

The Not So Ancient Game of Mahjong

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Mahjong is a popular game that originated in China but is played in many countries in the Far East and in the West, notably in the UK and the USA. Far from being an ancient game “dating back to Confucius”, it was only invented in the late nineteenth century. Its popularity spread to all parts of China, in good time to greet the large number of foreigners who began to congregate in Shanghai and other ports in the 1920’s. The *aficionados* of the game took their newly discovered passion back to their home countries and the game spread to all parts of the world, just as contract bridge did, at about the same time.

Like bridge, mahjong is a game for four players where hands are played at the rate of about one every 10 or 15 minutes. My parents played both but in Hong Kong, mahjong is about a thousand times more popular than bridge.

A basic mahjong set consists of 136 tiles as shown below:

There are 4 copies of each of the 34 tiles shown, to make the basic set of 136 tiles.									
The first three rows of tiles, numbered from 1 to 9, are the three suits known in English as Characters , Circles and Bamboos .									
In the fourth row are the four Winds (east, south, west and north) in dark blue, and the white, green and red Dragons .									
In fact, the three suits are three kinds of money:									
Circles - “coppers” in Chinese, are coins.									
Bamboos - “knots” in Chinese, are knotted pieces of silk, used as money in former times. “One Bamboo” is always depicted as a bird.									
Characters - “萬” (10,000 in Chinese) stand for paper money.									

At the start of a hand the players shuffle the face-down tiles and stack them two-high to make a four-sided wall (see picture below). Three dice are then thrown by the dealer to decide at which point along the wall the players will take their hands of

To **mahjong**, or win, the 14 tiles in a player's hand must form 4 triplets ($4 \times 3 = 12$ tiles) and a pair (2 tiles). The triplets may be **pungs** (three identical tiles of any kind) or **chows** (three tiles of the same suit that are in a sequence, such as 123 or 234, or 345 ... 789). The remaining two tiles must be identical, making a pair of "eyes".

Features in the hand determine how much the winner collects from the others. For example, if all the triplets are "chows" or if a "pung" is a triplet of a dragon tile or a wind tile (wind being in the right direction), the worth of the hand is doubled. Or, if all the triplets are "pungs" its worth increases 8-fold. Combinations corresponding to pure and mixed flushes and other exotica (too numerous to list and explain in a short piece such as this, as with wind directions) increase a hand's worth 16-, 32- ... up to a maximum usually fixed at 128-fold.

13 tiles. The dealer then begins by drawing a 14th tile from the wall. In the unlikely event that his 14 tiles form a winning pattern (see box below), he declares "Mahjong" and he wins the hand. Otherwise, he discards one of his tiles to end his turn.

The discarded tile may be taken by any of the other three players if they can mahjong, or make a "pung" with it. If no one mahjongs or makes a "pung", the player on the right of the discarder may take the discard to make a "chow". The player who picks up the discard to make the "pung" or "chow" must then make a discard to keep the number of tiles in his hand at 13. The triplet of "pung" or "chow" tiles formed by including the discard are placed face-up for all to see. They remain part of the 13-tile hand but become "fixed". That is, they can no longer be discarded or rearranged with the other tiles.



A hand at mid-play. In front of the four players are their hands of 13 tiles: some are hidden from the other players (standing upright) and others are exposed (placed face-up). The jumble of face-up tiles in the middle of the table are the out-of-play tiles. One and a half sides of the original four-sided wall can be seen.

If no one wants the discarded tile, it goes into the pool of out-of-play tiles in the middle of the table (see photograph below). The player on the right of the last player to discard then continues the play by drawing a tile from the wall. Play continues in this fashion until someone mahjongs, having improved his hand by discarding bad tiles in exchange for better ones.

While the above appears complicated, the rules of the game and the system of scoring take only a few afternoons of play to learn. You are then ready to tackle the finer points of the game, such as deciding which features in a hand should be developed, by weighing their worth against the probability of acquiring the missing tiles to complete the feature. Mahjong is a game of skill and luck!

If the above sounds fun, join us in the Mahjong Group!

The sharp-eyed among you will have noticed that in the two visible hands in the photograph above, the tiles are upside-down compared to the way they are normally displayed in the first picture. I have never seen this before and I can only guess that when mahjong happens and the tiles are flipped forwards for everyone to inspect and count the features, the tiles will be positioned correctly for everyone except the winner. A thoughtful etiquette! There is something new to learn about mahjong every day.