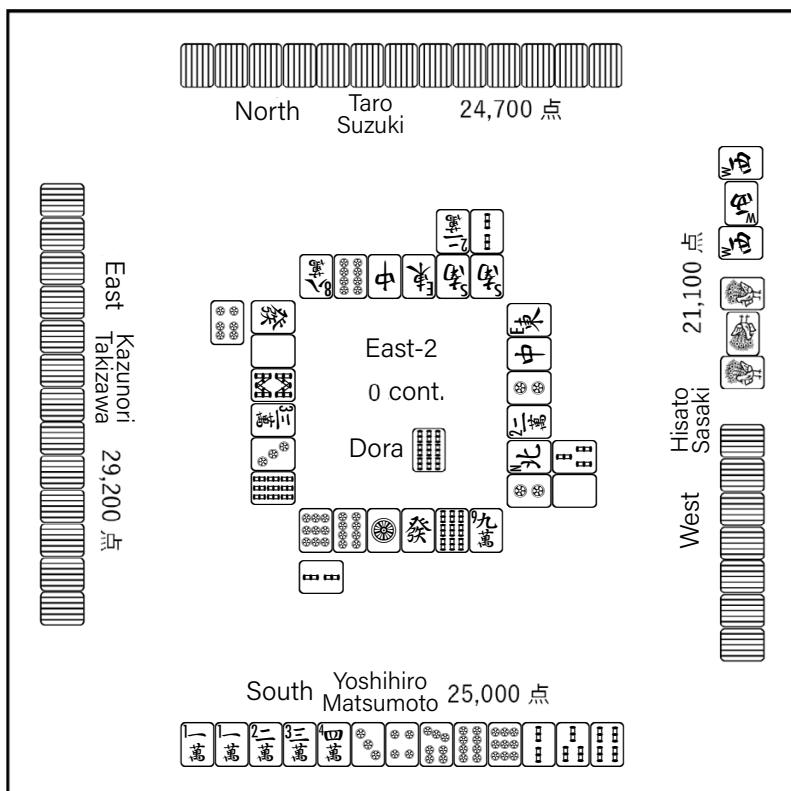
Yoshihiro Matsumoto
Shibuya ABEMAS

Asahi Shimbun M.LEAGUE: Final Stage

March 2nd, Game 3

Scores

1st place: EX FU-RINKAZAN	+134.5 (Takizawa)
2nd place: Akasaka Drivens	+123.4 (Suzuki)
3rd place: Shibuya ABEMAS	+10.3 (Matsumoto)
4th place: KONAMI Mah-jong Fight Club	▲ 19.7 (Sasaki)



Riichi, pinfu, *sanshoku* (mixed sequences) as a chasing riichi counter-attack with a  wait. I saw a chance to win with a *pin-ten* (tenpai waiting for *pinzu* tiles), so I have no regrets.

Additional notes for readers:

On turn 5, I discarded a dora from the following 1-away shape:



The dealer, Kazunori Takizawa, cut from the dragon honor tiles and then on turn 3 discarded the dora indicator , followed by  and seemed like he could riichi at any moment, so I decided to cut the dora  early. When I discarded that , Hisato Sasaki, to my right, hadn't called  yet and at the time I found it acceptable for Sasaki, who was in last place, to call the dora if he could. The result was Takizawa being first to riichi and me chasing after I pulled the best fill-in on my  middle-wait shape for a pinfu tenpai and a chance at *sanshoku* on one side. Although I was confident with my *pinzu* (dot) wait based on the board, I ended up picking up Takizawa's wining tile and dealt into his 12,000 point hand.

Asahi Shimbun M.LEAGUE: Final Stage

March 2nd, Game 3

Scores

1st place: EX FU-RINKAZAN

2nd place: Akasaka Drivens

3rd place: Shibuya ABEMAS

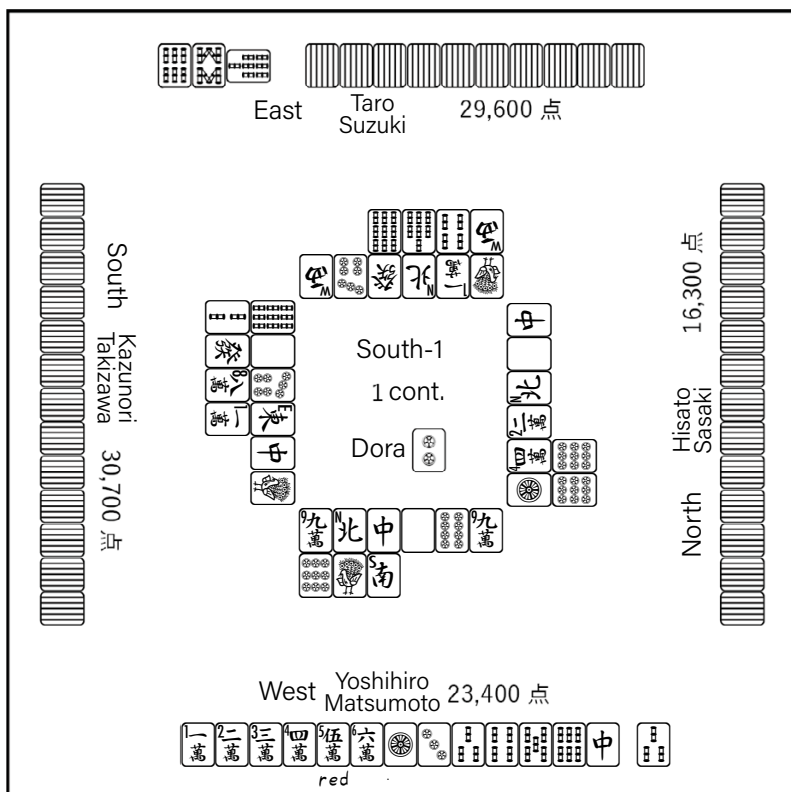
4th place: KONAMI Mah-jong Fight Club

+134.5 (Takizawa)

+123.4 (Suzuki)

+10.3 (Matsumoto)

▲ 19.7 (Sasaki)



Waiting for a middle  dora I chose to *dama* with no yaku. But if it's a final table perhaps the balance favors a riichi.

Taro (Suzuki), the dealer started by discarding a pair of , then called chi on a  middle (*kanchan*) wait and then discarded . It looks like a chi to tenpai. Moreover, it's at least 5,800 points.

Judging that there was a high possibility he had multiple , I decided it wasn't worth it.

Additional notes for readers:

I got to tenpai with a possible riichi, tsumo, red dora and regular dora, but looking at the board, the middle  wait looked bad and Taro Suzuki had dropped  then a pair of , after which he called chi for , discarding . I read that he had at least 5,800 points and was either tenpai or 1-away, so I didn't want to get into a riichi battle. Since he cut  before the pair of , it indicated there were four block options already, and I inferred that there was at least one *pinzu* block involving the dora. Additionally, the high defensive capability of the  pair drop meant that there he felt no need to consider defense, indicating a high-scoring hand. Furthermore, if it was only 2,900 points, I thought it was unlikely that a pro like Taro Suzuki would chi. The result was that all  tiles were absorbed by other players and no longer in the wall, and that led the hand ended in an exhaustive draw with only Suzuki showing tenpai for a dealer mangan.

Asahi Shimbun M.LEAGUE: Final Stage

March 2nd, Game 3

Scores

1st place: EX FU-RINKAZAN

2nd place: Akasaka Drivens

3rd place: Shibuya ABEMAS

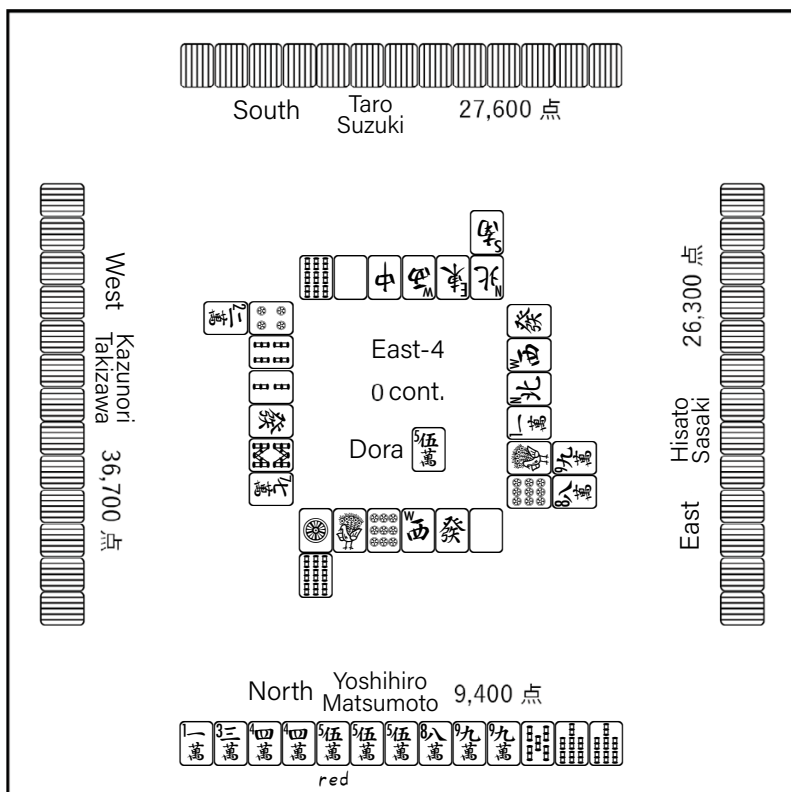
4th place: KONAMI Mah-jong Fight Club

+134.5 (Takizawa)

+123.4 (Suzuki)

+10.3 (Matsumoto)

▲ 19.7 (Sasaki)



A *chinitasu* (pure flush/full flush) for baiman. It started with the  pon.

Additional notes for readers:

With 4 dora, I wanted to win this hand no matter what. From my perspective, I could see three of each the middle *manzu* (character)  and , and judging by the way the other players were discarding *manzu*, I determined that there were still more of that suit left in the wall, so I decided to call Sasaki's  discard and play  (I didn't call the  discard by Takizawa in the previous turn because I hadn't drawn  yet). The reason I did not play  is because when other players started to push back, I would have to push back on them with two *suji* ( ) instead of just the one (only ). The shape of my hand is not as good as it first appeared, and I thought that even if I kept my hand closed, I wouldn't be able to win, so I called for tiles and it turned out well in this case. After this, I drew , called , the  paired up and I filled in the middle  to win a baiman.

Asahi Shimbun M.LEAGUE: Final Stage

March 2nd, Game 3

Scores

1st place: EX FU-RINKAZAN

2nd place: Akasaka Drivens

3rd place: Shibuya ABEMAS

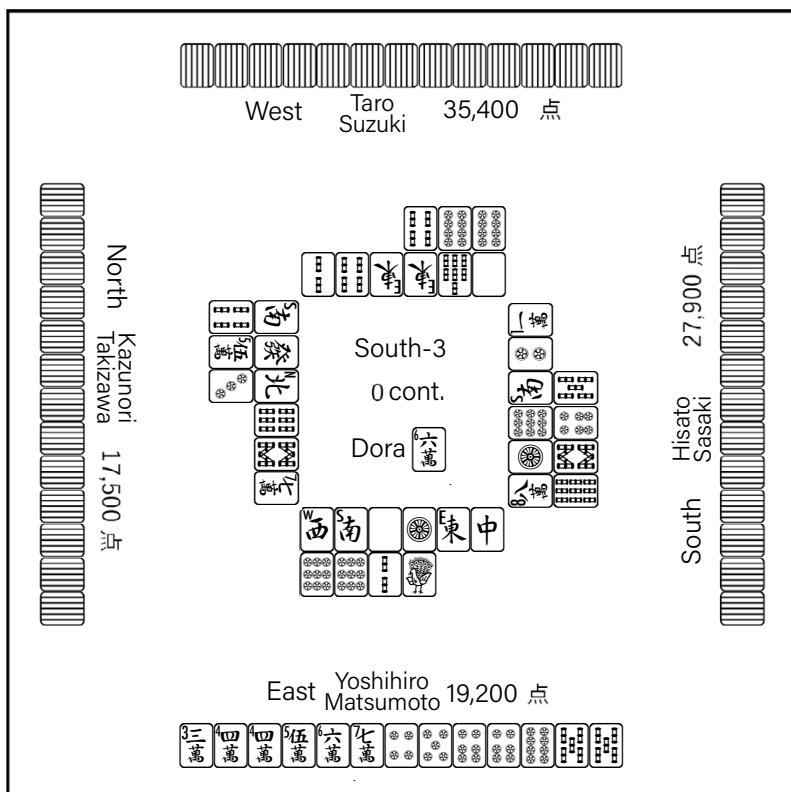
4th place: KONAMI Mah-jong Fight Club

+134.5 (Takizawa)

+123.4 (Suzuki)

+10.3 (Matsumoto)

▲ 19.7 (Sasaki)



I was dealer and ponned to get to tenpai, waiting for a middle  and ended up dealing in.

I thought that Taro, after discarding a pair of , was already likely to be in tenpai, making it difficult to discard  .

Additional notes for readers:

After Taro Suzuki discarded the  pair, he discarded  and  from his hand, indicating his hand was likely fairly fast. Additionally, Takizawa sitting to my left also discarded an honor tile and then a middle tile after it, indicating a potential tenpai or a fast hand with a decent score. Hisato Sasaki was also discarding risky middle tiles against those two, indicating he was likely fast as well. My hand had great potential, including dora, but considering the relative speed, I called  and discarded . I also made a judgment that  was easier to discard than , of which I could see four copies. This resulted in dealing into Taro Suzuki's pinfu and red dora when I discarded . Looking back now, my regret is that I should have let  go and held my ground instead since there wasn't actually much difference in danger between  and , which would have been pushed out anyway.

Asahi Shimbun M.LEAGUE: Final Stage

March 2nd, Game 3

Scores

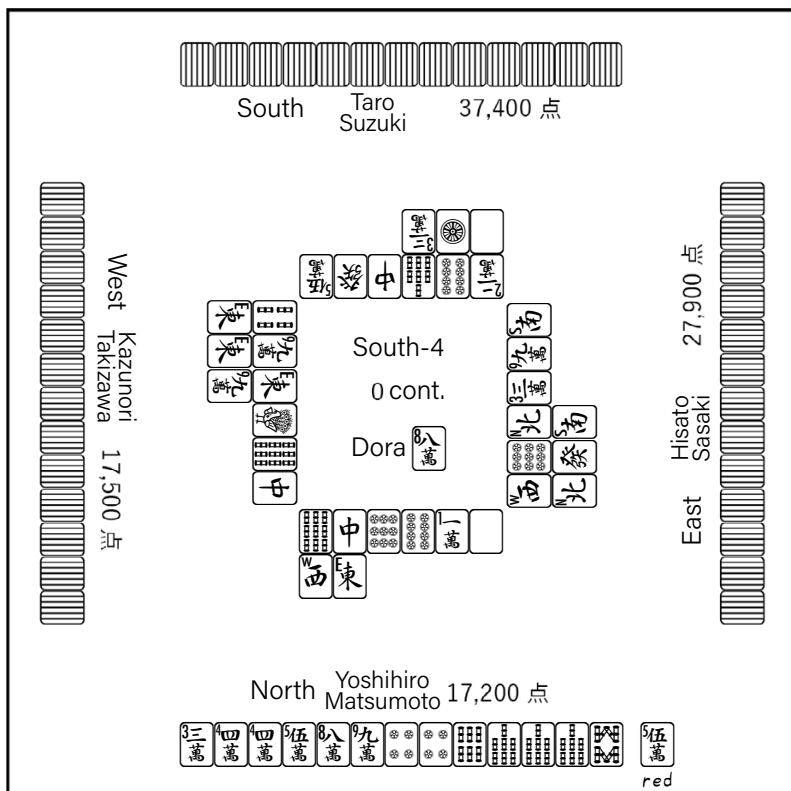
1st place: EX FU-RINKAZAN

2nd place: Akasaka Drivens +134.5 (Takizawa)

3rd place: Shibuya ABEMAS +123.4 (Suzuki)

4th place: KONAMI Mah-jong Fight Club +10.3 (Matsumoto)

▲ 19.7 (Sasaki)



In South-4 when choosing my blocks, I chose to let the dora partial sequence go since I needed a mangan self-draw for second place and any win would get me third place.

I have Taro's assistance to thank for this one.

Additional notes for readers:

In South-4, my condition was a mangan self-drawn win to get second place. On the other hand, since I could avoid last place with 1,000 points, I wanted to choose an option that could hedge both avenues until the last moment, so I discarded the side wait:  and then . By discarding the dora, I aimed to make it look like a cheap hand to get help from the first-place player, Taro Suzuki, in case of an emergency. While playing  then  would have provided a higher score in case I drew , I chose to cut  then  because, even if I drew a baiman, I would not be able to get first place. Instead, I chose to create the appearance of pursuing safety rather than score, making it easier for Suzuki to assist me. As a result, even though Hisato Sasaki declared riichi, I successfully received the  I was aiming for from Taro Suzuki, allowing me to move up to third place.

Asahi Shimbun M.LEAGUE: Final Stage

March 3rd, Game 1

Scores

1st Place: Akasaka Drivens

2nd Place: EX FU-RINKAZAN

3rd place: Shibuya ABEMAS

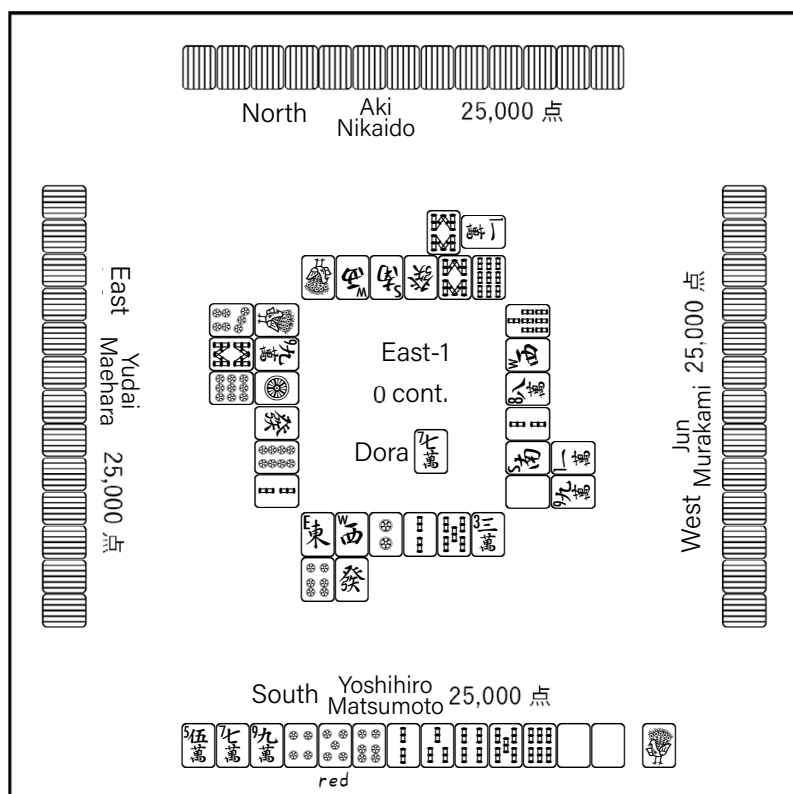
4th Place: KONAMI Mah-jong Fight Club

+179.9 (Murakami)

+92.0 (Nikaido)

▲ 9.5 (Matsumoto)

▲ 12.9 (Maehara)



I chased Aki's riichi waiting for a middle .

Considering Aki's reputation for strong hands when she declares riichi, I could either slow my hand down more safely (*mawashi*) by dropping my pair of , or slam  for a riichi, or change my strategy to cut  for a *dama*, which might have prevented a heavy loss if I had drawn a dora.

Additional notes for readers:

I chased with a riichi on the middle  wait against Aki Nikaido's reach. Nikaido's wait and score were unclear from her discards, so I chased based on the favorable situation of my  and the high score (5,200 points or higher). However, since Nikaido rarely plays low-scoring riichi with bad waits, and considering that EX FU-RINKAZAN was currently in first place in total points, it would not be surprising if she had either a good shape or a high score, or both. Therefore, it might have been better to simply bow my head and drop the pair of white dragons to roll the hand over. The result here was that I picked up Nikaido's side  wait, resulting in a loss of 8,000 points.

Asahi Shimbun M.LEAGUE: Final Stage

March 3rd, Game 1

Scores

1st Place: Akasaka Drivens

2nd Place: EX FU-RINKAZAN

+179.9 (Murakami)

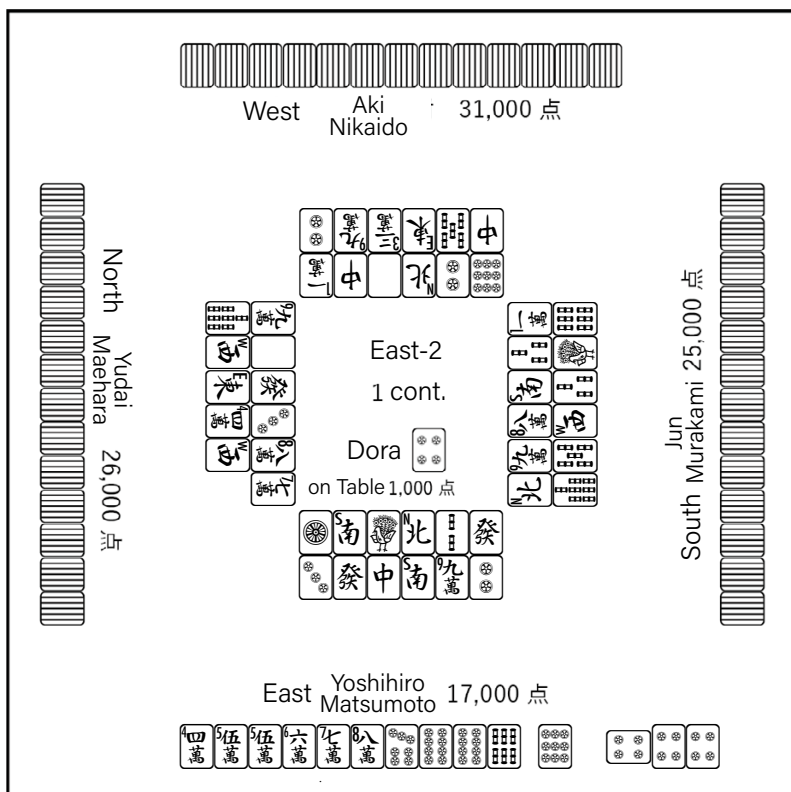
3rd place: Shibuya ABEMAS

+92.0 (Nikaido)

4th Place: KONAMI Mah-jong Fight Club

▲ 9.5 (Matsumoto)

▲ 12.9 (Maehara)



Tenpai with no yaku after a dora pon.

Discards: On the third row, I ended up drawing  and taking a no-yaku 1-away shape to keep my dealer turn.

Big regrets as the correct move was to go back to a strong 2-away shape instead of fixating on maintaining my dealer turn.

Additional notes for readers:

Although I poned dora, I was still 2-away from a *tanyao* (inside hand) in the third row and with no tiles around the , I judged that I could not get to tenpai in this state, so I decided to play  to maintain my dealer turn. However, I didn't initially call this hand wanting to just get to tenpai, my intention was to gain points with at least a dealer mangan. In any case, other players would find it difficult to play back to the dora pon, so I should have discarded , forgetting about continuances, and pushed to try and win the hand as long as I possibly could. If this were turn 16, I would have been heading towards a tenpai shape regardless of yaku, but since it was turn 13, I think I could have stuck it out a little longer to try to win.

Asahi Shimbun M.LEAGUE: Final Stage

March 3rd, Game 1

Scores

1st Place: Akasaka Drivens

2nd Place: EX FU-RINKAZAN

+179.9 (Murakami)

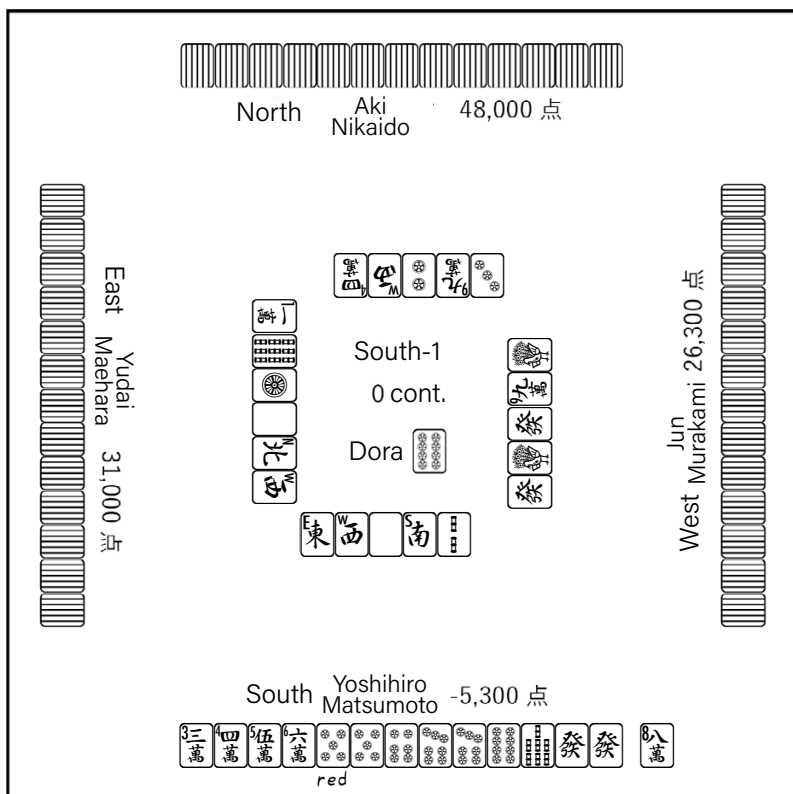
3rd place: Shibuya ABEMAS

+92.0 (Nikaido)

4th Place: KONAMI Mah-jong Fight Club

▲ 9.5 (Matsumoto)

▲ 12.9 (Maehara)

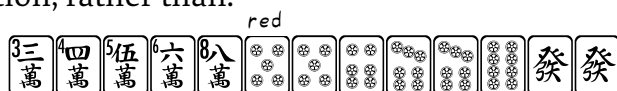


South-1, dropped the pair of 發.

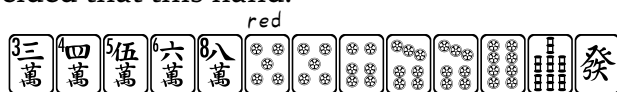
Considering the score, this was a pair drop that would let me also respond to later draws.

Additional notes for readers:

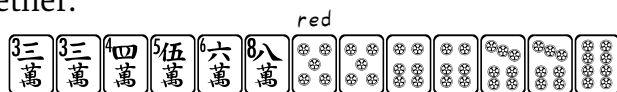
If I were to discard 𪛗, I could get to 1-away from ready, but there were two 發 discarded already and since I was already below zero in points going into South-1, I wanted points. If I were to play 𪛗, there was a possibility of being left with a bad wait, and it would likely end up as 5,200 points, so I did not take the 1-away and instead discarded 發 for a 2-away shape. As explained in the 'Build hands you can fight back with' section, rather than:



I decided that this hand:



would allow me to pick up surrounding *souzu* (bamboos) and would also be easier to call with to push back. After this, there was a riichi from Aki Nikaido, and I put together:



a 1-away shape I could push back with, but it ended with a deal-in unrelated to me.

Asahi Shimbun M.LEAGUE: Final Stage

March 3rd, Game 1

Scores

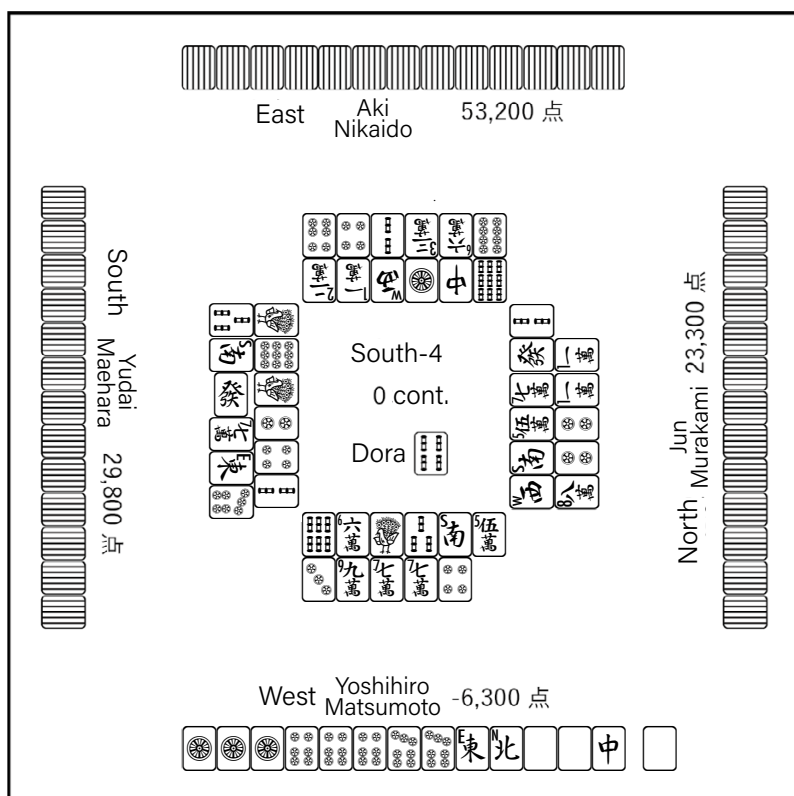
1st Place: Akasaka Drivens

2nd Place: EX FU-RINKAZAN +179.9 (Murakami)

3rd place: Shibuya ABEMAS +92.0 (Nikaido)

4th Place: KONAMI Mah-jong Fight Club ▲ 9.5 (Matsumoto)

▲ 12.9 (Maehara)



South-4. If I were to win a baiman directly from Murakami I could get third place and with a *suanko* (four concealed triplets) win on a self-draw, I would get second place.

Sticking to the four concealed triplet hand, I waited to pon the  until the second one was discarded, ending up with a futile 12,000 point hand.

Additional notes for readers:

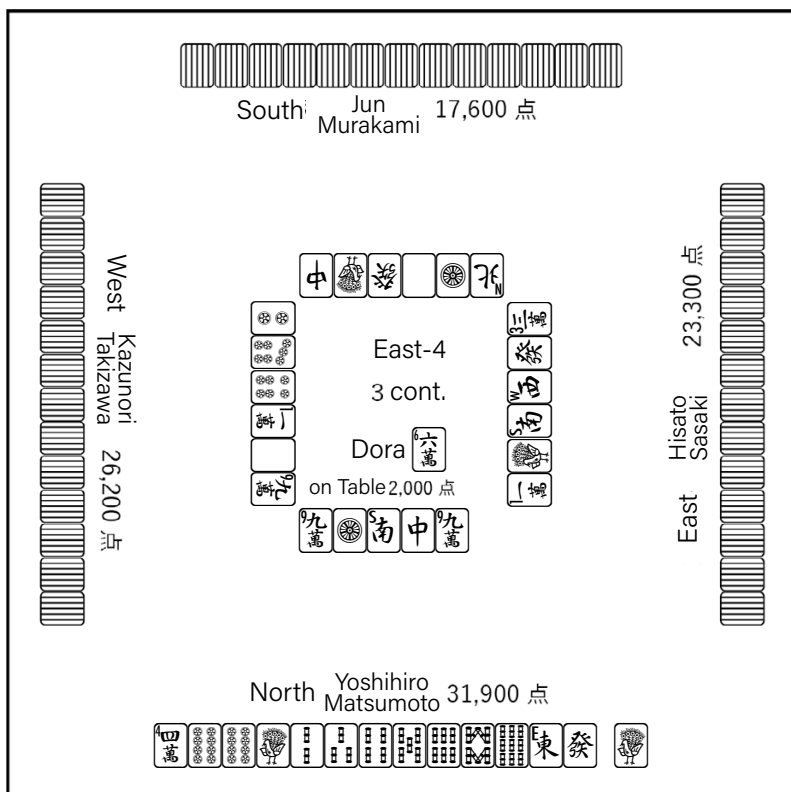
South-4, negative points. Yudai Maehara had already declared riichi, but as explained in 'Push gain and push loss situations' section, even if I were to deal in here, I would only lose cumulative points and I didn't have to worry about dropping down in placement, so I pushed  on the first turn after the riichi, even with my narrow 2-away. Hedging the *suanko*, I did not call the  in the previous turn (I could see all four , so  seemed to still be in the wall). Maehara's discards were all from his hand from turn 3, except for  and , and since he cut a twice-cut  and after that a once-cut  before he declared riichi, I predicted a strong possibility of *chiitoitsu* (seven pairs). Since no one matched Maehara's post-riichi , I wasn't ready to give up on it. It was difficult to determine whether  or  were still in the wall, so I decided to keep , which was more visible, and discard  instead. As a result, after ponning , I won 12,000 points from Murakami on .

Asahi Shimbun M.LEAGUE: Final Stage

March 9th, Game 2

Scores

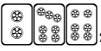
1st place: EX FU-RINKAZAN	+242.6 (Takizawa)
2nd place: Akasaka Drivens	+201.7 (Murakami)
3rd place: Shibuya ABEMAS	▲ 94.4 (Matsumoto)
4th place: KONAMI Mah-jong Fight Club	▲ 110.9 (Sasaki)



After Shiratori started the session looking like a favorite to take first but ended up in third, I wanted to get his points back in this game by all means necessary.

In East-4, I saw Takizawa's anomalistic discard pile started with a once-cut and then a not-yet-cut honor tile, so I kept the twice-cut  for safety, but painfully dealt into his hell-wait riichi on the *ippatsu* (unbroken). 6,400.

Additional notes for readers:

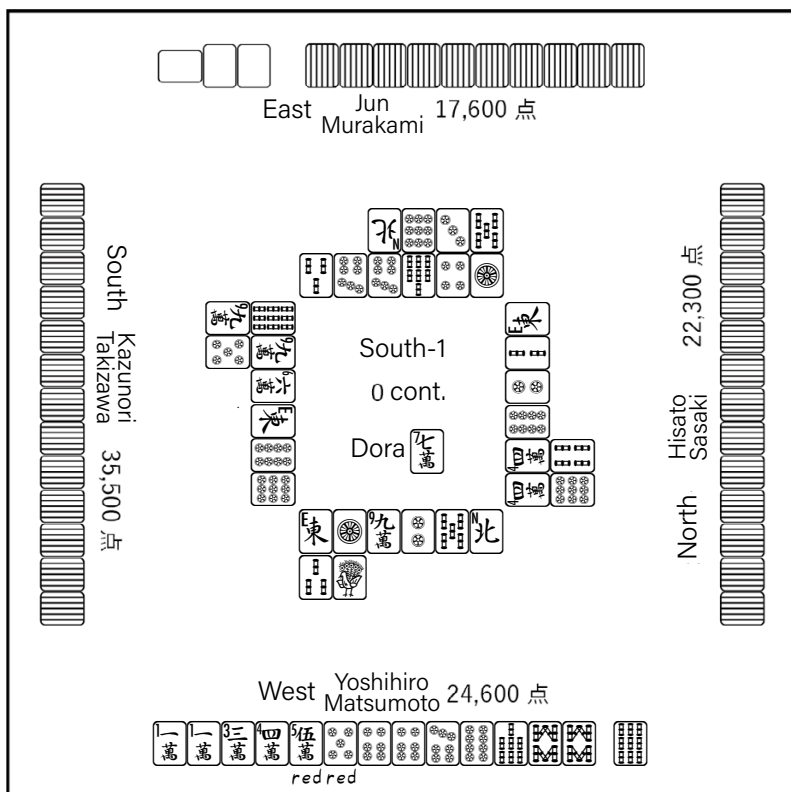
Based on Takizawa Pro's initial discards of , I read his hand as a *chiitoitsu* and cut my honor tiles early. My hand had three blocks of *souzu* for an *ittsu* (full straight/pure straight), one block around , and my pair was . From a safety perspective, I chose to discard my honor tiles from most dangerous to least, keeping the twice-cut . After Takizawa discarded , he played  from his hand. It became unlikely he was going for a *honitsu* (common flush/half flush) and even more likely he had all pairs, so I wanted to discard likely waits early. But, he immediately declared riichi after that and I ended up diving right into his  hell wait for a loss of 6,400 points. Looking at the table, the honors were in extremely low demand (cheap) and I don't think anyone would have held back . This is not so much a reflection on my own play as it is an example of a game where I was beautifully outplayed by Takizawa.

Asahi Shimbun M.LEAGUE: Final Stage

March 9th, Game 2

Scores

1st place: EX FU-RINKAZAN	+242.6 (Takizawa)
2nd place: Akasaka Drivens	+201.1 (Murakami)
3rd place: Shibuya ABEMAS	▲ 94.4 (Matsumoto)
4th place: KONAMI Mah-jong Fight Club	▲ 110.9 (Sasaki)



South-1 riichi, pinfu and two red dora and five of the  wait were visible to me.

Murakami was going for a *manzu* flush and the other two players seemed to be somewhat defensive toward it so it seemed like I could win a *dama* hand quickly, but I called riichi aiming for a mangan or haneman self-draw. The relative weight of first place seemed worth it.

Additional notes for readers:

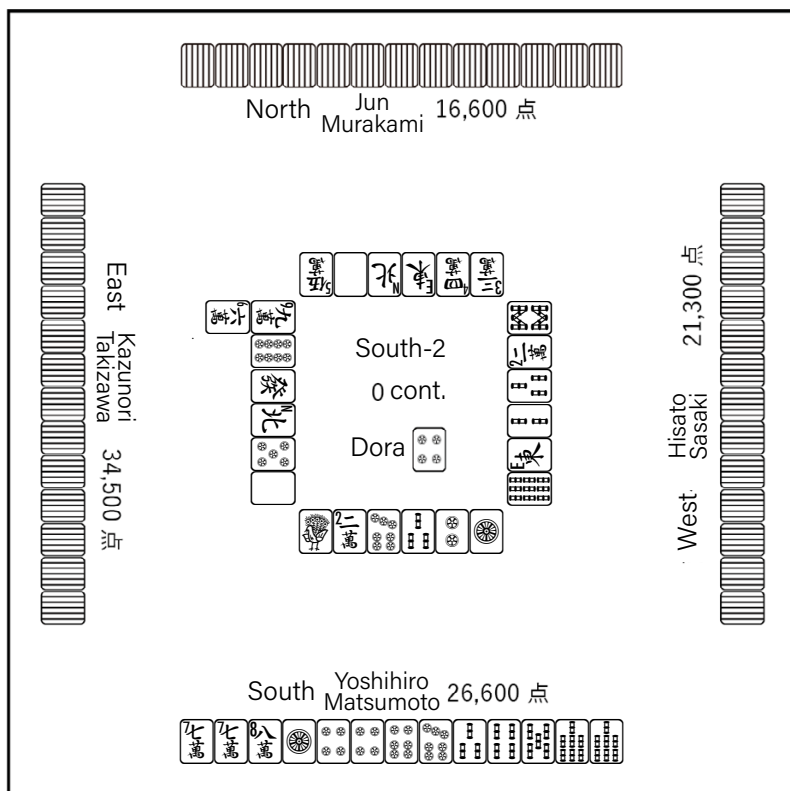
Jun Murakami was calling for a *honitsu* and to me it looked like Kazunori Takizawa and Hisato Sasaki were leaning toward defense. Then I got a tenpai with pinfu and two red dora. I could see four of the  tiles, so it wasn't a great number in terms of waits. If I kept my hand *dama*, it seemed that I could pick up 3,900 points from anyone easily. However, a pinfu tenpai with two red dora is a rare, all-in hand and because winning a mangan or more there would put me in contention for first place, and considering Murakami might push back and  might come out, and because I'd look suspicious pushing strong tiles against Murakami alerting the others not to risk  against me, I shoved the riichi. The result was an exhaustive draw with only myself in tenpai.

Asahi Shimbun M.LEAGUE: Final Stage

March 9th, Game 2

Scores

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3rd place: Shibuya ABEMAS	▲ 94.4 (Matsumoto)
4th Place: KONAMI Mah-jong Fight Club	▲ 110.9 (Sasaki)



South-2

 was discarded so I called chi. Since I planned to call  , I saw the *manzu* as a critical point in the hand and blasted it off with the chi, discarding . Since  was a back-*suji* to Takizawa, I wanted to get rid of it first.

It ended with Takizawa declaring riichi with a   wait and I ponned . I caught the red  going all in, and then won the hand off him directly for 8,000 points. I am glad I was able to make a move.

Additional notes for readers:

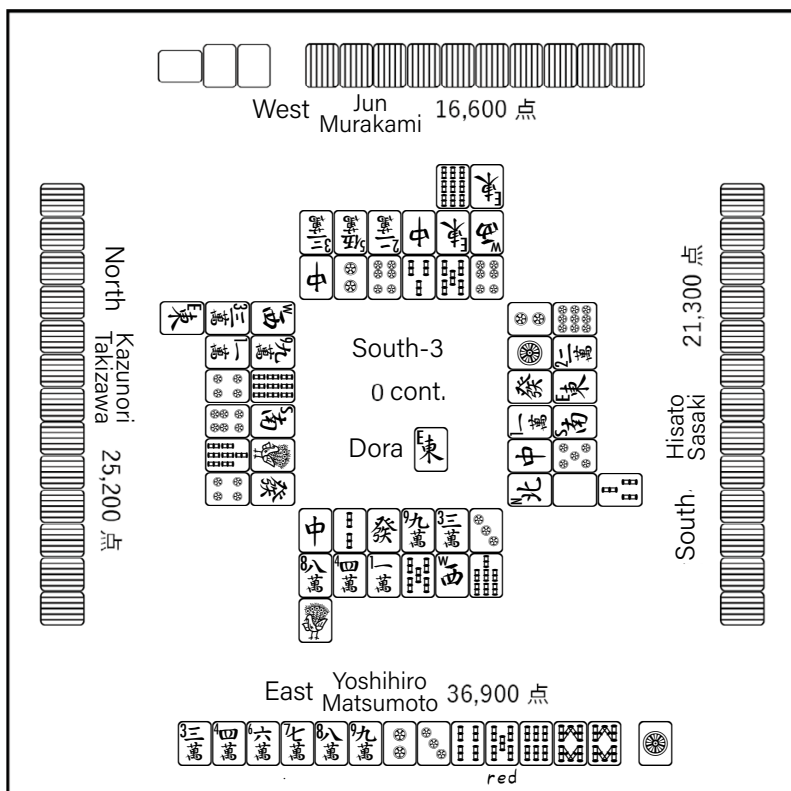
This hand has high-scoring potential closed, but the   and  pairs get in the way a bit. As explained in the 'The 4 Highs of Calling' section, I anticipated a high score, speed, and a good wait for this hand. If I could win at least 3,900 points to take into South-3, I would be much closer to first place, so I wanted to call   right away. Basic strategy of calling is to start with the bad shapes, but whether I called  or  first, I would still be left with   , and  would be the bottleneck, so I started by proactively calling . Also, in terms of relative speed, the discards from Takizawa (the dealer) made his hand look fast, so I dropped the  pair early. In the end, Takizawa had to discard a red dora after riichiing with a   wait so I was able to win off his red  with the ideal 8,000 points.

Asahi Shimbun M.LEAGUE: Final Stage

March 9th, Game 2

Scores

1st place: EX FU-RINKAZAN	+242.6 (Takizawa)
2nd place: Akasaka Drivens	+201.1 (Murakami)
3rd place: Shibuya ABEMAS	▲ 94.4 (Matsumoto)
4th Place: KONAMI Mah-jong Fight Club	▲ 110.9 (Sasaki)



South-3. Murakami, currently in last place, looked like he was hedging a *manzu honitsu* or a *chanta* (common ends/half outside hand). I was tenpai with pinfu and a red dora, and that's when Murakami discarded the dora , so he was almost definitely waiting for  . Considering the possibility of going into South-4 with a point advantage as long as I didn't lose points here, I discarded the  and opted to *dama*.

Additional notes for readers:

In South-3, Jun Murakami was in last place and calling for tiles even though he didn't have any dealer turns left, so his hand looked expensive. As explained in the 'Look at the Bigger Picture' section, as long as I didn't deal into Murakami here, I had a good chance at winning the game. Although I made it to pinfu tenpai with a red dora, based on his discards, Murakami seemed to have a block of *manzu* above those and   looked super dangerous, so I discarded  instead and waited on a middle  without riichi. However, Murakami then discarded  from his hand and  from his draw, then the fourth  from his hand. By process of elimination, he was most likely choosing a partial sequence from    , or it was a slide after drawing  . If it was a slide, then   would pass, and judging from the number of honor tiles and *manzu* I could see, a *honitsu* was seeming much less likely. If it was an outside hand, then  would only deal into the cheaper side. If I could win this hand, the possibility of me finishing the game in first place would increase significantly, so I'm now reflecting on whether it would have been better to cut  and go for riichi.

Asahi Shimbun M.LEAGUE: Final Stage

March 9th, Game 2

Scores

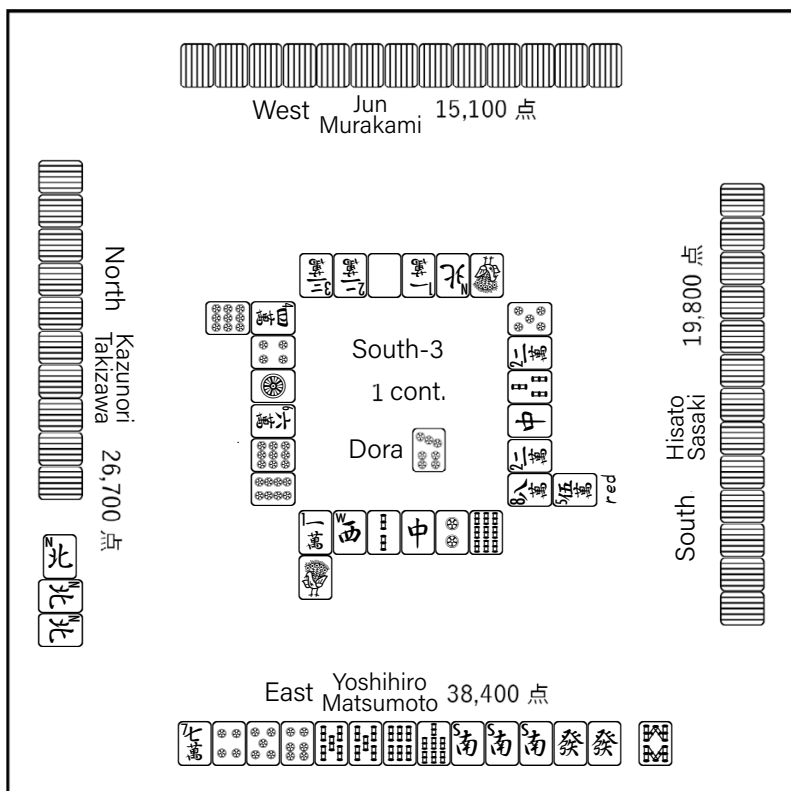
1st place: EX FU-RINKAZAN

2nd place: Akasaka Drivens +242.6 (Takizawa)

3rd place: Shibuya ABEMAS +201.1 (Murakami)

4th place: KONAMI Mah-jong Fight Club ▲ 94.4 (Matsumoto)

▲ 110.9 (Sasaki)



South-3 Takizawa had ponned his seat wind and was giving off big *souzu* vibes.

I had a concealed triplet of 南 and was waiting in tenpai with pairs of 發 and 𠄎. I was waiting on the same suit as Takizawa, but if I could ship this hand, it would be the deciding factor so I slammed the riichi! Murakami ended up running out of options and dealt into my 發 wait for 9,600 points. So it really was a decisive hand.

Additional notes for readers:

Kazunori Takizawa had called his own seat wind and was showing a possibility of a *souzu honitsu*. I wanted to connect with the cheap *manzu* on the table, but I ended up drawing 𠄎 and in a two-pair wait tenpai waiting for 𠄎 and 發. It was in no way a good wait, and it was certainly an option to not riichi and wait for an upgrade, but even if I were to upgrade to a two-sided wait or better in the *souzu*, it wouldn't necessarily be a good wait, and if I could win on 發 then the score would be even higher, so I decided to riichi. As explained in the 'Think in Terms of Relative Speed' section, Takizawa didn't look quite tenpai with his *honitsu* yet, and if he only had one 發, then I had a decent chance at being able to win the hand. The result was a 發 discard from Murakami, who got stuck without safe tiles, and I won 9,600 points.

Asahi Shimbun M.LEAGUE: Final Stage

March 9th, Game 2

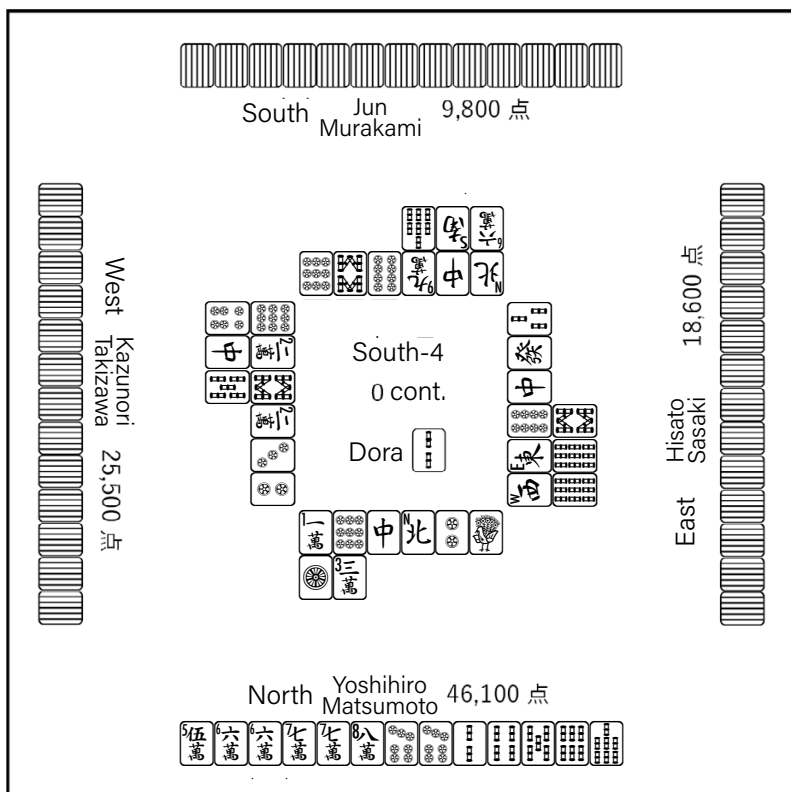
Scores

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4th Place: KONAMI Mah-jong Fight Club ▲ 110.9 (Sasaki)



Takizawa wouldn't be able to make it to first, but surely he wanted to finish in second. I wouldn't be able to deal into 8,000 points, but I could assist his hand up to a point. I was tenpai with *tanyao*, dora 1.  was a safe tile to Hisato. Since  was discarded early, and Hisato was so intent on winning I thought that it was much less likely he had a pair of dora, I called chi on the  and discarded the dora, essentially switching my hand to a two-sided wait. I also read that it would be easy for Takizawa to discard  when I made that decision, but in the end my call led to Hisato drawing 4,000-all. Hmm.

Additional notes for readers:

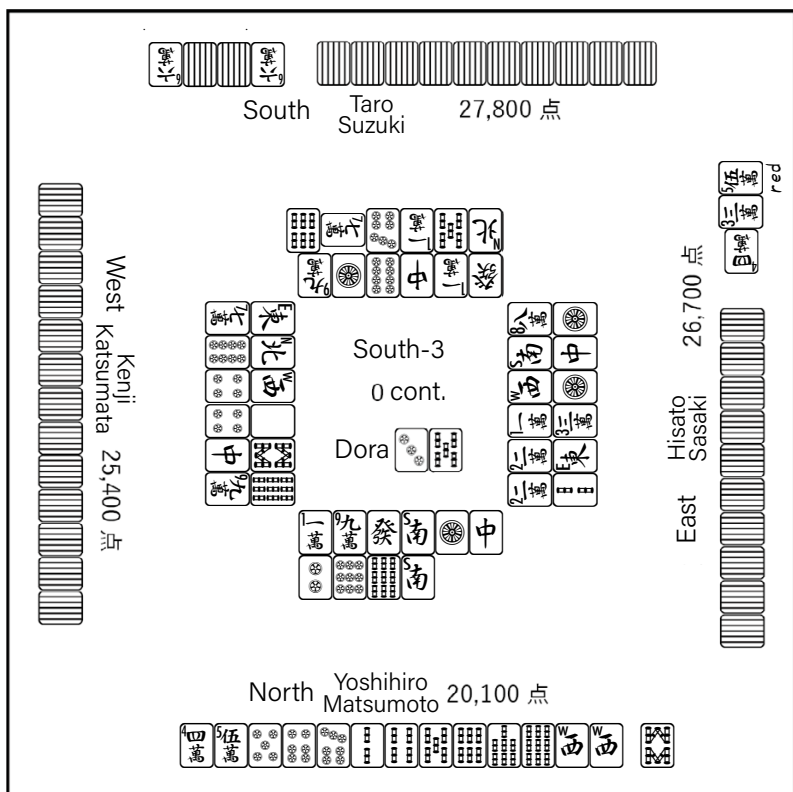
Following the 'Identify a Theme for the Hand' section, my themes for this hand were to first aim for the fastest win I could, then to avoid dealing into the dealer, Hisato Sasaki, at all costs, and if I couldn't win, then to let someone other than Hisato win the hand. That's when I got to tenpai, waiting for the middle , which was also a safe tile in Sasaki's discard pile. Shifting to the thoughts of the other players here, first place was far away from Kazunori Takizawa who was in second place, so if I couldn't win the hand, I wanted to keep the option of dealing into Takizawa for any hand less than a mangan. Since Takizawa would drop to third place if he were to deal into a mangan hand, I tried to make it clear I was going for a cheap hand and break up completed blocks to call for better waits. In the end, Hisato Sasaki drew his *ippatsu* winner after riichiing, but I still think I played correctly.

Asahi Shimbun M.LEAGUE: Final Stage

March 9th, Game 2

Scores

1st place: EX FU-RINKAZAN	+242.6 (Takizawa)
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3rd place: Shibuya ABEMAS	▲ 94.4 (Matsumoto)
4th place: KONAMI Mah-jong Fight Club	▲ 110.9 (Sasaki)



South-3. I chased Taro's riichi with a six times-cut  riichi+pinfu+dora hand.

There weren't many of my wait left and there may not have been any left in the wall at all, but I slammed this riichi aiming for first place and then fell short.

I was unable to get my *ippatsu* and suffered a painful last place.

Here I felt frustrated and hot all over my body--totally helpless for a while.

Additional notes for readers:

I was in tenpai waiting for  with six of those tiles visible to me. There was a riichi by Taro Suzuki. There was no guarantee that the remaining two  tiles were in the wall, and looking at Suzuki's discards, he discarded  then , holding only  until the very last minute, despite it not seeming to fit in his hand. That meant he was holding onto  because of its perceived safety to him, not as a helper tile, and his riichi likely harbored a good wait. However, as it was already South-3 and I was in last place, if Suzuki were to win here taking the game to South-4, any shot I had at first place would be virtually gone. If I could win here, with a kan on the table, then I could hope for a big score and get much closer to first place, so I declared riichi. The result ended with me dealing into Suzuki for 3,200 points, but to be honest, this was a difficult judgment to make in terms of balance.

the youngest first-draft M.LEAGUE
Matsumoto Fact Sheet

Haircuts once every
6 weeks in Koenji

20/60 Eyesight

Ray-ban or lacoste
glasses

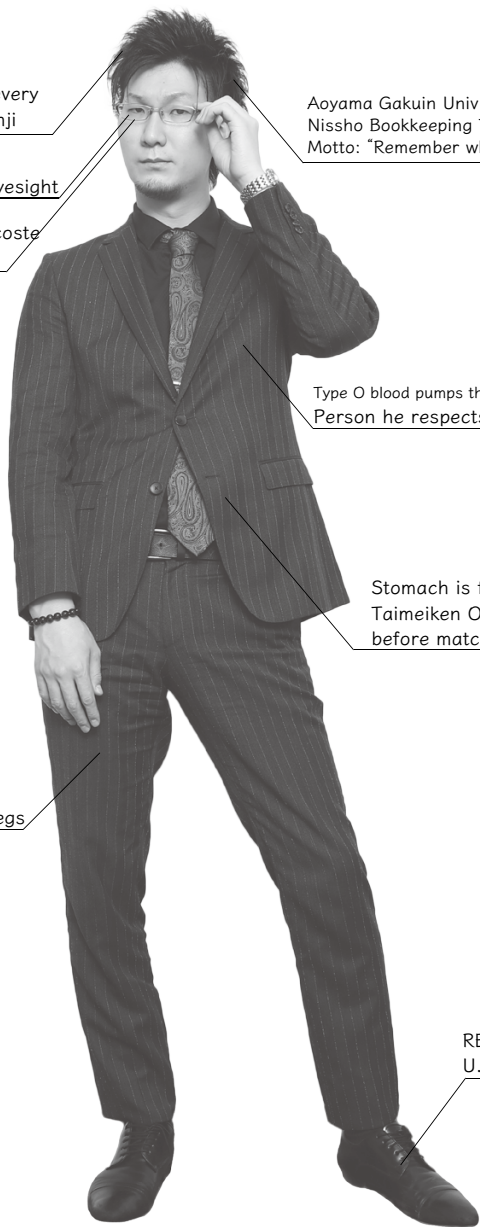
Aoyama Gakuin Univ. Grad
Nissho Bookkeeping Test Grade 2
Motto: "Remember why you started"

Type O blood pumps through these veins
Person he respects: Father

Stomach is filled with
Taimeiken Omelet-rice
before matches

Baseball-built legs

REGAL shoes
U.S. 9.5 / U.K 8.5



Matsumoto Fact Sheet

Yoshihiro Matsumoto Profile

Date of Birth: May 3, 1992

Mahjong Experience: 17 years (as of 2026)

Hometown: Yokohama City, Kanagawa Prefecture

Current Residence: Tokyo

Affiliated Professional Organization:

Nihon Professional Mahjong Association (NPM)

Became a Pro: 2013

Titles Won: 25th Ryuo Title

Favorite Celebrity: Yutaka Takenouchi

Hobbies: Alcohol, Karaoke, Pet Shops

Activities on Days Off: Gym, Alcohol, Karaoke

The Strongest Mahjong Player Besides Myself:

Takaharu Ooi

Rival: Sho Shiratori

Best Pro Friend: Sho Shiratori

Pre-Match Routine: Review winning matches

Weaknesses: Heights, Insects, Haunted Houses,

Injectons

A Day in the Life of Matsumoto

(M. LEAGUE Regular Season)

10:00 AM

Woke up earlier than expected

10:30-11:00 AM

Bath time

11:30 AM-12:00 PM

Breakfast while watching video from a winning match for mental training

1:00 PM

Massage

4:00 PM

Arrive at studio

Strategy meeting with teammates

7:00 PM

Play or support teammates

11:00 PM

Go home with joy and sorrow

1:00 AM

Get home and reflect on match in the bath (again)

3:00 AM

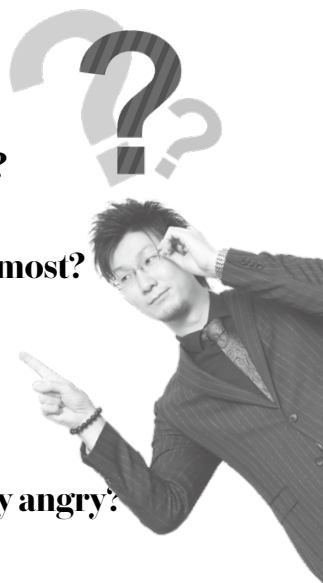
3 o'clock already?!

Go to sleep



10 Questions for Matsumoto

- Q1. **What's your baseball team?**
I don't have a particular team, but I think Hanshin is a good team.
- Q2. **What do you look for in a woman?**
A cute smile.
- Q3. **What title do you want to win the most?**
Jan-o and Saikyosen
- Q4. **What is the most undesirable behavior in an opponent?**
Intimidation of others
- Q5. **What happens when you get really angry?**
I rarely get angry, but I have been told that I can be incredibly scary
- Q6. **What would you like to improve about yourself?**
My laziness and anxiety
- Q7. **What magazine do you regularly read?**
Kindai Mahjong
- Q8. **What made you cry most recently?**
A Dog of Flanders
- Q9. **What has been your toughest Mahjong match so far?**
The final of the 26th Ryuo Tournament
- Q10. **What do you want to say to your father right now?**
Thank you for everything so far, and I look forward to your continued support!



Afterword

I believe there have been very few Mahjong strategy books that focus on the entire life of one person. Maybe only Takaharu Ooi's book 'Ooi Fever' (多井熱). Those who read the M's Essays in this book will remember that Ooi makes many appearances.

No matter what the game or sport, the great players are exceptionally skilled at timing, and Yoshihiro Matsumoto is no exception. You can see this in his various media appearances and commentary, but he is also adept at gauging the timing of his opponents at the mahjong table and finds his own timing to push his deciding hands. He describes it as the 'best balance,' but another way to put it is that he has almost a sixth sense when it comes to grasping distance in anything.

At the same time, he understands well how his behavior affects the feelings of others. At his core, it is not about him wanting others to see him as cool through his actions, but rather about wanting others to feel happy. It is precisely because he has respect for others that he is so popular. This may be a social skill he developed while always being considerate of his family.

This afterword is starting to feel like a best man's speech at a wedding. While I hope that those who pick

up this book will improve their mahjong skills, I also hope they can sense something about the way this young man lives.

Satoshi Fujiwara (Publisher for Japanese edition)

Former member of the Nihon Professional Mahjong Association (NPM/2004-2015). While working full time at a company, he also wrote numerous reports and articles as a freelance mahjong writer. He has a senior-junior relationship with the author in the mahjong community.

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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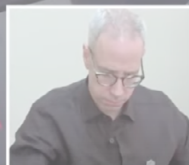
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