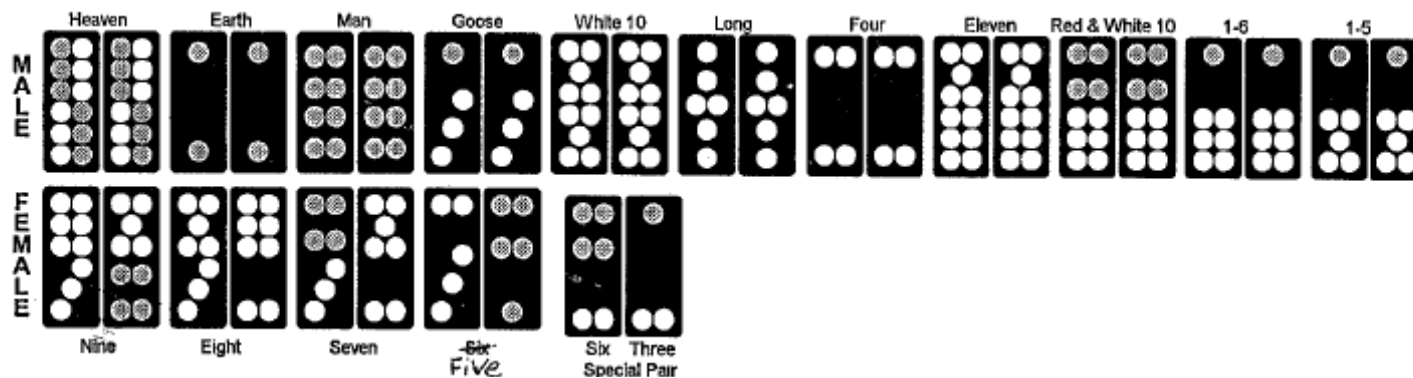


Heaven 9 – Chinese Dominoes (a.k.a. Tien-Gow)



Introduction

Almost 10 years ago, in January of 1989, I introduced the game of Chinese Dominos at FTI (which was then known as B&W). It's a fun, some say addictive, game. Up till the past year or so, there was practically always at least one game every lunch hour. We have been coasting all these years with the original core of players, but the core is thinning out. When any of the regular players is on a business trip or on vacation, we can no longer depend on having a game. With this note, I hope to attract more players.

This note includes a complete description of the game and its rules. Like most card games, it is easier to learn the game by watching a demo than by reading the rules. If you are a card player interested in a fast-paced, novel game, raise your hand. Then send me email or voice mail and I will introduce you to the game and let you know when there is a game you can watch. Feel free to pass this invitation on to other interested friends.

Current players and kibitzers include

Jim D
 Dave D
 John K
 Stanley L
 Curt M

Jeff S
 Todd S
 Tim S
 Norm Y

Introduction (originally written in January 1990)

I am not very good at card games and lose consistently to my parents in Chinese Dominos games when my brother and I visit them around Christmas. I wanted to play better so I wrote these rules a year ago to recruit players at the office to give me practice. The game turned out to be addictive and there has been at least one game played practically every lunch hour since it was introduced, even though I quit playing regularly after the first 4 months. There are at present 8 regular players, including two part-time students. There are two sets of dominos jointly owned by the regular players. Three of the regular players own sets of their own (I am not counting myself among the regular players). There are 4 irregular players. There are also one or two onlookers who have not yet dared to expose themselves to the verbal abuse that characterize the regular players (Note I am not counting myself among the regular players).

At the Christmas visit just passed, I played four sessions of dominos with

my family, each lasting 2-3 hours. I was the leader or tied with the leader in three sessions. I was a close second in the fourth session. My objective was accomplished and my parents are presently recruiting to prepare for my next visit.

In this revision I have incorporated amendments and corrections to the rules that I originally set down in February 1989. And since that time, I have confirmed that Chinatown in Washington, D.C. has a Chinese grocery/general store that sells sets of Chinese Dominos for a little less than \$30.

Introduction (originally written in February 1989)

Chinese Dominos is a game I played with my parents and my brother off and on since I was a boy. For the past several years, I have played it with my parents when I visit them around Christmas. I am not good in any card game and I lose consistently against my parents. But this is such a simple game, I want at least to understand why I lose even if I do not win. I asked my father to send me his set of dominos for me to practice with. All I need to do now is to recruit interested card players to learn the rules and to formulate winning strategies. I don't play much cards so I can't really compare the game with other card games. But my impression is that it is an easy-to-learn, fast-moving game with some novel rules.

While I call this game Chinese Dominos, it is not universally known among Chinese. Before I gave up and asked my father to send his set of dominos, I tried to find a set of my own. When I asked the sales lady at a Chinese gift shop in Lynchburg to order a set of dominos for me, she didn't know what I was talking about. Maybe it should be called Cantonese Dominos, but I wouldn't count on it being known universally among Cantonese. In fact none of the Chinese I know, that I happened to ask, were familiar with the game. But I did see a set a few years ago in a Chinese grocery/general store in Washington, D.C., so I have reason to believe that this game is played outside my immediate family.

On these few pages, I am going to set down the rules as I know them. I don't know whether there are official rules. Even between my parents there are sometimes disputes. For example, on my most recent visit to my parents, I asked my parents to arrange the tiles in order of rank for me to videotape in preparation for writing these rules. I learned (and my parents learned, too, I think) that they held some of the tiles upside down with respect to each other. To change my luck, I considered orienting the tiles as my mother did. But that additional burden on my limited card playing talent would nullify any benefit I might gain from the reorientation.

So I have reverted to old habits and must play with the handicap of holding some of the tiles upside down. Thanks to the video tape, I have the ranking of the tiles correct, but I am unable to adapt to the reorientation and am showing you the tiles in the orientation I am used to.

So be warned that some of the tiles shown in these rules may be upside down. Mom said it doesn't matter. I'm not sure what she meant, but that evening she went on to be the big winner.

There are Chinese names associated with the tiles, though for a few of the minor tiles my parents disagreed. The name of the game can be roughly transliterated from Cantonese as Tien-go. "Tien" means "the sky" or "the heavens" and is the name for the highest ranking male tile. "Go" means "nine" and is the name of the highest ranking female tile.

The hardest thing to learn about this game is remembering the rank of the tiles because there is no rule relating rank to the pattern of pips or dots for the 11 different tiles in the "male" suit.

The tiles

The game of Chinese Dominos is played with 32 tiles with red and white dots as shown in Figure 1. The names for each tile shown in Figure 1 are not necessarily the traditional ones, but simply names made up for convenience in explaining the rules. Each tile is paired with another which does not necessarily look alike. There are two suits which I will call male and female. The tiles shown in the top row of Figure 1 are male; the tiles in the bottom row are female.

The shuffle and the deal

The tiles are placed face down and shuffled. The tiles are arranged face down in a row of eight stacks each four tiles high. The winner of the previous hand tosses one or two dice near either end of the row of tiles. Counting begins with the previous winner and proceeds counter-clockwise to select who will take the first two stacks from the end where the dice were tossed. Proceeding counter-clockwise in turn, each player takes two stacks.

To determine who tosses the dice and plays the opening trick for the first hand, two dice are tossed by any player and the players are counted off counter-clockwise.

For variety or change-of-luck, the tosser may call out "peel 'em" (an approximate translation) to mean that each player take tiles a layer of eight at a time instead of taking two stacks of four at a time.

The play

Chinese Dominos is a game for four players who play counter-clockwise in turn. The object is to win counters. Pennies serve as readily available counters.

A hand begins with the shuffling and dealing of eight tiles to each player and ends when all tiles have been played. Stacks of four tiles in height are formed as each trick is played. Special bonuses may be awarded during the hand, but usually counters are exchanged at the end of each hand depending on the number of stacks each player has won.

The winner of the previous trick (or previous hand for the first trick of the hand) opens each trick by playing face up one to four tiles of the same rank. In his turn a player may take the trick by following suit and stacking an equal number of higher ranking tiles on top of the trick. If a player

cannot or chooses not to take the trick, he needs not follow suit, but he must "bury" an equal number of tiles by placing them face down at the bottom of the stack. After his turn, each player passes the stack counter-clockwise to the next player. After all four players have played, the winner of the trick collects the stack of tiles.

The winner of the hand is winner of the last trick. If the last trick consists of only one tile, players who have not won at least one trick in the hand are "shut out" and must bury their remaining tile.

If the last trick consists of more than one card (a pair, for example), there is no requirement to have previously won a trick.

Rank of single tiles

If only one tile is played, higher ranking tiles takes lower ranking tiles of the same suit. A tile cannot take a tile of a different suit or over a tile of equal rank in the same suit.

The male tiles on the top row of Figure 1 are arranged in order of rank with the higher ranking tiles on the left. The rank of the male tiles on the top row has to be memorized by rote because there is no rule relating rank with the pattern of dots on each tile.

With the exception of the special pair on the far right, the female tiles on the bottom row of Figure 1 are also arranged in order of rank. The rank of the female tiles on the bottom row is directly related to the number of dots on each tile regardless of color. While the pattern of dots is different, female tiles with the same number of dots are equivalent.

There are two female tiles that form a "special pair", one has 6 dots and the other has 3 dots. Played singly, the rank of the tile is based on the number of dots, i.e. the one with three dots is the lowest ranking female tile and the one with six dots rank higher than the tile with five dots.

Rank of pairs

If two tiles have the same rank regardless of suit, they may be played together as a pair. There are four kinds of pairs:

- male pair - identical male tiles
- female pair - female tiles with the same number of dots
- mixed pair of tiles with the same rank but different suit
- special pair - the "6" and "3" female tiles form the "special pair"

The first two kinds of pairs are obvious. For an example of the third kind, note that the female "9", which is the highest ranking female tile, may be paired with the male "heaven" which is the highest ranking male tile. Therefore the "heaven" and the "9" may be played as a pair. Similarly the "earth" may be paired with the "8" and so forth down to the "goose" and the "5". The male tiles from the white 10 on down do not pair with any female tiles.

For a pair to take a previously played pair, the pair must be of higher rank and be of the same kind as the previously played pair. In other words only a male pair may take a male pair; only a mixed pair may take a mixed pair; and only a female pair may take a female pair.

The tiles in the special pair may not be paired with any tiles except each other. The special pair is unbeatable when it is led, but only when it is led. Otherwise it has no rank and can be only buried. In addition the player who leads the special pair collects from the other players an immediate bonus, which will be explained below.

Rank of triples and quads

In addition to pairs, groups of three and four tiles may be formed from male and female tiles of the same rank. These triples and quads may be played at the same time or split up at the discretion of the player. In order to take a triple or a quad, you must play a group of three tiles of higher rank and each tile must follow suit. That means you must have the same number of male and female tiles, all must be of the same rank, and the

rank must be higher than the triple you are taking. For example, if a triple of two (male) "goose" and one (female) "5" tiles is played, it may be beaten only by a higher ranking group of two (male) earth and one (female) "8" tiles. However a triple with one (male) earth and two (female) "8" tiles does not match in kind and cannot take the other triple.

Stack payoffs

The object of the game is to win counters from the other players. The winner of the hand collects and pays out counters depending on how many stacks of tiles he and the other players have won during the hand. For this discussion, let each counter be worth one cent. How much each losing player pays the winner of the hand depends on the number of stacks he (the losing player) has. If he has four stacks, he has made his quota and pays nothing. He is said to be "even". If he has fewer than four, he pays a cent for each stack short of four. For example, if he has one stack, he pays the winner 3 cents. If the losing player has more than four stacks, the winner of the hand pays the losing player a cent a stack for each stack in excess of four. The winner is said to have been required to "buy" the excess stacks.

Previous-wins multiplier

For the first hand of a game, there is no previous winner and payoff for everyone is made at the nominal rate. After the first hand, the payoffs by the winner of the previous hand are multiplied by a "previous-wins" multiplier. The multiplier depends on the number of previous consecutive wins and is equal to one more than the number of previous consecutive wins. If the winner of the current hand won the previous hand, the value of each stack is doubled for everyone. If the winner had won the previous two consecutive hands, the stack values are tripled for everyone. And so forth. However, when the previous winner loses, his multiplier applies only to what he has to pay out; everyone else pays the nominal rate. In other words when a one-time winner loses, he pays out double the stack values for each stack he has short of four. A two-time winner pays triple,

etc.

If the previous winner loses, but has stacks in excess of four, then the new winner has to "buy" the stacks above four at a rate multiplied by the previous-wins factor. It is conceivable that a first-time winner can pay out more to the previous winner than he collects from the other players.

To keep track of the previous winner a special tile is passed to the winner of each hand. To keep track of the number of previous consecutive wins, counters are stacked on the tile. For the first win, no counter is stacked on the tile. For a second win, one counter is stacked on the tile, etc.

Bonus for the special pair

In addition to being unbeatable when it is led, leading the special pair entitles its player to a special bonus of 2 cents paid immediately by each of the other players. If one of the other players was a winner of the previous game, his payout is multiplied by his previous-wins factor. Similarly, if the winner of the previous game is the one who leads the special pair, the payout by the other three players is multiplied by the previous-wins factor. Note that unless the special pair is led, no bonus is collected.

If the special pair is played as the last trick of a hand, the bonus for it is doubled and compounded with the previous-wins factor. The stack payoff rate is not affected.

Bonus for quads

Winning a trick with a quad entitles the player to a special bonus of 4 cents paid immediately by each of the other players. If one of the other players was a winner of the previous game, his payout is multiplied by his previous-wins factor. Similarly, if the winner of the previous game is the one who won the trick with the quad, the payout by the other three players is multiplied by the previous-wins factor.

If the quad wins the last trick of a hand, the bonus for it is doubled and compounded with the previous-wins factor. The stack payoff rate is not affected.

Other multipliers

If a player wins a hand by sweeping all tricks and shutting out all other players (Is this called a grand slam in bridge?), all payoffs for stacks are tripled. So all other players have to pay for four stacks at rate of 3 cents a stack compounded with the previous-wins factor.

If the last trick is won with the lowest ranking card in either suit (a female 3 or a male 1-5), all stack payoffs are doubled. It is not clear to me whether or not the winner has to pay double when he "buys" stacks from players who won more than four stacks. Until I learn differently, I will rule that he will also have to buy at the doubled rate. That means in rare situations, it may be preferable to win with a card other than one of the lowest ranking cards.