



Koi-Koi

**ORIGINS, RULES,
AND STRATEGIES**

Perfect for beginners!



A TRADITIONAL JAPANESE CARD GAME THAT LINKS CONTEMPLATION AND COMBINATION!

Make the most beautiful Yaku - that is to say, the most beautiful card combinations.

Koi-Koi is a set collection game played with a deck of traditional Japanese cards known as Hanafuda. Balance calm contemplation with the chaos of chance and immerse yourself in this iconic game.

CONTENTS:

- History and origin of the game 3
- Rules 8
- Quick strategy 25
- Variants 26



A BRIEF HISTORY OF CARD GAMES

BY THE FRENCH PLAYING CARD MUSEUM

The origins of card games remains a mystery. The paper and printing came from China, but the idea of associating multiple series of cards into hierarchies may have originated elsewhere. Some card fragments found in Egypt (estimated from the 13th century), a game from the end of the 15th century preserved in the Topkapi Palace Museum (in Istanbul), and the mention of "Saracen cards" in Italian texts point to the **Middle East as a possible origin**. However, it is indeed in **Europe** where we find the **first mention of "playing cards" in the 1370s**, and where we find the oldest examples. It is also in Europe that this type of game experienced the greatest growth.

Cards added a **new tactic** to the world of tabletop games: bluffing, as well as countless combination possibilities. It's astonishing to imagine the vast diversity of games that were designed, modified, and played on quays and sidewalks, in gambling dens, inns, and aristocratic salons. **In just a few decades, card games became widespread**. Their presence is recorded in 15th century Egypt, then in China. From the 16th century onwards, an original cardmaking tradition developed in Persia, then India, with sets of eight or ten suits painted entirely by hand. At the same time, Japan adopted European cards, which were introduced to the region by Portuguese merchants.

Since they adapt to all kinds of uses (play, of course, but also divination, art, education, etc.), traditional playing cards have always been able to reinvent themselves while remaining faithful to their original form.



HISTORY OF HANAFUDA

BY THE FRENCH PLAYING CARD MUSEUM

Though China held a major influence over Japanese gaming culture, it wasn't from their neighbors that the Japanese developed playing cards. Rather, it was from the **Portuguese** who came to trade during the mid-16th century. They rapidly adopted and domestically produced their own playing cards, which they called karuta. Like Portuguese games, the first karuta had 48 cards. They featured coins, cups, clubs, and swords (ôru, koppu, hau, and isu) as suits, and kings, knights, and knaves (rei, kaba, and sôta, corresponding to the Portuguese rei, cavaleiro, and sota).

The years Japan closed its borders to outsiders, from 1639 to 1868, considerably influenced the evolution of these cards. The Japanese ingeniously reinvented these games by masking their Western origins and circumventing the ban on gambling. Two groups of games developed from this: those inspired by an ancient matching game that used shells (kai-awase), such as the One Hundred Poets game (Hyakunin Isshu karuta); and those descended from Portuguese cards. Among the latter **appeared an original creation called the "Game of Flowers" or Hanakaruta** (renamed later on as Hanafuda). The cards, split into twelve suits of four cards (instead of four suits of twelve cards) represented the months of

a year, illustrated with flowers, pieces of paper used to write short poems (tanzaku), animals, and other more unique motifs: the sun, moon, curtains, phoenix, and even the poet Michikaze with a frog. **But make no mistake, this charming game has long been popular in gambling dens.** A small factory founded in 1889 experienced success from its production of Hanafuda decks: **Nintendo.** And so, Hanafuda was exported. It is played, notably, in Korea and Hawaii, and has partly rid itself of its scandalous reputation.



CARDS AND THEIR MEANING

Koi-Koi is a rich game, largely due to the elements on the cards, which all have significant meaning. Throughout this booklet, you will find text boxes that explain the symbolic and cultural links of certain cards or visual elements.

KOI-KOI IN POP CULTURE

Koi-Koi is found in many elements of pop culture, notably in **movies or anime**. For example, the plot of the Japanese animated film *Summer Wars* (directed by Mamoru Hosoda) is built around the game of Koi-Koi and is based on an epic confrontation with artificial intelligence.

Outside of playing the game, you can also find random references to card combinations, called Yaku, that let you gain points. For example, in the manga *Naruto* by Mamashi Kishimoto, the Ino-Shika-Chō formation (formed by the characters Ino, Shikamaru, and Chōji) references the powerful “Boar, Deer, and Butterfly” Yaku, which lets you gain points with only 3 cards.

CONTENTS

Koi-Koi uses Hanafuda cards. There are 48 cards, divided into 12 suits of 4 cards each. Each suit represents one month of the year, identified by the flowers on the card. You will also find a player aid, which we added to the traditional cards.

January • Pine



February • Plum



March • Cherry



April • Wisteria



May • Iris



June • Peony



July • Bush Clover



August • Pampas Grass



September • Chrysanthemum



October • Maple



November • Willow



December • Paulownia





January - Pine: Venerable and valiant, the pine is a tree of eternity, a symbol of longevity and happiness (during Japanese weddings, it is tradition to bring two small figures representing the spouses together under a pine branch). The pine symbolically allows us to begin the year with happy promises.



June - Peony: A symbol of prosperity and happiness, the peony is regularly seen in schools and workplaces to promote success.



July - Bush Clover: Unattractive at first glance, the bush clover has no strong symbolism associated with it. However, it is the flower with the most poems dedicated to it in the *Man'yōshū* anthology (the first collection of Japanese poetry, from around AD 760). In addition, an enclosed garden is dedicated to the flower in the Kyoto palace: the mysterious *hagitsubo*, "the bush clover court." It is said its strength lies precisely in the unsuspecting nature of its beauty.



We decided to add a distinctive icon, which isn't found on traditional cards, to help players identify each suit more easily.



Among all of these cards, there are **4 different types of cards**.

FLOWER CARDS (KASU)

These are the most common type, with **24 cards**. Each month has 2, except for November (only 1) and December (3).

PAPER CARDS (TANZAKU)

There are **10 cards** total (1 per month, except August and November).

There are three types: simple papers (x4), red poems (x3), and blue poems (x3).



February - Plum: This flower is a strong symbol for calligraphers. Indeed, the plum tree is linked to the legend of Michizane. He was a learned poet advisor to the emperor and became a vengeful spirit as a result of his unjust death. He then became the patron god of letters and the arts. In January, people come to admire the plum trees in bloom and write the first characters of the year at the Kitano sanctuary, dedicated to the poet. It is during tribute ceremonies like this that tanzaku are hung from the branches of the temple trees by visitors. Originally, tanzaku were small vertical cards used for writing poems. Nowadays, they are used for writing wishes during festivals or ceremonies.

ANIMAL OR OBJECT CARDS

On these cards, you can find an animal or object. However, on traditional cards, there may be an animal on certain cards that don't belong to this type (like cards with the crane or phoenix). There are **9 cards** of this type.



February - Plum: A symbol of valor and renewal, the tree blooms just before the snow melts. Its flowers announce, in the midst of the cold, the coming of spring. To Japanese poets, the tree takes precedence over the cherry tree, which seems banal and common compared to the Chinese plum tree. Indeed, in the *Man'yōshū* anthology, 118 poems are dedicated to the plum tree, compared to just 42 for the cherry tree. The tree has been adopted as the symbol for scholars and its flowering branches are the emblem of calligraphers and poets.

LIGHT CARDS (KO)

There are **5 Light cards**: the crane, curtain, full moon, poet, and phoenix. These cards let you make the most powerful Yaku.





January - Pine: Like the pine, the crane is also a symbol of longevity. It is ridden by the immortals, human hermits who achieved immortality through wisdom and virtue. A venerable, wise, and powerful animal, the crane is a recurring symbol in Japan. It is found on the most

expensive kimonos, paintings by the greatest masters, samurai coats of arms, and also in the hands of children learning origami, the art of folding paper.

HOW TO PLAY

There are several ways to play Koi-Koi. The rules outlined here are fairly common and are the **perfect starting point for beginners**.

OVERVIEW AND GOAL

Koi-Koi is a **two-player game played over 12 rounds**, for an average game of 80 minutes. It is common to play **only 6 rounds** for shorter games. You can also decide to stop whenever you like (depending on the time available).

Each turn, take cards from the center of the table, using those in your hand to make the best combinations (called Yaku) and finish the round with the most points. At the end of the game, the player with the most points wins!

SETUP

Each player draws a random card. The player with the card closest to the January suit becomes the Oya (the first player). The December suit is the furthest away from January. In case of tie, each player draws a new card.

The Oya shuffles all 48 cards and deals them as follows:

- 4 cards to your opponent, face down
- 4 cards to yourself, face down
- 4 cards in the center of the table, face up

Repeat these steps once more so that each player has 8 cards and there are 8 cards in the center of the table. Make a deck with the rest of the cards and put it face-down in the center of the table. The face-up cards form what is called **the Ba**. You (and only you) may look at the cards in your hand.



Special scenario while dealing:

In the Ba, if the Oya reveals 4 cards of the same month or 4 pairs (a pair is formed by two cards of the same month), the round is void. The Oya reshuffles all cards and deals again.

If you have 4 cards of the same month or 4 pairs of months in your hand, you immediately win the round and gain 6 points (see Win the Round, page 17).



ROUND OVERVIEW

Take turns starting with the Oya. On your turn, take these two actions in order:

1. Play a card from your hand
2. Play a card from the deck

1. PLAY A CARD FROM YOUR HAND

Choose a card from your hand and play it face-up in the Ba.

If your played card is the same month as another card in the Ba, match them. When two cards are matched, **take them and place them in front of you**. If you don't match any pairs, do not take any cards.

You played an August card (pampas grass) from your hand, so you can match it with the August card in the Ba.



2. PLAY A CARD FROM THE DECK

Reveal the top card of the deck. If this card is the same month as another card in the Ba, match them and place them in front of you. If no pair is matched this way, do not take any cards and add the revealed card to the Ba.

You revealed an August card (pampas grass) from the deck, you can match it with the August card in the Ba.



You cannot match more than 2 cards together.

Exception: If 3 cards of the same month are in the Ba during setup, the card played as the 4th of this month lets you take all 4 cards of this month.



Ba



There are 3 June cards (Peony) in the Ba.
You play the fourth card, which lets you take all 4 June cards and place them in front of you.

Once you finish both actions, your opponent takes their two actions in order.

At the start of your turn, if there are no cards in the Ba, reveal the top card of the deck and place it in the Ba before taking your turn.

WIN THE ROUND AND GAIN POINTS

By matching and therefore placing cards in front of you, **you can make Yaku**. This happens each time the cards in front of you correspond to the different Yaku (see page 20). Pay attention and try to form new Yaku whenever you match cards.

When you make a Yaku, you have two options:

- **Immediately end the round and announce "Shobu"** (which means "game," as if to say "time to gain points").

Gain points corresponding to all of your Yaku. Your opponent loses as many points as you gain.

- **Try to gain more points by saying "Koi"** (which means "come on," as if to say "I'll take my chances").

In this case, if you make a new Yaku or improve one of your existing Yaku, you again have the choice to end the round or continue. Each time you decide to continue the round, announce an extra "Koi" for each new Yaku you have made.

If you end the round by announcing "Shobu" during one of your Yaku, the points you gain for all your Yaku are doubled, tripled, or quadrupled if you announced "Koi", "Koi Koi", "Koi Koi Koi", and so on. Your opponent loses as many points as you gain.

However, if you continue the round and your opponent can make or improve one of their Yaku before you, they can end the game and gain double, triple, or quadruple points instead of you (depending on what you announced). You lose as many points as they gain.

Add up the gained points, then multiply this sum according to the rules above. Make note of the points gained or lost during the rounds.

END OF THE ROUND

The round ends once one of these two conditions is met:

- One player makes a Yaku (see Yaku, page 20) and decides to announce "Shobu."
In this case, the round ends immediately, and this player wins the round.

- **The Oya has no more cards in hand.**

In this case, if the Oya was the last player to make a Yaku or no Yaku was made, the round is void. If they were not the last player to make a Yaku, their opponent does not play their last card and the opponent wins the round.

Add up the points from the winner's Yaku, then multiply this sum according to the rules above. Make note of the points gained or lost during the rounds.

PREPARE THE NEXT ROUND

The player who won the previous round becomes the Oya. If there was no winner during the previous round, change the Oya.

The new Oya takes the cards, shuffles them, then deals to begin the next round (see page 13).

THE DIFFERENT YAKU

There are 12 Yaku. You can find these Yaku, as well as their points, on the player aids.

Kasu

If you have 10 Kasu (❁) cards, gain 1 point. Gain 1 extra point for each Kasu card after the 10th.



You gain 1 point for the 10 Kasu cards in this Yaku, plus 1 point for your 11th card. This makes the Yaku worth 2 points.

Tan

If you have 5 Tanzaku (♣ ♠ ♥) cards, gain 1 point. Gain 1 extra point for each Tanzaku card after the 5th.



You gain 1 point for the 5 Tanzaku cards in this Yaku, plus 2 points for your 6th and 7th cards. This makes the Yaku worth 3 points.

Tane

If you have 5 Animal or Object (🐼 🐉 🐊) cards, gain 1 point. Gain 1 extra point for each Animal or Object card after the 5th.

1 pt



1 pt



You gain 1 point for the 5 Animal and Object cards in this Yaku, plus 1 point for your 6th card. This makes the Yaku worth 2 points.



May - Iris: Among the Object cards, the card with the bridge is of special interest. "Irises at Eight Bridges" represents an imaginary place originating from one of the oldest sources of Japanese poetry: The Tales of Ise. One tale in this work tells the story of an exiled poet who reached the place where the river separates into eight streams of water. There, he discovered irises and was inspired to write an acrostic poem with the word for iris ("Kakitsuhata" in old Japanese). The representation of the eight bridges therefore became a famous landscape, evoking an ancient world full of poetic feelings.

Aotan

If you have all 3 blue Tanzaku (🐉) cards, gain 6 points.

6 pts



Akatan

If you have all 3 red Tanzaku (🍡) cards with a poem, gain 6 points.

6 pts



Ino-Shika-Chō (Boar-Deer-Butterfly)

If you have the Boar, Deer, and Butterfly (🦋) cards, gain 5 points.

5 pts



July - Bush Clover: The wild boar is considered a dangerous creature in winter, when it leaves the hills to seek food in nearby villages. Its existence on a July card wards off its hostility, by inviting it to doze off in the sun!

Hanami-de-ippai (Moon Viewing with Sake)

If you have the Sake Bowl (🍶) and the Full Moon (🌕) cards, gain 3 points.

3 pts



Tsukimi-de-ippai (Flower Viewing with Sake)

If you have the
Sake Bowl (☺) and
Curtain (☼) cards,
gain 3 points.

3 pts



March - Cherry: Every year, the blossoms of the cherry tree are celebrated with festive picnics. Curtains are hung between trees for privacy and sake is enjoyed while admiring the ephemeral beauty of the cherry blossoms.

San kō

If you have 3 **Light** (☼) cards,
gain 6 points.

6 pts



Ameyonkō

If you have 4 **Light** (☼) cards, one of which must be the **Poet** (☼), gain 8 points.



November - Willow: This man, called "The Poet," represents the father of Japanese calligraphy: Ono no Michikaze. He emancipated Japanese writing from Chinese codes. A new calligraphy called "Wyo" was born, characterized by the flexibility and fluidity of its lines, recalling the branches of the willow, which bends without breaking under the weight of snow and wind. For this, the willow is often used as a metaphor for skill and wisdom in martial arts.

Yonkō

If you have 4 **Light** (☀️) cards, but not the **Poet** (👤), gain 10 points.

Gokō

If you have all 5 **Light** (☀️) cards, gain 15 points.

MULTIPLE YAKU

It is possible to make multiple Yaku, but **each card can only count towards a single Yaku**.

It is easier to visualize your options for Yaku by grouping your cards in front of you according to their type (Kasu, Tanaku, Animals, and Light), which also facilitates counting points.

END OF THE GAME

Traditionally, the game ends after 12 rounds. For shorter games, you can choose to play only 6 rounds instead. **The player with the most points at the end of the game wins!**

In the case of a tie, play one additional round to determine the winner.

QUICK STRATEGY

Here are some tips to keep in mind to quickly improve your skill.

Matching cards of the same month can be taken, but they will not necessarily help you gain a lot of points. You will have to pay attention to the type of cards (Kasu, Tanzaku, Light, etc.) which will let you make Yaku.

Certain months contain stronger cards than others. If you have cards in your hand that share the same month as the Light cards, you have a greater chance of taking them during the round. By learning the distribution of cards (through practice), you will have a **better vision of the potential of the cards in your hand**, and will know when to end the round, and when to risk continuing.

When you play cards in front of you, you can **arrange them by type** to better see your future Yaku or the potential **to improve your existing Yaku**.

VARIANTS

Koi-Koi is a traditional card game that has been played since the 18th century. Therefore, it has **several variants**. We have chosen the most interesting among those we played during our research!

LIGHT CARDS IN THE BA

During setup, if **you reveal a Light card in the Ba**, double the points gained at the end of the round. If there are two Light cards, triple them (and so on).

EXCHANGE

At the start of the round, before players look at their hand, **the second player can decide to exchange their cards with the Oya's**.

This variant presumably originated in gambling dens, to prevent cheating.

GAJI

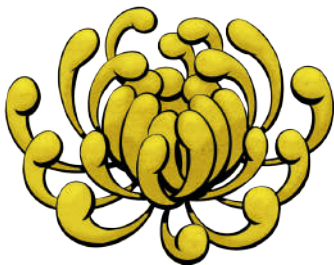
Among the November cards, there is one special card: **the Gaji (or storm)**.

If no other November card has been played when you play the Gaji from your hand (and not the deck), **you can match this card with any other card in the Ba** (no matter its month).

Additionally, leave the Gaji in front of you, next to the matched card. At the end of the round, take all of the cards from the Ba that match the month of this card.

TRIO

If you have the 3 blue Tanzaku and the 3 red Tanzaku, gain an extra 3 points (add this bonus to points gained from the Tanzaku, Aotan, and Akatan Yaku).





Illustrator: Anna Gushchina
Project Manager: Amélie Scordilis
Graphic Designers: Claire Wach
and Lenaïg Bourgoïn
Editor for the historical intro:
Gwenael Beuchet
(heritage conservation associate)
Editor: Xavier Taverne
Translator: Danni Loe



This game is published in collaboration
with The French Playing Card Museum
and the city of Issy-les-Moulineaux.

