

## General strategy pointers for beginners

### **Don't grab the first discard that completes one of your sets.**

Many beginners think they are doing good if they're making lots of melds (Chows, Pungs, Kongs) -- they don't realise that melding is an onerous duty, not a sign of success! If you watch experienced players, you will see that they do not necessarily grab the first Pung opportunity that comes along, for several reasons:

- a. It shows the other players three tiles that you have collected; opponents can learn more about your hand by the melds AND discards than they could from the discards alone.
- b. It narrows the opportunities for the hand you are building. (If you don't understand this now, you'll figure it out very quickly.)

In general, don't take somebody else's discard unless you have a **clear plan** for your hand, and that particular discard advances your hand closer to a win.

### **Keep a Pair.**

It's harder to make a pair if you have only one tile than it is to make a Pung if you have a pair. So if you have a pair, don't be too quick to claim a matching tile to form a Pung.

### **Have Patience.**

When first learning to play, it's typical to grab every opportunity to meld a Pung or Chow. In the early stages of a game, you should instead keep in mind that there are a lot of good tiles available for drawing from the Wall - and by not melding your tiles, you don't clue everyone as to what you're doing, and you stand a chance to get a Concealed Hand.

### **Be Flexible.**

As you build your hand, be ready to abandon your earlier thinking about how to build it as you see what kind of tiles others are discarding.

### **Don't Let Someone Else Win.**

As much as you want to go out yourself, sometimes it's wiser to keep anybody else from winning. Especially, you don't want to "feed" a high-scoring hand. If a player has melded three sets of all one suit, that's especially dangerous (you might feed a Pure or Clean hand, and have to pay a high price); thus the player announces the danger when making a third meld in one suit.

### **Watch the discards and watch the number of tiles in the Wall.**

As it approaches the end, the tension increases - and it's more important to be careful what you discard when there are fewer tiles remaining to be drawn. If the number of tiles in the Wall is getting low, don't discard any tiles which you do not see in the discard area.

## General Strategies for Mah-Jong

### **The 1-4-7 rules.**

The "1-4-7 rule" is a good playing strategy. If the player to your right discards a 4, and you don't have another of those to discard, you might be all right if you discard a 1 or a 7. Remember that these number sequences are key: 1-4-7, 2-5-8, 3-6-9.

Between any two numbers in these sequences there can be an incomplete chow; if a player throws one number, then that player probably does not have a chow that would be completed by that number or the number at the other end.

Discarding tiles IDENTICAL to what another player discards is always good, if you can.

This 1-4-7 principle also applies to any five-in-a-row pattern (assuming the hand is otherwise complete - you have two complete sets and a complete pair, waiting to go out with a five-in-a-row pattern as shown by \*\* in the table below).

Try to go out waiting for multiple tiles (not just one). Imagine that you have three complete sets and two pairs. Imagine that one pair is 2 Bamboo, and you draw a 3 Bamboo from the wall -- which tile do you discard now? In this situation, many experienced players will discard a 2 Bam, keeping 2-3. A two-way incomplete chow call is better than a two-pair call.

Learn to shape the hand into calling patterns that give you multiple chances to win, such as the following:

<b>Tiles in hand</b>	<b>Call for</b>
2223	134
2224	34
2223344	2345
2223334	2345
2223456	14736
22234 RR	25 R
23456	147**
34567	258**
45678	369**

Highly skilled players of mah-jong know these patterns by heart. More complex call shapes are mostly extensions of these.

Of special interest is the complexity of the pure hand. If you're working on a pure hand, it can often be difficult to tell what all the tiles are that can complete the hand. For instance:

1-2-3-4-5-5-5-6-6-6-7-8-9 (5 chances); 1-2-3-4-5-5-5-5-6-6--7-8-9 (5 chances);  
2-3-4-4-4-5-5-5-6-6-6-7-8 (7 chances); and of course 1-1-1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-9-9 (9 chances).

### **Terminals and simples**

When playing keep in mind the profound difference between terminals ("ends," ones and nines) and simples ("non-ends," twos through eights). By their very nature, terminals can be used in far fewer potential melds. Therefore, if it is too early to form a strategy, get rid of a few terminals, and your hand will usually take shape enough to form a strategy. Most good players often go for an "all simples" hand or a "many terminals" type hand -- keep an eye on your opponents' discards to try to discern which they're doing. This will help you late in the game where you have a choice between several potentially dangerous discards -- remember that the terminals are usually in less demand. Most one-away hands are not waiting for terminals.

### **Body language**

Develop a Poker Face (or "Poker Body Language") -- When I started out playing this game, I was told that I looked too honest, that I didn't have a poker face. Experienced players hardly ever look up from their tiles -- much less look up to see the expression on an opponent's face. So I think a better phrase for what I didn't have, rather than "poker face," might be "poker body language" -- one's posture, not only one's facial expression, can give one away.

One thing you can try is to treat each discard as a tile you need, as if you are waiting. Essentially you're waiting anyway, just not for the 'out' tile, but a possible pung or kong.

Another thing you can do is on a real lousy hand, where you're playing safe, try to act as if you're waiting. Remember to see/hear every discard clearly, and draw each tile deliberately. It's always better

to let people think you're waiting, so they'll have to play conservatively. One way to disguise the tile you're waiting for is to make sure that you spend an equal amount of time on each drawn tile before discarding. One of the most common mistakes a beginner makes is to study the combination before discarding a tile, and letting everyone know what suit and approximately what number he needs. By speeding up the combination study and slowing down the discard of useless tiles, it should make it much harder for experts to figure out what you need." "While you're at it, you should also try to figure out what tiles the other players are waiting for. By doing this and verifying after each hand, you can pick up valuable experiences. Maybe by concentrating on this, you'll forget you're waiting, and your body language wouldn't be so obvious."

### Three stages of a Mahjong hand

Learn the three stages of a Mah-Jong hand. If you think of the hand as occurring over three stages instead of two, your strategy is moving nicely towards the upper levels.

1. Opening -->           DEVELOP
2. Middle game -->     ATTACK
3. End game -->        DEFEND

Opening Game:           DEVELOP your hand by removing isolated pieces. Keep your options open; much depends on what you draw.

Middle game:            ATTACK with your hand by deciding on a goal (choosing one option), and building your hand towards that goal.

End game:                DEFEND your game by making sure no one else wins. Your great hand will be useless if someone else wins!

The boundaries between the three games is not a mere count of discards, of course. You have reached the middle game when your hand is clear. You have reached the endgame when you are worrying more about discards than draws.

Here's another more detailed view on the three stages and how they apply to strategies described.

### STAGE ONE -- Opening (FIRST SIX TURNS +/-) -- DEVELOP:

Evaluate the potential of your hand. If you have a lot of pairs, plan to try for an all-pairs hand or an all-Pung hand. Determine as early as possible what hand you think you can get. Consider whether you want to throw away terminals or simples.

In this stage, don't take somebody else's discard unless you have a clear plan for your hand and that discard advances the hand closer to a Win.

Be mindful of your wind and the prevailing wind. Hang onto those winds in the early part of a hand until you can see that they're hopeless or your hand is shaping another way.

Your wind (when it's not the round wind) may well be a safe tile to discard. If a pair of dragons has already been thrown, the third and fourth are probably safe to discard (it's rare, but not unheard of, for someone to go out waiting for a dragon pair). Keep it to use later when it's getting dangerous.

Try to go out waiting for multiple tiles (not just one). A two-way call is better than a one-way call. Learn to shape the hand into calling patterns that give you multiple chances to win.

## **STAGE TWO -- Middle game (AFTER THE 6TH TURN +/-) -- ATTACK:**

Keep a Pair. It's harder to make a pair if you have only one tile than it is to make a Pung if you have a pair.

Be flexible. If your Stage One plan is not working, switch plans.

If you're getting close to going Out, don't let your body language give that fact away.

## **STAGE THREE -- Endgame (AFTER THE 12TH TURN +/-, or as the wall is down to the last section) -- DEFEND:**

If you realise you won't be able to make your targeted hand, focus on preventing others from winning. Especially, you don't want to "feed" a high-scoring hand. Never discard to a third exposure, even if you have to break up a good hand.

Know what's safe to discard. The "1-4-7 rule" is a good playing strategy. If the player to your right discards a 4, and you don't have another of those to discard, you might be all right if you discard a 1 or a 7. Discarding tiles IDENTICAL to what another player discards is always good, if you can.

Watch the discards and don't discard any tiles which you do not see in the discard area.

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## Hong Kong Specific MahJong Strategies

1. **Go for the high-scoring combinations** (pure, clean, and if applicable, special hands). You only need a few high-scoring hands to win the game.
  2. **Be flexible.** If one plan is not working, switch plans.
  3. Be careful of what you discard later in the game. Even if there is no penalty for throwing the winning tile, your secondary goal should still be to prevent others from winning.
  4. **Don't be too quick to chow or pung.** Even if chicken hands are OK you stand a better chance of getting a good score if you keep your hand concealed. Laying your tiles down (melding) lets people see what you're doing, too.
  5. **Watch the discards** and try to figure out what other players are holding. Remember that other players can do that too.
  6. **Be mindful of your wind and the prevailing wind.** Hang onto those winds in the early part of a hand until you can see that they're hopeless or your hand is shaping another way.
  7. **Watch your flowers.** If you have the right flowers, you can go out with an otherwise chicken hand if necessary.
  8. **Watch the flowers and the seasons.** Be aware if it's possible for anyone to get a bouquet (all 4 Flowers, or all 4 Seasons). It might affect your plan.
  9. **Don't let Kong opportunities sway you from your targeted hand.** My first draft of the FAQ said that Kongs were good things (because they let you get an extra draw from the wall) but it was kindly pointed out: "Kongs are especially worthless, since they do not contribute to your hand (except in variants where they earn extra value, or if you Win, or if you are trying for the All Kongs special hand that some variants recognise)." - Kong from a discard gains you nothing unless the kong has value or you go out on the supplement tile.\* - Kong from self-pick is different. The Kong is considered concealed in many forms of Mahjong, and it does afford you an extra pick from the wall. - Conversion of a melded Pung to a Kong is likewise not bad, but it is subject to being Robbed. It also costs nothing because it is still your draw. That is, if you have three white dragons in hand and the player before you discards the fourth, you gain by making a kong if the kong is worth more than the Pung (which depends on the form of Mahjong that you are playing). You'll still get to draw the same tile, and you'll have an exposed kong instead of a concealed Pung. (You do lose if exposing the kong puts you at a disadvantage for other reasons.) If the kong is not worth more than the Pung and you aren't ready to go out, there's no point in making this kong; you don't need to tell everyone else at the table that you have a kong of white dragons.
  10. **Get more cautious as the wall gets lower and lower.** Don't discard tiles that haven't previously been discarded.
  11. **Another strategic reason for not claiming discards to make a meld** -- making melds means you make fewer picks from the wall. If you use Flowers/Seasons as bonus tiles, and if your Flowers/Seasons have not yet been used up, you want to increase your chances of picking these tiles from the wall.
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