

A Beginner's Guide to Koi-Koi

1. Intro.....	2
2. A Brief History	3
3. The Hanafuda Deck	4
4. How to Play Koi-Koi	7
5. Variations	15
6. Strategy	17
7. Useful Links	18
8. Quick Reference	19

1. Intro

This guide aims to serve as an introduction to the Japanese card game of Koi-Koi. To the novice the game can appear quite confusing; it uses an unfamiliar deck comprised of a myriad of seemingly unrelated cards, and follows an apparently complex set of rules for winning rounds and scoring points. In fact the game is quite simple, with an underlying logic and elegance behind the deck structure. It takes surprisingly little practice to pick up the basics - hopefully this guide will make that learning period even shorter.

Koi-Koi is played using Hanafuda, or “flower cards”, a traditional set of Japanese playing cards. Many different games can be played with a Hanafuda deck - Koi-Koi is just one. In the following sections I give a potted history of the game, explain the structure of the deck, work through the rules and highlight some common rule variations. I've also included some pointers for developing strategy - I'm reasonably new to Koi-Koi myself, so no doubt that section will see updates as my appreciation for the nuances of the game evolves.

A lot of the information in this document has been cribbed from Koi-Koi and Hanafuda websites, so you may experience a sense of déjà vu when reading through this if you've already been researching online. I've included links to all of the sites I've poached from at the end – thanks to all of them for making the materials available.

Finally, many thanks to Christopher Yudichak, developer of the iPhone app *Kiki's KoiKoi*, for clarifying some of the ambiguities and variations of the rules. I recommend his game to players of any ability – I found it invaluable when I started learning the game and (IMHO) it is the best Koi-Koi game available on the app store.

Jake May, June 2012

2. A Brief History

To understand the design of the Hanafuda deck and the rules of Koi-Koi it helps to know the background to how they both originated:

Since its early years, card games were played in Japan by the nobility, but they were not commonly played by the lower classes nor were they used for gambling. This all changed in 1549 when a missionary Francis Xavier landed in the country. The crew of his ship brought with them a set of 48 Portuguese Hombre playing cards from Europe, which became very popular with people, along with their use for gambling. When Japan subsequently closed off all contact with the Western world in 1633, foreign playing cards were banned.

Despite that prohibition, gambling with cards remained highly popular. Because playing card games *per se* was not banned, new cards were created with different designs to avoid the restriction. Each time gambling with a card deck of a particular design became too popular the government banned those cards, which then prompted the creation of new ones. This cat and mouse game between the government and rebellious gamblers resulted in the creation of many differing designs.

Through the rest of the Edo era and the Meiwa, Anei, and Tenmei eras (roughly 1765–1788), a game called Mekuri Karuta became most popular. Consisting of a 48-card deck divided into four sets of

twelve, it was one of the most common forms of gambling during this time period. In fact, it became so commonly used for gambling that it was banned in 1791, during the Kansei Era.

Over the next few decades, several new card games were developed and subsequently banned because they were used almost exclusively for gambling purposes. However, the government began to realize that card games would always be played by the populace in some form, and began to relax their laws against gambling. The eventual result of all this was a game called Hanafuda, which combined traditional Japanese games with Western-style playing cards. Because hanafuda cards do not have numbers (the main purpose is to associate images) and given the long duration of a game, it has a partially limited use for gambling, but it is still possible to gamble by assigning points for completed image combinations. By this stage however, card games were not nearly as popular as they had been due to past governmental repression.

In 1889, Fusajiro Yamauchi founded a company that produced handmade Hanafuda cards - that company was Nintendo! Remaining true to their roots, Nintendo still make Hanafuda cards today and even offer a special Hanafuda deck that features Mario characters. Nintendo also included a version of Koi-Koi in a videogame for Nintendo DS, Clubhouse Games.

3. The Hanafuda Deck

The modern Hanafuda deck consists of 48 cards bearing nature-inspired designs associated with the twelve months of the year. The cards are described by their month and kind.

The whole set of cards are shown on the next page. I've included some of the alternative names that the different card types go by.

Months

- The Hanafuda deck is divided into the twelve months of the year, each containing four cards.
- Months are referred to either by the month name, the Japanese name or the flower name.
- Each card bears an image incorporating that month's flower.
- It may help you to remember this basic structure by comparing it to a standard western deck of playing cards: a western deck has 4 suits of 13 cards, whereas a Hanafuda deck has 12 suits (months) of 4 cards.

Kinds

















































There are four main types, or "kinds", of card:

- 1. Brights:** 5 cards – Crane, Curtain, Moon, Phoenix and Rain Man. Rain Man has slightly less value than the other Brights as it can't be used to make certain sets.
- 2. Earths:** 9 cards –all of these are represented by animals, apart from the Bridge and the Sake Cup. Many have red clouds along the margins.
- 3. Ribbons:** 10 cards - 3 Poetry, 3 Blue, 4 Red.
- 4. Plains:** 24 cards – None of these have animals on them, just the flower. The odd one out is the Thunder card – in some games this is a wild card, but in Koi-Koi it's just a boring old Plain.

As you can see from the diagram, almost every month consists of two Plains and two of the other kinds, the only exceptions being November which has one of each kind, and December with three Plains and one Bright.

I've included bracketed point values for the different kinds in the diagram below. Other Hanafuda games use these values for scoring; they're not actually used in Koi-Koi but you will still hear the cards referred to as "20 point", "10 point" etc. so it's worth knowing them.

A Beginner's Guide to Koi-Koi

Name Flower Month	Matsu Pine January	Ume Plum February	Sakura Cherry March	Fuji Wisteria April	Shobu Iris May	Botan Peony June	Hagi Clover July	Susuki Pampas August	Kiku Chrysanthemum September	Momiji Maple October	Yanagi Willow November	Kiri Paulownia December
Brights 5 (20 pt.)	 Crane		 Curtain					 Moon			 Rain Man	 Phoenix
Earths/ Animals 9 (10 pt.)		 Nightingale		 Cuckoo	 Bridge	 Butterflies	 Boar	 Geese	 Sake Cup	 Deer	 Swallow	
Scrolls/ Ribbons 10 Red 4 Poetry 3 Blue 3 (5 pt.)	 Poetry	 Poetry	 Poetry			 Blue			 Blue	 Blue		
Plains/ Chaff/ Junk 24 (1 pt.)	 	 	 	 	 	 	 	 	 	 	 Thunder/ Lightning	 有權 有標  任天堂  別製張貫

Tips for Remembering the Cards

One of the early stumbling blocks when learning Koi-Koi is remembering the month and kind for each card, especially as some of the cards share somewhat similar designs; these pointers should help you get to grips with them:

- Before you start playing spend some time reviewing the deck; lay out the cards as in the image above and compare the number, colour, size and orientation of the flowers – although some months may seem similar there are always distinguishing features.
- Remember that each month only has four cards.
- Remember how many cards are in each kind: 5 Brights, 9 Earths, 10 Scrolls, 24 Plains (Plains make up half the deck).
- Scrolls are the most easily identifiable of the kinds – just remember there are three types, poetry, blue and red.
- There are only five Brights, so learning those will quickly help you distinguish between Brights and Earths: if it's a picture card but isn't a Bright then it's an Earth.
- The only card that doesn't have the month's flower on it is the Thunder card, which is a willow like the Rain Man – rainy cards stick together!

Another way to help remember the deck is to learn the significance of the different cards; this site:

<http://namakajiri.net/nikki/the-flowers-of-hanafuda/>

...does a wonderful job of describing the myths and folklore incorporated into the designs and the relevance of the flowers associated with each month.

Once you've gained a bit of familiarity with the deck you're ready to start playing. Don't worry about learning every detail on all the cards, at this stage you just want to be familiar with the basics - you certainly don't need to be learning anything as in-depth as the flower names for each month just yet.

4. How to Play Koi-Koi

Overview

The goal of Koi-Koi is to collect “yaku” or sets of cards. Points are awarded based upon the rarity of the yaku – the rarer it is, the more points.

The Match

A match typically comprises 12 rounds, one for each month of the year. After twelve rounds each player tallies the points for all the rounds they have won and whoever has the most points wins the match.

Picking the Dealer

To decide the dealer, or “oya” (which means parent), each player picks a card from the deck - the closest month to the start of the year deals. Another way to decide the oya is to pick just one card and whoever's birthday month is closest to the card's month deals.

The Layout

The cards are shuffled and dealt. There are different dealing conventions, such as dealing cards in twos or fours, but ultimately you end up with the cards dealt out as follows:

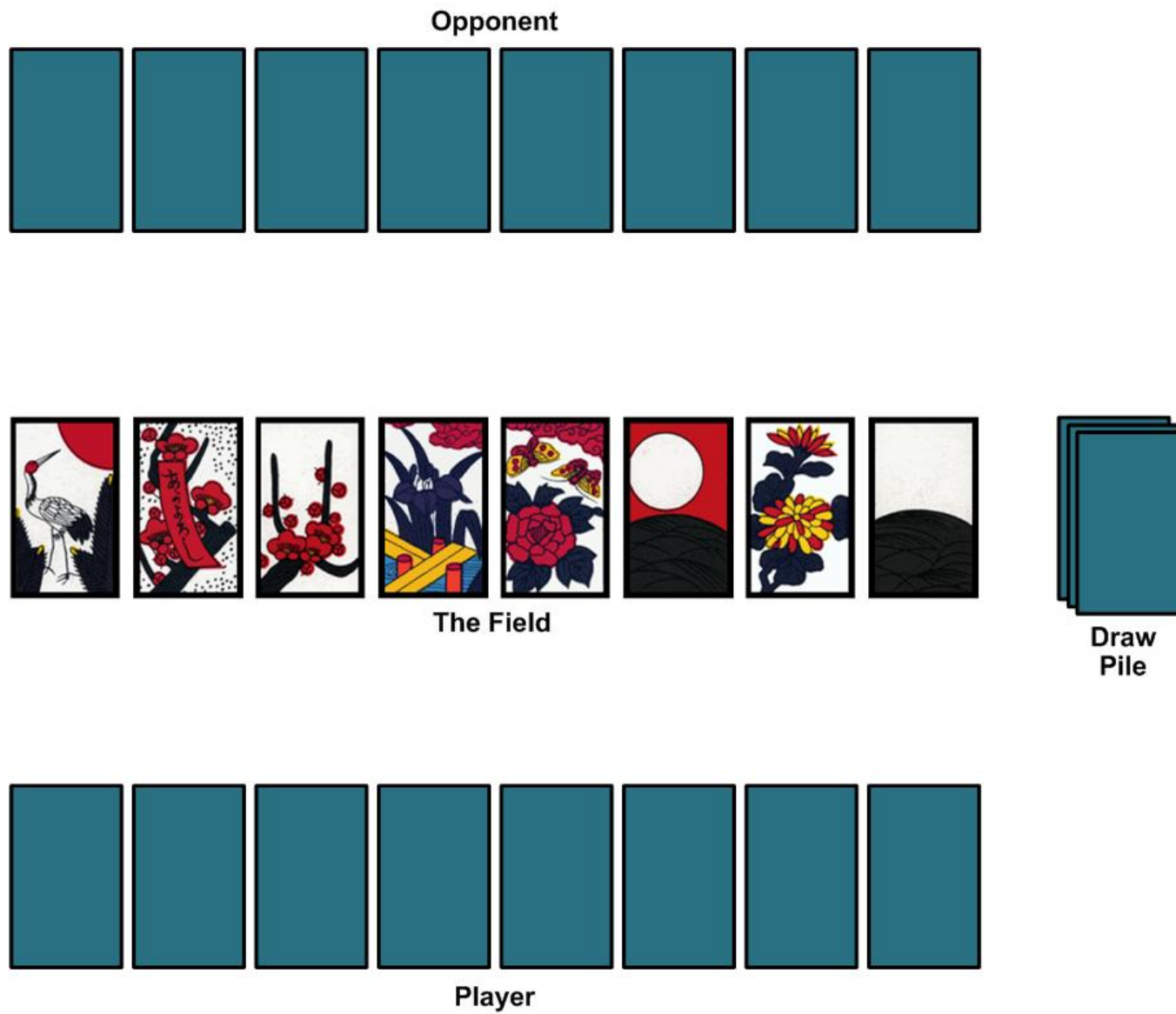
- 8 cards dealt face down to opponent
- 8 face up between the players (the Field)
- 8 face down to dealer

The image on the next page shows a typical starting layout.

Look at your cards but keep them hidden from your opponent (that said, when learning it can help immensely to play the first couple of matches with all cards face up so you can see why particular decisions are being made and openly discuss strategy). It can make it easier to assess your hand if you sort your cards into months or kinds.

The oya starts the round.

A Beginner's Guide to Koi-Koi



Turn Sequence

A turn consists of two parts:

Part 1

You must either:

a) Choose a card from your hand and turn it face up, then attempt to match it with a card of the same month from the Field. You then take the matched pair and place them on your side of the table to build your sets with.

or:

b) Add a card of your choice from your hand face up to the Field.

You must turn the card face up when matching so that it is visible to your opponent. Note that it is not obligatory to match a card from your hand even if you can do so - this is useful for strategic play (see section 6: Strategy).

Part 2

Draw the top card from the Draw Pile, turn it face up and attempt to match it with a card of the same month from the Field and take the pair to build your sets. If you cannot match the drawn card it is added to the Field. In this part of the turn, if you can make a match you *must* take the pair.

In both parts, if you can match your card with more than one card in the Field then it is your choice which card to take.

Play alternates between the players in this manner until either both players have run out of cards in their hand or one player makes a set. This sets the maximum length of a round to 8 turns each.

Special Matching Rule

If there are three cards of the same month in the Field whoever can make a match with the fourth captures all four.

Yaku

As mentioned above, the aim of the game is to make sets or “yaku”. A mistake beginners often make is to think they are collecting sets of the months but this is not the case; you are in fact trying to collect sets of cards based on the different kinds - Brights, Earths, Scrolls and Plains; you only use month-matching to move the cards from your hand, the Draw Pile and the Field to build your sets.

You can see the whole list of sets in the image on the next page.

Tips for Remembering Yaku

Learning the yaku is probably the toughest part of the game, but there are some tricks to help speed up the process:

- There are 12 valid yaku (one for each month of the year).
- You are grouping cards into sets of Brights, Scrolls, Earths and Plains; with the exception of the two Viewing Pairs (Curtain/Moon + Sake Cup) all yaku are contained within their kinds.
- At first, don't worry about remembering the points for each yaku and just focus on learning the yaku themselves. You can always refer to the sheet to check your points once you have a yaku, but it's much more disruptive to have to keep checking to see if you've actually made one.
- **Scroll** sets are the easiest to identify so learn those first – there are only three yaku: Blue, Red (poetry), and 5+.
- **Brights**: It really helps to learn the Bright cards early on – there are only five of them and they make the highest-scoring yaku. You can make yaku of 3, 4 or 5 Brights in any combination, except the Rain Man, which cannot be used to make a set of 3 Brights.
- **Earth**: There are only two Earth yaku; one is the special Earth yaku, Boar, Deer, Butterfly - I like to remember it as a pair of mammals (the only mammals in the deck) and a pair of insects (the only insects). The other yaku is five or more Earths – you can also use the Boar, Deer and Butterfly cards to make up this set.
- **Plains** have no special yaku – just collect ten or more.
- The **Viewing Pairs**, Blossom Viewing (Curtain + Sake Cup) and Moon Viewing (Moon + Sake Cup), are very useful sets, being comprised of only two cards. They are also the only two sets to mix kinds (Curtain and Moon are both Bright cards, Sake Cup is an Earth card). I remember them by imagining sitting drinking a cup of sake whilst watching the moon rise or pulling back the curtain to reveal the spring blossom, but each to their own!
- You can use cards in more than one set e.g. the moon card can be used to make both the Moon Viewing and Three Brights; the Blue Scroll yaku can be used towards Five Scrolls.

A Beginner's Guide to Koi-Koi

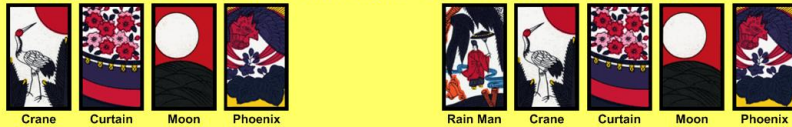
Three Brights: 5 *Any three non-Rain Man Brights*



Rainy Four: 7 *The Rain Man plus three other Brights*



Dry Four: 8 *The four non-Rain Man Brights* Five Brights: 10 *All five Brights*



Blue Scrolls: 5 *All three blue scrolls*



Red Scrolls: 5 *All three poetry scrolls*



Scrolls: 1+ *Any five scrolls; an extra point for each card above five*



Boar, Deer, Butterfly: 5



Earth: 1+ *Any five earths; an extra point for each card above five*



Plains: 1+ *Any ten plains; an extra point for each card above ten.*



Mixed Sets (optional)

Blossom Viewing: 5



Moon Viewing: 5



Immediate Wins

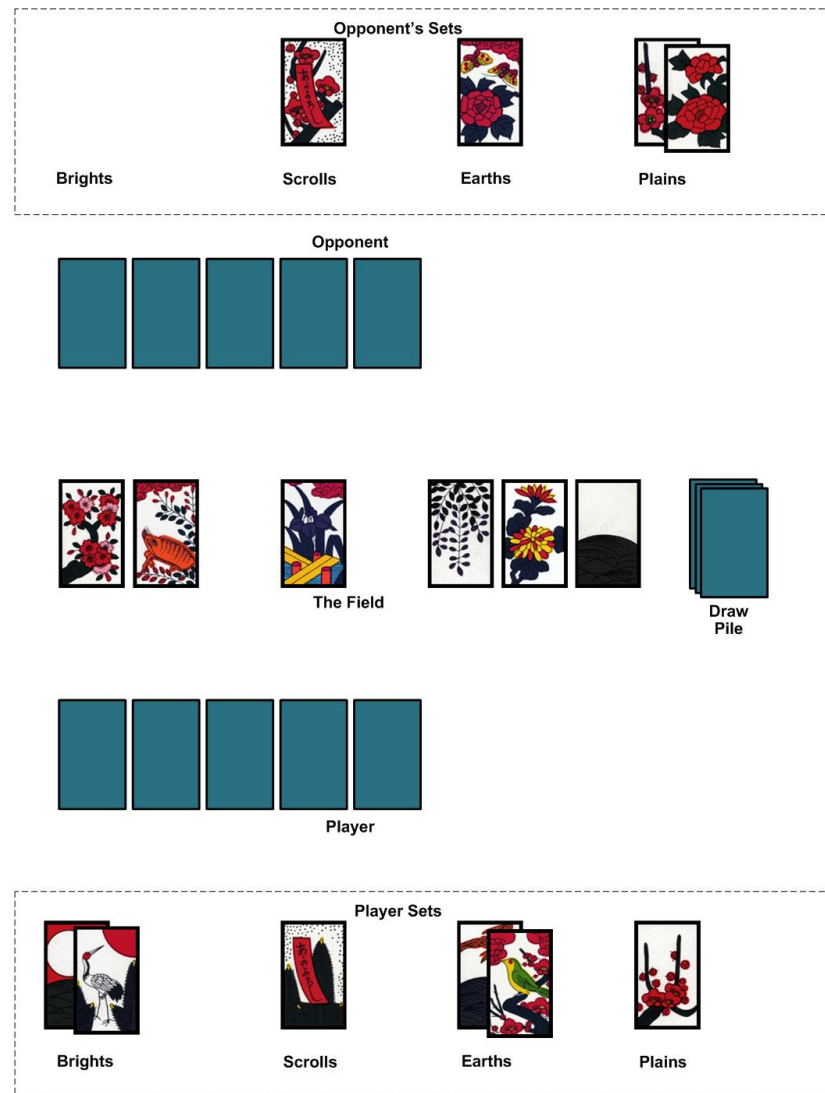
If either player has either of the card combinations in their hand at the start of a round then that player automatically wins and the cards are redealt.

Four Months: 6 *Four cards of any one month*

Four Pairs: 6 *Four pairs of any four month*

A Beginner's Guide to Koi-Koi

This image shows what a game in flow might look like, with both players starting to build yaku:



Koi-Koi!

If after completing your turn you have made one or more yaku you have the choice to either:

a) Call "Stop", ending the round and collecting the points for all the sets you have made

or

b) Call "Koi-Koi!" (literally "Play On!"), and attempt to make another set before your opponent makes a set.

If you manage to make another set you can again choose to call Koi-Koi or stop and win points for all yaku you have made for that round.

You can build on sets to create larger sets so, for example, you can add an extra Bright card to your set of 3 Brights to make 4 Brights or two extra Scrolls to your 3 blues to make 5+ Scrolls.

Warning! If your opponent makes yaku after you have called Koi-Koi they can then choose to end the round and take the points for their sets or Koi-Koi and continue play. If they stop you lose all your points for that round, plus your opponent receives a x2 point bonus for breaking your Koi-Koi (see Point Multipliers below).

Play passes back and forth in this manner until either one player ends the round or both players run out of cards.

Ending the Round

- If neither player has made any yaku after all cards in both of their hands have been played then the round is a draw and neither player makes points.
- If one player has called Koi-Koi and all 8 turns have been played then they win the round and collect points even if they did not make a subsequent set.
- If you lose the round you receive no points regardless of how many sets you have made.
- Play still continues even if all cards are taken from the Field.
- The winner of the round becomes the oya for the next round. If nobody wins the round the current oya deals.
- The oya must shuffle the deck before the next round.

Instant Wins and Redeals

There are two special yaku such that if you are dealt them to your hand before play begins the round ends and you are immediately awarded 6 points. The game then continues to the next round. If either of these combinations is dealt to the table, however, the round is declared void and a redeal occurs. These two combinations are:

- Four cards of the same month
- Four pairs of matching months

Point Multipliers

Koi-Koi bonus

A player who beats an opponent's Koi-Koi by making yaku before their opponent and chooses to stop gains a x2 point multiplier for their sets. You do not receive the multiplier if you are the one who calls Koi-Koi - only the player who is trying to beat Koi-Koi receives it. Think of the multiplier as a token - whoever calls Koi-Koi must pass the token to their opponent. If whoever holds the token makes yaku and stops, they then claim the multiplier. Note that the point multiplier for beating Koi-Koi always remains at x2 - it does not double each time somebody Koi-Koi's (although see Variations below).

7+ points bonus

If you make 7 or more points then your score is doubled. So, if you beat your opponent's Koi-Koi *and* make 7 or more points you will receive a x4 multiplier! This is often the trick to getting really big scores - knowing the right time to gamble and take the risk is key to becoming a good player.

5. Variations

A game as old as Koi-Koi has evolved a number of variations and different rule-sets – here are a few that you may want to try out once you've got to grips with the basics:

Nintendo Rules

- You may only Koi-Koi once per round, and if you beat an opponent's Koi-Koi you cannot counter Koi-Koi - the round automatically ends.

Making Sets

- Adding to existing sets doesn't count as making a new set e.g. collecting 10 plains, calling Koi-Koi then adding additional Plains wouldn't count, although you would collect the extra points upon making new sets.

Extra Sets

- The game can be enhanced by introducing another yaku worth 4 points. It is achieved by collecting four cards that belong to the month corresponding to the round number (e.g. January cards in round one, February cards in round two and so on).
- The Viewing Pairs are disallowed.
- The Viewing Pairs do not count towards stopping or calling Koi-Koi, but still score.
- Collecting both Viewing Pairs awards an extra 5 points.
- Collecting both the Red and Blue Scroll yaku awards an extra 5 points.

Extending Rounds

- Rounds can be extended by continuing the game when players run out of cards from their hand. Players simply draw cards from the Draw Pile and skip the first part where they are supposed to draw their cards first.

Wild Card

- The Thunder Card is used as a wild card and can contribute to any yaku.

Hidden Draw

- In order to make the game less random the players can check the card drawn from the draw pile without revealing it to the other players. If there is a pair in the Field, they can collect it. Otherwise the card is not placed in the Field but in the hand of the player who drew it.

Point Bonuses

- The point multiplier doubles each time Koi-Koi is called (often used when gambling).

End Game

- If a player calls Koi-Koi and the round ends before they manage to make another set then they lose the round and the opponent gains points - if the opponent has made no sets then zero points are scored.
- If a player calls Koi-Koi and the round ends before they manage to make another set then the round is a draw – no points scored.
- If no one collects the points before the round ends, the oya is the winner and gains 6 points (the so-called oya-kan).

Multiplayer

- Originally the game was designed for two players but it is possible to incorporate more parties. If only one deck is in use then as many as three people can play the game (each player should be dealt 7 cards). If two decks are used then as many as six people can play simultaneously.

6. Strategy

- Assess your hand and the Field at the start of the round and weigh up where your best opportunities for making yaku lie.
- Learn the frequencies of the different kinds – it's important to know the probability of a particular card coming up.
- At the start of a round there's a 75% chance of a hidden card being in the Field and a 25% chance of it being in your opponent's hand. However, because you only make a maximum of 8 draws from the Draw Pile per round the chance you will draw any given hidden card is 25% (breakdown: 25% chance it is in your opponent's hand, 25% you draw it, 25% they draw it, 25% it is left in the pile), so bear in mind that the odds are against you drawing a specific card.
- The Sake Cup is a very useful card, and well worth capturing early if the opportunity arises.
- The Moon and Curtain cards are the most useful Brights as they can be used for both the Bright yaku and Viewing Pairs.
- The Rain Man is the least valuable Bright card as it can't be used for making the 3 Brights yaku, and scores one less point for the Rainy 4 yaku.
- Observe the yaku that your opponent is collecting – it is as important to block their yaku as it is to build your own.
- Try to focus on collecting specific yaku rather than going after everything, but give yourself escape routes in case your opponent blocks you.
- Also look at what your opponent isn't collecting – if there are some valuable cards in the Field that are being left it could be because your opponent doesn't have a matching month card.
- If two cards in a month have already gone and you have the other two in your hand, or can match the pair on the Field, then those cards are safe, which can be used to your advantage.
- Don't rush to play out safe matches – it can be better to hold back and not tip off your opponent what your strengths are.
- Sometimes it can be useful to discard a card to the Field from your hand, even if there's another match available, as it can be used to set up your subsequent turns.
- Be careful discarding a card while there are still potential matches to be made with it. Consider what your opponent may have in their hand or what might be turned from the Draw Pile.
- It can be fatal to ignore Plains – in a single turn a player can accrue four Plains, very handy if you want to quickly break an opponent's Koi-Koi.
- When deciding whether or not to Koi-Koi, pay attention not only to your opponent's potential yaku, but also what is left in the Field – those innocuous Plains could make for some rather damaging matches from the Draw Pile.
- Take into account your position in the entire match before calling Koi-Koi – if you're ahead sometimes it can be better just to take low points than risk your opponent stealing a high score and leapfrogging into the lead.

7. Useful Links

Wikipedia:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Koi-Koi_\(card_game\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Koi-Koi_(card_game))

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hanafuda>

Great general sites for all things Hanafuda and Koi-Koi:

<http://www.hanafuda.com/>

<http://www.sloperama.com/hanafuda/>

<http://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/5451/hanafuda>

<http://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/11865/koi-koi>

<http://www.hanafubuki.org/koikoi.html>

<http://www.superjer.com/files/hana/>

Play online:

http://www.gamedesign.jp/flash/hanafuda/hanafuda_e.html

<http://www.hanafuda.com/play-hanafuda/>

Wonderful descriptions and photos of the cards and flowers and the folklore behind them:

<http://namakajiri.net/nikki/the-flowers-of-hanafuda/>

8. Quick Reference

Rules

1. Pick a card – closest birthday to the card month is the dealer (oya).
2. Deal 8 cards face down to each player and 8 face up to the Field. The remaining cards form the Draw Pile.
Oya starts:
- 3a) Match one card from your hand by month with a Field card or discard a card to the Field.
- 3b) Take one card from the draw pile and match with a Field card or leave on the Field.
4. If you have a made a set (yaku) call “Koi-Koi” (play on) to continue and attempt to make another set, or “Stop” to end the round and take the points for all sets made.
5. If you call Koi-Koi or have not made a set on your turn, play passes to your opponent.
6. If your opponent has called Koi-Koi and you make yaku you may: (i) call Koi-Koi and continue, or (ii) Stop and receive double points for your yaku. Your opponent makes no points.
7. If both players have played all cards from their hand then the round is over. The winner is the last player to have made a set. If no player made a set then no points are scored.
8. If you made 7 or more points for that round double your score.
9. The player with the highest total score after 12 rounds wins the match.

Sets

- **Three Brights** (any 3 Brights excl. Rain Man) **5pts**
- **Rainy Four** (any 4 Brights including Rain Man) **7pts**
- **Dry Four** (any 4 Brights excluding Rain Man) **8pts**
- **Five Brights** (all 5 Brights) **10pts**
- **Blue Scrolls** (3 blues) **5pts**
- **Red Scrolls** (3 poetry) **5pts**
- **Five Scrolls** (any 5 or more Scrolls) **1pt** (+1 for each extra)
- **Boar, Dear, Butterfly** **5pts**
- **Five Earths** (any 5 or more Earths) **1pt** (+1 for each extra)
- **Ten Plains** (any 10 or more Plains) **1pt** (+1 for each extra)
- **Moon Viewing** (Moon + Sake Cup) **5pts**
- **Blossom Viewing** (Curtain + Sake Cup) **5pts**

Immediate Wins

- Four of a month in your hand **6pts**
- 2 pairs of two months in your hand **6pts**