

Beginning Mah Jong

The origins of Mah Jong are disputed, but it is probably based on an old Chinese game, amended and popularised in the early C20th. Rules can vary depending on where you play, but we try to stick to the rules as developed by the British Mah Jong Association. It started out as a gambling game, hence the scoring at the end of a round.

Basically, the game has similarities with many established games played with a standard pack. But the look and 'feel' of the game is quite different.

It is played with domino-like tiles and not cards. And there are more of them! They are:

- Three 'suits' of 1-9 - called **Bamboos, Characters and Circles**. There are four sets of each of these.
- Two more 'suits' - four called **Winds** (East, South, West and North, each given a letter - ESWN - as well as the Chinese symbol)) and three called **Dragons** (Red, Green and White - with a symbol and a letter CF & B). Again, there are four sets of each one of these 'suits'.

In addition, there are two more 'sets', rather more decorative (Pretty) than the other suits. These are called '**Flowers**' and '**Seasons**', with four in each. As well as the image, each of these has a number - 1-4 - which has importance when scores are worked out at the end of a game. Each player has their special Flower/Season.



NB Not all tiles are worth the same when it comes to scoring at the end of a round. Ones, nines and all Winds and Dragons, are called '**Major**' tiles, and score higher: twos to eights are '**Minor**' tiles, scoring less well.

Over the years, some tiles have acquired odd-sounding names: *Pretties* - Any Flower or Season; *1 Circles* - Moon of China; *1 Bamboo* - Bamboo Bird; *White Dragon* - Bar of Soap. So be warned.....

A set may also contain tile racks to hold the tiles, two dice and a special dice to remind players of the Wind of the Round.

The game begins with allocating to each of the (usually) four players a name for that round - one of the four Winds. So, going round the table **anti-clockwise**, the players become ESW or N. One of these, starting with East, 'leads' the game with the first move, and East is the 'wind of the round'.

All tiles are placed, face down, on the table, and the two players on either side of East shuffle (or **wash** as it is called) the tiles until East tells them to stop.

Each player then takes 36 tiles randomly, still face down, and places them in a line in front of him/her, 18 tiles long and 2 deep. The four rows are then carefully pushed together (usually using the racks that will hold each player's tiles), until an unbroken square wall is built.

Unlike most card games, no one player 'deals'. Tiles are dealt in this way.

Using the two dice, East then throws these into the wall, adds them up, and counts round the four sides of the wall to stop at the total of the two dice. This player then throws the two dice again, adds the new score to that of East's throw, and, starting from the right corner of his/her edge, counts up to the total of the four thrown dice. At this point the **wall is 'broken'** and two tiles lifted out and placed on the wall to the right of the gap. From the gap, and moving clockwise, each player, starting with East, takes two piles of two (i.e. four) tiles, and places them face up on his/her rack where s/he alone can see them. There are three 'rounds' of this, ending when each player has 12 tiles. At this point, each takes in turn just one more tile, making 13, and East takes one more to give him/her 14.

The game proper can then start!

Keeping things simple, the aim of the game is to change your dealt tiles through a process of picking up and discarding, trying to build on your hand to get to a position where you have four sets of three identical tiles, plus a pair - 14 in all. Once a player reaches this position, s/he declares '**Mah Jong**', and wins that game!

Once the tiles have been examined, any Flowers/Seasons (Pretties) are placed, face up, in front of the player, and, in turn, affected players replace these with tiles from the right side of the break in the Wall (**the Kong Box**) to return to 13 active tiles. This done.....

..... starting with East, s/he discards, face up, to the centre of the Wall, the tile least likely to be of use in developing a good hand. If, and only if, another player already has two or three identical tiles, this discard can be claimed to form a '**Pung**' (a set of 3) or '**Kong**' (a set of 4). If no player 'calls' Pung or Kong, play moves, **anticlockwise**, to the next player (South), who picks up the next tile from the Wall, and considers, in the light of his/her 14 tiles, which to discard. If a Kong is called, a tile is taken from the Kong Box, and the number of his/her 'active' tiles increases by one. A discard follows.

On discarding, the player **calls out** of the name of the tile being discarded - e.g. "*Seven Characters.*"

If a player (e.g. West) *not next* to the one discarding a tile (e.g. East) is able to call Pung or Kong, s/he takes the tile and discards one, with players between these two (in the case, South), missing a turn.

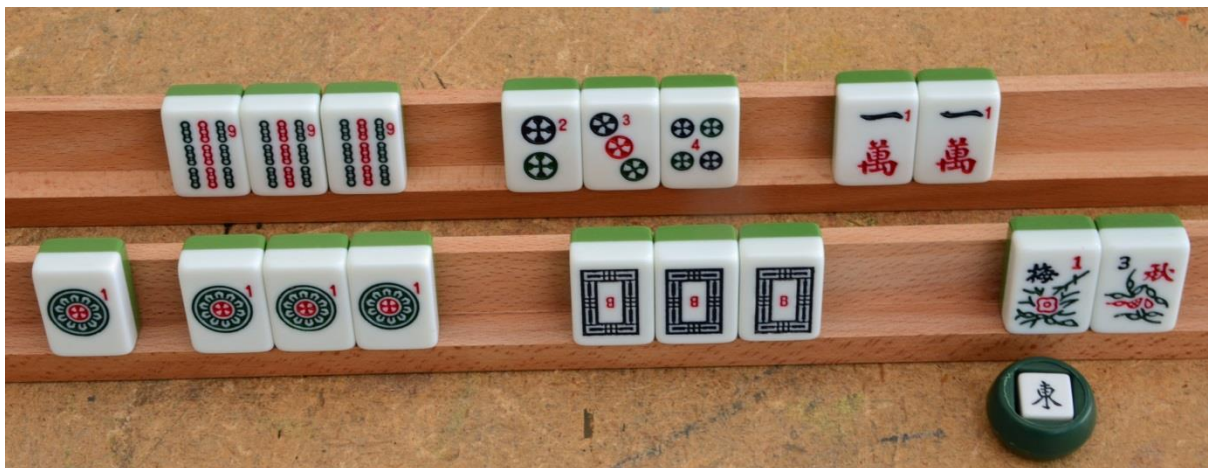
Pungs and Kongs can be either '**Exposed**' or '**Concealed**', with the latter scoring more highly. If a Pung or Kong is achieved by picking from the Wall (i.e. other players do not know what you have picked), this is concealed. If it is reached by calling a discard, others know the tile and it is exposed. All exposed sets must be placed (Pungs and Kings), face up, in front of the player.

Mah Jong can also be achieved if a hand, as well as 3 sets of 3 or 4 identical tiles, plus a pair, contains a run of three consecutive tiles of the same suit (e.g. 3, 4 and 5 Circles). This is called a **Chow**, and **only one Chow per hand is permitted**. A Chow does allow a player to 'go Mah Jong', but seriously affects the score that hand will attract, *so Chows are only really held late in a game* if no other route to winning seems likely. A discard to complete a Chow can only be called if Mah Jong follows immediately and the game ends.

A player needing just one tile to go Mah Jong announces that s/he is **"One for Mah Jong"** or, more usually, that s/he is **"Fishing"**! This alerts other players to be extra careful with their discard choices.

A player can only 'call' a discard to make a pair if this tile completes a Mah Jong hand. If two players call the same tile, but one is calling it to 'go Mah Jong', this takes precedence.

Once a player has gone Mah Jong, that game is over, all tiles are displayed and scoring using a standard framework takes place. Scores can range from nothing to several thousand (unless a maximum score per hand is agreed before play starts), and totalled up over several rounds.



At the end of a scoring round (i.e. a player has 'gone Mah Jong'), the player called East Wind moves round one place anticlockwise. Once all players have been East Wind, South becomes the Wind of the Round, and play rotates similarly. If all playable tiles have been exhausted and no player has made Mah Jong, no scoring takes place, and the Wind of the Round remains with the same player. The player named Wind of the Round attracts No.1 Season and Pretty as their 'special' tile for that game, with Nos. 2-4 following round the table.

Special Hands: As well as the standard way of 'going Mah Jong', there is a range of 'Special Hands'. These are more difficult to achieve, and have some fanciful names. Beginners are advised to stick to the basics before trying to learn these.

If you are interested to learn more, including details of the 'special hands', you might like to invest in: 'Mah Jong' in the 'Know the Game' series published by A & CB, compiled by the British Mah Jong Association. I got mine via Amazon.

Martin E King
Beginning Mah Jong/August 2015?/Revised2.17