the words at the table

Mahjong Terms

Mahjong Tilework
Updated September 23, 2026

Untagged words belong to every style unless the entry names one. Otherwise: AM American, HK Hong Kong, CO Chinese Official, JP Japanese.

The tiles

Bams The stick suit, 1 to 9. The bumps are coins on a string.

Blank A spare, for a tile you lose or chip.

Bonus tile HK CO A flower or season: set aside, then replaced.

Craks The character suit. The lower character means ten thousand.

Dots The coin suit, also called circles.

Dragons Red, green and white. Not called dragons in Chinese.

Flower, season AM HK CO Eight tiles numbered for the seats. Bonus tiles, except in American hands.

Honor Any wind or dragon.

Index The corner numeral or letter on an export tile.

Joker AM Wild in any group of three or more, never in a pair.

Red five JP One five per suit in red, counting as dora.

Simple JP Any 2 to 8.

Soap AM The White Dragon, used as a zero.

Terminal A 1 or a 9 of any suit.

The table

Dead wall HK JP Tiles set aside for replacements. Japanese dora indicators go here.

Pusher AM The bar that shoves your wall into reach.

Rack The stand holding your tiles upright.

Replacement tile HK CO JP Taken after a kong or a bonus tile. None in American play.

Round wind, seat wind HK JP A set of either scores where an ordinary wind does not.

Wall The face-down tiles a hand is drawn from.

Wind indicator The block showing whose round it is.

Making a hand

Chow HK CO JP Three in a row in one suit, claimed only from your left. Not in American play.

Concealed, exposed A concealed hand has claimed no discard. Exposing lays a set face up.

Dead hand AM A hand that can no longer win. It still pays.

Kong Four alike, still one set. Hong Kong and Japanese play take a replacement.

Pair Two alike. Claimable only to win.

Pung Three alike.

Quint, sextet AM Five and six alike. Of a numbered tile, wind or dragon, they need jokers.

Robbing the kong HK Winning on the fourth tile as it joins an exposed pung.

American play

Bettor AM With five or six, a player sitting out who bets on the hand.

Blind pass AM Passing tiles on unseen, on the last pass of a round.

The card AM The League's yearly list of allowed hands. Changes every spring.

Charleston AM Passing three tiles right, across, then left, before the first turn.

Courtesy pass AM The players opposite swap up to three tiles.

Siamese Mah Jongg AM Gladys Grad's two-player variant: two hands each.

Scoring, by style

Dora, ura dora JP Bonus tiles adding han, never a yaku. Ura dora are for riichi winners only.

Faan HK Each roughly doubles the payment, up to a limit.

Fu JP Minipoints for how a hand is built. Irrelevant at five han.

Furiten JP Barred from winning on a discard, because a winning tile is in your own discards.

Han JP The doubles, from yaku and dora.

Ippatsu JP A han for winning in the first go-round after riichi.

Limit hand HK JP A fixed maximum, whatever the hand adds up to.

Mangan, haneman, baiman, sanbaiman JP The limit hands in order, from five han.

MCR, Guobiao CO The Chinese Official rules, set in 1998. Eight points to win.

Riichi JP Declaring a concealed hand one from winning, for 1,000 points. Locks the hand.

Tai The Taiwanese unit. Adds rather than doubles.

Tsumo JP Winning on your own draw. All three pay.

Yaku JP A named pattern. No hand wins without one.

Yakuman JP The great hands, scored as a limit of their own.

Names that cause trouble

Orphans Three hands answer to it: ones and nines, the same plus honors, and the thirteen-tile hand.

Mahjong The game, the call, and the winning hand. The name means sparrow.

The same hand, three names English took the words from Chinese and Japanese separately.