

# Mahjong

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**Mahjong** (Chinese: 麻將; pinyin: *má jiàng*) is a game that originated in China, commonly played by four players (with some three-player variations found in Korea and Japan). Mahjong is a game of skill, strategy and calculation and involves a certain degree of chance. In Asia, mahjong is also popularly played as a gambling game (though it may just as easily be played recreationally).

The game is played with a set of 152 tiles based on Chinese characters and symbols, although some regional variations use a different number of tiles. In most variations, each player begins by receiving thirteen tiles. In turn players draw and discard tiles until they complete a legal hand using the fourteenth drawn tile to form four groups (melds) and a pair (head). There are fairly standard rules about how a piece is drawn, stolen from another player (melded), the use of basic (numbered tiles) and honours (winds and dragons), the kinds of melds, and the order of dealing and play. However there are many regional variations which may vary these rules; in addition, the scoring system, the minimum hand necessary to win varies significantly based on the local rules being used.

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## Mahjong



A game of mahjong being played in Hangzhou, China

Chinese name	
Traditional Chinese	麻將
Simplified Chinese	麻将
Transliterations	
Hakka	
- Romanization	ma jiong3
Mandarin	
- Hanyu Pinyin	Má jiàng
Wu	
- Romanization	mu ciang (麻雀兒/麻將)
Cantonese	
- Jyutping	maa4 zoeng3
- Yale Romanization	ma4 jeung3
alternative Chinese name	
Traditional Chinese	麻雀
Simplified Chinese	麻雀
Transliterations	
Hakka	
- Romanization	ma4 jiok3
Mandarin	
- Hanyu Pinyin	Má què
Min	




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## Name

The game was called 麻雀 (pinyin: *má què*), meaning sparrow in Chinese, which is still the name most commonly used in some southern Chinese dialects such as Cantonese and Min Nan, as well as in Japanese. However, most Mandarin-speaking Chinese now call the game *má jiàng* (麻將). In Northern Wu Chinese (Shanghainese and its relatives), it is pronounced as 麻將 [mu tsian], but in actuality, 麻將 is the diminutive form of 麻雀, written as 麻雀兒 [mu tsiaʔ ɿ], due to an erhua event. It is through the Wu Chinese pronunciation of 麻雀兒 that the diminutive form of 麻雀 in Northern Wu dialect became known as 麻將 in both Mandarin and Wu.

## History

### Mahjong in China

One of the myths of the origin of mahjong suggests that Confucius,<sup>[1]</sup> the Chinese philosopher, developed the game in about 500 BC. This assertion is likely to be apocryphal. According to this myth, the appearance of the game in the various Chinese states coincided with Confucius' travels at the time he was teaching his new doctrines. The three dragon (cardinal) tiles also agree with the three cardinal virtues bequeathed by Confucius. *Hóng Zhōng* (紅中 , red middle), *Fā Cái* (發財 , prosperity), and *Bái Ban* (白板 , white board) represent benevolence, sincerity, and filial piety, respectively.

The myth also claims that Confucius was fond of birds, which would explain the name "mahjong" (maque 麻雀 = sparrow). However, there is no evidence of mahjong's existence before the Taiping era in the 19th century, which eliminates Confucius as a likely inventor.

Many historians believe it was based on a Chinese card game called *Mǎdiào* (馬吊) (also known as *Ma Tiae*, hanging horse; or *Yèzǐ* [葉子], leaf) in the early Ming dynasty.<sup>[2]</sup> This game was played with 40 paper cards similar in appearance to the cards used in the game Ya Pei. These 40 cards are numbered 1 to 9 in four different suits, along with four extra flower cards. This is quite similar to the numbering of mahjong tiles today, although mahjong only has three suits and, in effect, uses four packs of Ya Pei cards.

There is still some debate about who created the game. One theory is that Chinese army officers serving during the Taiping Rebellion created the game to pass the time. Another theory is that a nobleman living in the Shanghai area

<b>- Hokkien POJ</b>	Moâ-chhiok
<b>Wu</b>	
<b>- Romanization</b>	mu ciah
<b>Cantonese</b>	
<b>- Jyutping</b>	maa4 zoek3
<b>- Yale Romanization</b>	ma4 jeuk3
<b>Japanese name</b>	
<b>Kanji</b>	麻雀
<b>Kana</b>	マーじゃん
<b>Transliterations</b>	
<b>- Romaji</b>	mājan
<b>Korean name</b>	
<b>Hangul</b>	마작
<b>Hanja</b>	麻雀
<b>Transliterations</b>	
<b>- Revised</b>	majak
<b>Romanization</b>	
<b>- McCune-Reischauer</b>	machak
<b>Vietnamese name</b>	
<b>Vietnamese</b>	mạt chược

created the game between 1870 and 1875. Others believe that two brothers from Ningpō created mahjong around 1850, from the earlier game of Mǎdiào.

This game was banned by the government of People's Republic of China when it took power in 1949.<sup>[3]</sup> The new Communist government forbade any gambling activities, which were regarded as symbols of capitalist corruption. After the Cultural Revolution, the game was revived, without gambling elements (see below), and the prohibition was revoked in 1985.<sup>[4]</sup> Today, it is a favorite pastime in China and other Chinese-speaking communities.

## Mahjong in the Western world

In 1895, Stewart Culin, an American anthropologist, wrote a paper in which mahjong was mentioned. This is the first known written account of mahjong in any language other than Chinese. By 1910, there were written accounts in many languages, including French and Japanese.

The game was imported to the United States in the 1920s.<sup>[5]</sup> The first mahjong sets sold in the U.S. were sold by Abercrombie & Fitch starting in 1920.<sup>[6]</sup> It became a success in New York, and the owner of the company, Ezra Fitch, sent emissaries to Chinese villages to buy every set of mahjong they could find. Abercrombie & Fitch sold a total of 12,000 sets.<sup>[6]</sup>



Students in the United States learning how to play mahjong

Also in 1920, Joseph Park Babcock published his book *Rules of Mah-Jongg*, also known as the "red book". This was the earliest version of mahjong known in America. Babcock had learned mahjong while living in China. Babcock's rules simplified the game to make it easier for Americans to take up, and his version was common through the mahjong fad of the 1920s. Later, when the 1920s fad died out, many of Babcock's simplifications were abandoned.

The game has taken on a number of trademarked names, such as "Pung Chow" and the "Game of Thousand Intelligences". Mahjong nights in America often involved dressing and decorating rooms in Chinese style.<sup>[7]</sup> Several hit songs were also recorded during the mahjong fad, most notably "Since Ma is Playing Mah Jong" by Eddie Cantor.<sup>[8]</sup>

Many variants of mahjong developed during this period. By the 1930s, many revisions of the rules developed that were substantially different from Babcock's classical version (including some that were considered fundamentals in other variants, such as the notion of a standard hand). The most common form, which eventually became "American mahjong", was most popular among Jewish women.<sup>[9]</sup> Standardization came with the formation of the National Mah Jongg League (NMJL) in 1937, along with the first American mahjong rulebook, *Maajh: The American Version of the Ancient Chinese Game*.

While mahjong was accepted by U.S. players of all ethnic backgrounds during the Babcock era, many consider the modern American version a remake of a Jewish game,<sup>[10]</sup> as many American mahjong players of Jewish descent. The NMJL was founded by Jewish players and is considered a Jewish organization. In addition, players usually use the American game as a family-friendly social activity, not as gambling. In 1986, the National Mah Jongg League conducted their first Mah Jongg Cruise Tournament, in conjunction with Mah Jongg Madness. In 2010, this large scale seagoing event hosts its 25th Silver Anniversary Cruise, with players from all over the States and Canada participating.

In recent years, a second organization has formed, the American Mah Jongg Association. The AMJA currently hosts tournaments all across North America, with their signature event being at the Trump Taj Mahal Casino Resort in Atlantic City, New Jersey.

British author Alan D. Millington revived the Chinese classical game of the 1920s with his book *The Complete Book of Mah-jongg* (1977). This handbook includes a formal rules set for the game. Many players in Western countries consider Millington's work authoritative.

Mahjong is not the first re-appearance of the Chinese game in the western world. It was also introduced in playing card form by an official of Britain's Consular Service named William Henry Wilkinson, author of the Chinese origin of playing cards, under the name of Khanhoo. This card game does not seem to have made much impression. The later success of mahjong came in part from the elegance of its mechanism as embodied in the domino-like pieces.

## Current development

Today, the popularity and the characteristics of players of mahjong vary from country to country. There are also many governing bodies, which often host exhibition games and tournaments. It remains far more popular in Asia than in the West.

Mahjong, as of 2010, is the most popular table game in Japan.<sup>[11]</sup> In Japan, there is a traditional emphasis on gambling, and the typical player is male. Many devotees there believe the game is losing popularity and have taken efforts to revive it.<sup>[citation needed]</sup> There are several manga and anime (e.g. Saki and Akagi) devoted to dramatic and comic situations involving mahjong.<sup>[12]</sup> In addition, Japanese video arcades have introduced mahjong arcade machines that can be connected to others over the Internet. There are also video game versions of strip mahjong.

Mahjong culture is still deeply ingrained in the Chinese community. Sam Hui wrote Cantopop songs using mahjong as their themes, and Hong Kong movies have often included scenes of mahjong games. Many gambling movies have been filmed in Hong Kong, and a recent sub-genre is the mahjong movie.

Like other games, such as chess, Mastermind, checkers and card games, prolonged playing of mahjong may trigger epileptic seizures. The number of such cases, however, are rare. According to a 2007 study,<sup>[13][14]</sup> to date there are only 23 reported cases of mahjong-induced seizures in the English medical literature.

Studies by doctors have also shown in Hong Kong that the game is beneficial for individuals suffering from dementia or cognitive memory difficulties, leading to the development of mahjong therapy.<sup>[15]</sup>

As of 2008, there were approximately 7.6 million Mahjong players in Japan. An estimated 8,900 Mahjong parlors in Japan did ¥300 billion in sales that same year.<sup>[16]</sup>

## Type of game

Because of the solid form of the tiles, mahjong is sometimes classified as a domino game. However, it is much more similar to Western-style card games such as rummy.

## Variants

There are many variations of mahjong. In many places, players often observe one version and are either unaware of other variations or claim that different versions are incorrect. Although many variations today differ only by scoring, there are several main varieties:

### Descriptions

- **Chinese classical mahjong** is the oldest variety of mahjong and was the version introduced to America in the 1920s under various names. It has a small, loyal following in the West, although few play it in Asia.
- **Hong Kong mahjong** or **Cantonese mahjong** is possibly the most common form of mahjong, differing in minor scoring details from the Chinese Classical variety. It does not allow multiple players to win from a single discard.
- **Korean mahjong** is unique in many ways and is an excellent version for beginners and three players. One suit is omitted completely (usually the Bamboo set) as well as the seasons. The scoring is simpler and the play is faster. No melded chows are allowed in and concealed hands are common. Riichi (much like its

Japanese cousin) is an integral part of the game as well. Korean Rules

- **Sichuan mahjong** is a growing variety, particularly in southern China, disallowing chi melds, and using only the suited tiles. It can be played very quickly.
- **Taiwanese mahjong** is the variety prevalent in Taiwan and involves hands of 16 tiles (as opposed to the 13-tile hands in other versions), features bonuses for dealers and recurring dealerships, and allows multiple players to win from a single discard.
- **Japanese mahjong** is a standardized form of mahjong in Japan and is also found prevalently in video games. In addition to scoring changes, the rules of *rīchi* (ready hand) and *dora* (bonus tiles) are unique highlights of this variant. Besides, there is a variation called *sanma* (三麻) based on this sort, which is modified for playing by three players, and its main differences from the standard one are that *chī* (Chow) is disallowed and the simple tiles (numbers two through eight) of one suit (usually characters) are removed.
- **Western classical mahjong** is a descendant of the version of mahjong introduced by Babcock to America in the 1920s. Today, this term largely refers to the "Wright-Patterson" rules, used in the U.S. military, and other similar American-made variants that are closer to the Babcock rules.
- **American mahjong** is a form of mahjong standardized by the National Mah Jongg League<sup>[17]</sup> and the American Mah-Jongg Association.<sup>[18]</sup> It uses joker tiles, the Charleston, plus melds of five or more tiles, and eschews the Chow and the notion of a standard hand. Purists claim that this makes American mahjong a separate game. In addition, the NMJL and AMJA variations, which differ by minor scoring differences, are commonly referred to as *mahjongg* or *mah-jongg* (with two Gs, often hyphenated).
- **Three player mahjong** (or three-*ka*) is a simplified three-person mahjong that involves hands of 13 tiles (with a total of 84 tiles on the table) and may use jokers depending on the variation. Any rule set can be adapted for three players, however this is far more common and accepted in Japan, Korea, Malaysia and the Philippines. It usually eliminates one suit entirely or tiles 2-8 in one suit leaving only the terminals. It needs fewer people to start a game and the turnaround time of a game is short—hence, it is considered a fast game. In some versions there is a jackpot for winning in which whoever accumulates a point of 10 is considered to hit the jackpot or whoever scores three hidden hands first. The Malaysian and Korean versions drop one wind and may include a seat dragon. Korean Japanese three player variant.
- **Singaporean/Malaysian mahjong** is a variant similar to the Cantonese mahjong played in Malaysia. Unique elements of Singaporean/Malaysian mahjong are the four animal tiles (cat, mouse, cockerel, and centipede) as well as certain alternatives in the scoring rules, which allow payouts midway through the game if certain conditions (such as a *kang*) are met.
- **Fujian mahjong**, with a *Dàidì* joker 帶弟百搭.
- **Vietnamese mạt chược**, with 16 different kinds of jokers.
- **Thai mahjong**, includes the Vietnamese tiles with another eight for a total of 168 tiles.
- **Filipino mahjong**, with the Window Joker.
- **Pussers bones** is a fast-moving variant developed by sailors in the Royal Australian Navy. It uses a creative alternative vocabulary, such as *Eddie*, *Sammy*, *Wally*, and *Normie*, instead of *East*, *South*, *West*, and *North*.
- **Mahjong Solitaire** involves stacking the Mahjong tiles in various configurations and then through an act of elimination the discovery of tile pairs and the removal of those pairs from the stack. Microsoft Corporation released a computerized Mahjong solitaire game called "Mahjong Titans" originally bundled with Windows Vista and later also with Windows 7. Previously Activision in 1986 released a computerized Mahjong solitaire game for the Amiga, Macintosh and Apple IIs computers and also the Sega Master System entitled Shanghai.

## Selected Variations Compared

Mahjong Variations

Variation	Hong Kong	HK New	Classical	Japanese	Korean	Taiwan	Malaysia/Singapore	Three player mahjong J/K	American
Flowers	Yes	Yes	Yes	Optional	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Seasons	Yes	Yes	Yes	Uncommon	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
					No or			No or only	



Bamboo	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	only terminals	Yes	Yes	Terminals	Yes
Animals	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
Jokers	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
Scoring Base	Faan	Faan	Multipliers	Multipliers	Simple	Simple	Simple	Simple	American
Scoring	Winner	Winner	All	Winner	Winner	Winner	Winner	Winner	Winner
East Doubles	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Sacred Discard	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Melded Chows	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Riichi	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
Minimum Points (in variations units)	3f	5f	3f	1y	2p	7/10t	2u	3+	Varies

## Mahjong competition rules

In 1998, in the interest of dissociating illegal gambling from mahjong, the China State Sports Commission published a new set of rules, now generally referred to as Chinese Official rules or International Tournament rules (see Guobiao Majiang). The principles of the new, wholesome mahjong are: no gambling, no drinking, and no smoking. In international tournaments, players are often grouped in teams to emphasize that mahjong from now on is considered a sport.

The new rules are highly pattern-based. The rulebook contains 81 combinations, based on patterns and scoring elements popular in both classic and modern regional Chinese variants; some table practices of Japan have also been adopted. Points for flower tiles (each flower is worth one point) may not be added until the player has scored 8 points. The winner of a game receives the score from the player who discards the winning tile, plus 8 basic points from each player; in the case of *zimo* (self-drawn win), he receives the value of this round plus 8 points from all players.

The new rules were first used in an international tournament in Tokyo, where, in 2002, the first World Championship in Mahjong was organized by the Mahjong Museum, the Japan Mahjong Organizing Committee, and the city council of Ningbo, China. One hundred players participated, mainly from Japan and China, but also from Europe and the United States. Mai Hatsune, from Japan, became the first world champion. The following year saw the first annual China Majhong Championship, held in Hainan; the next two annual tournaments were held in Hong Kong and Beijing. Most players were Chinese, but players from other nations attended as well.

In 2005, the first Open European Mahjong Championship<sup>[19]</sup> was held in the Netherlands, with 108 players. The competition was won by Masato Chiba from Japan. The second European championship<sup>[20]</sup> in Copenhagen (2007)



The top three in the World Mahjong Championship in Tokyo, October 2002. In the middle: world champion Mai Hatsune, from Japan



The first Open European Mahjong Championship, Nijmegen, the Netherlands, June 2005

was attended by 136 players and won by Danish player Martin Wedel Jacobsen. The first Online European Mahjong Championship was held on the Mahjong Time server in 2007, with 64 players, and the winner was Juliani Leo, from the U.S., and the Best European Player was Gerda van Oorschot, from the Netherlands. The Third Open European Mahjong Championship 2009<sup>[21]</sup> at Baden/Vienna, Austria, was won by Japanese player Koji Idota, while runner-up Bo Lang from Switzerland became European Champion. There were 152 participants.

In 2006, the World Mahjong Organization (WMO) was founded in Beijing, China, with the cooperation of, amongst others, the Japan Mahjong Organizing Committee (JMOC) and the European Mahjong Association (EMA). This organization held its first World Championship in November 2007 in the Chinese town of Chengdu, attended by 144 participants from all over the world. It was won by Li Li, a Chinese student at Tsinghua University. The next World Championship will take place in Utrecht, the Netherlands, in Summer 2010.

Some other parties have also attempted to create international competition rules. The most noticeable one is the Zung Jung (中庸) Mahjong Scoring System, created by Hong Kong mahjong scholar Alan Kwan. Unlike the Chinese Official rules, Zung Jung is designed with simplicity as one of its design goals, and aims to be suitable for casual entertainment as well as tournament play. Zung Jung is adopted by the World Series of Mahjong event held annually in Macau. The World Series of Mahjong was last held in September 2008, in which 302 participants took part. The main event had a prize pool of US\$1-million, which was won over three days of play by Alex Ho, from Hong Kong. He won US\$500K from the prize pool and a mahjong necklace designed by Steela+Steelo.<sup>[22]</sup>

Western, or American-style Mah Jongg tournaments are held in virtually every state - the largest in Las Vegas, NV twice a year, and in Atlantic City, NJ, by Mah Jongg Madness; and the annual cruise hosted by the National Mah Jongg League and Mah Jongg Madness (MJM). MJM tournaments host between 150 and 500 participants at these larger events; and there are several smaller scale, but equally successful tournaments held annually by other hosts. Prize pools are based on the number participating. Rules are based on the National Mah Jongg League standard rules.

## Equipment

*Main article: Mahjong tiles*

Mahjong can be played either with a set of mahjong tiles or a set of mahjong playing cards (sometimes spelled "kards" to distinguish them from the list of standard hands used in American mahjong). One brand of mahjong cards calls these *Mhing*. Playing cards are often used when travelling, as they take up less space and are lighter than their tile counterparts; however, they are usually of a lower quality. In this article, "tile" will be used to denote both playing cards and tiles.

Many mahjong sets will also include a set of chips or bone tiles for scoring, as well as indicators denoting the dealer and the Prevailing Wind of the round. Some sets may also include racks to hold tiles or chips (although in many sets, the tiles are generally sufficiently thick so that they can stand on their own), with one of them being different to denote the dealer's rack.

Computer implementations of mahjong are also available. These allow you to play against computer opponents, or against human opponents on the Internet.

A set of mahjong tiles will usually differ from place to place. It usually has at least 136 tiles (most commonly 144), although sets originating from America or Japan will have more. Mahjong tiles are split into these categories: suits, honor, and flowers.



Basic equipment: chips, tiles, and dice

## History

The suits of the tiles are money-based. In ancient China, the copper coins had a square hole in the center; people

passed a rope through the holes to tie coins into strings. These strings are usually in groups of 100 coins, called *diào* (吊, or variant 吊), or 1000 coins, called *guàn* (貫). Mahjong's connection to the ancient Chinese currency system is consistent with its alleged derivation from the game named *mǎ diào* (馬吊).

In the mahjong suits, the coppers represent the coins, the ropes are actually strings of 100 coins, and the character myriad represents 10,000 coins or 100 strings. When a hand receives the maximum allowed winning of a round, it is called *mǎn guàn* (滿貫, literally, "full string of coins".)

## Kinds of suits

There are four categories of suits of which the fourth "wild tiles" is used in only a few local variations (American and Singapore rules).

### Simples

There are three different simple suits numbered 1-9. They are bamboo, coins and characters. They are universally used with the exception of limited or no bamboo in Korean rules and the removal of one suit or 2-8 of one suit in three player versions. Only simples can be used to make a chow.

### Honours

There are two different honour suits. The winds of which there is north east south and west and the dragons of which there are Red, Green and White. Honours cannot form chows.

### Bonus Tiles

There are up to 16 possible bonus tiles. In some variations they are discouraged such as riichi and other Japanese variations. The most commonly used ones are the flowers. The seasons are used in most Chinese variations (Hong Kong, Taiwanese, shanghai). In Singapore and Malaysian variations there is also an animal suit. There is a fourth suit which may be used made up of possible modes of transportation (i.e. rickshaw). It is rarely used. There are four of each suit and each tile is unique. They are numbered 1 to 4.

### Wild Tiles

Also known as Joker tiles. They are used in only a few variations and do not constitute a suit but rather can be substituted for any desired tile based on the particular rules of the variations.

## Individual Suits

- **Stones** (alternatively *wheels* or *circles*): one through nine (□□□□□□□□). Named as each tile consists of a number of circles. Each circle is said to represent can (筒, *tóng*) coins with a square hole in the middle.



- **Bamboos**: one through nine (□□□□□□□□). Named as each tile consists of a number of bamboo sticks. Each stick is said to represent a string (索, *sǔo*) that holds a hundred coins. Note that 1 Bamboo is an exception: it has a bird sitting on a bamboo, to prevent alteration.



- **Characters** (alternatively *numbers*): one through nine (□□□□□□□□). Named as each tile represents ten



thousand (萬, *wàn*) coins, or one hundred strings of one hundred coins.



## Honors

- **Wind tiles:** □ East Wind (東, *dōng* east), □ South Wind (南, *nán* south), □ West Wind (西, *xī* west), and □ North Wind (北, *běi* North).



- **Dragon tiles:** □ Red Dragon, □ Green Dragon, and □ White Dragon. The term *dragon tile* is a Western convention introduced by Joseph Park Babcock in his 1920 book introducing mahjong to America. Originally, these tiles are said to have something to do with the Chinese Imperial Examination. The red tile ("中"榜, *zhōngbǎng*) means passing the examination to clear the way to officialdom. The green tile ("發"財, *fācái*, literally "get rich") means wealth. The white tile (白板, *báibǎn*, literally "clean slate") means freedom from corruption. It usually has a blue border to distinguish from replacement tiles and prevent alterations. In the original Chinese mahjong, these pieces are called *jiàn* (箭), which represents archery, and the red "中" represents a hit on the target. In ancient Chinese archery, one would put a red "中" to signify that the target was hit. White "白" represents failure, and green "發" means that one will release the draw.<sup>[citation needed]</sup>



## Flowers

The last category, and typically optional components to a set of mahjong tiles, these tiles often contain artwork. Many people prefer not to use these tiles, because they make it easier to win and earn bonus points. For example, if you have no flowers in your hand, you get only one bonus point; but if you hold two flower tiles that match your seat/wind direction, you are entitled to two bonus points, since flowers correspond with wind directions. For example, holding a pair of the symbol 3 flower while you are in the West Wind position earns 2 bonus points for that hand, since the 3 flower is associated with the West Wind.

Japanese rule sets discourage the use of flowers and seasons. Korean rules and three player mahjong in the Korean/Japanese tradition use only flowers. In Singapore and Malaysia an extra set of bonus tiles of four animals are used. The rule set includes a unique function in that players who get two specific animals get a one time immediate payout from all players. In Taiwanese mahjong, getting all eight flowers and seasons constitutes an automatic win of the hand and specific payout from all players.

Four of the flower tiles represent the four noble plants of Confucian reckoning: □ plum, □ orchid, □ chrysanthemum, and □ bamboo.



The other four flower tiles (or season tiles) represent seasons: □ spring, □ summer, □ autumn, and □ winter.



The animal tiles used in Malaysia, Singapore and local variations are the animals. They represent the cat, mouse, cockerel and centipede.



## Setting up the board

The following sequence is for setting up a standard Hong Kong (or Singapore) game. Casual or beginning players may wish to proceed directly to gameplay. Shuffling the tiles is needed before piling up.

### Game Wind and Prevailing Wind

To determine the Player Game Wind (門風 or 自風), each player throws three dice (two in some variants) and the player with the highest total is chosen as the dealer or the banker (莊家). The dealer's Wind is East; the player to the right of the dealer has South wind; the next player to the right has West; and the fourth player has North (imagine a reversed map). Game Wind changes after every hand, unless the dealer wins. In some variations, the longer the dealer remains dealer, the higher the value of each hand.

The Prevailing Wind (場風) is always set to East when starting. It changes after the Game Wind has rotated around the board; that is, after each player has lost as the dealer. The dealer is always East. A full game of mahjong lasts until the Prevailing Wind has cycled through all four.

A mahjong set with Winds in play will usually include a separate Prevailing Wind marker (typically a die marked with the Wind characters in a holder) and a pointer that can be oriented towards the dealer to show Player Game Wind. In sets with racks, a rack may be marked differently to denote the dealer.

These Winds are also significant, as Winds are often associated with a member of a Flower tile group, typically 1 with East, 2 with South, 3 with West, and 4 with North.

### Dealing tiles

All tiles are placed face down and shuffled. Each player then stacks a row of tiles two tiles high in front of him, the length of the row depending on the number of tiles in use:

- 136 tiles: 17 stacks for each player
  - Suits of dots, bamboos, and characters + winds + dragons
- 144 tiles: 18 stacks for each player
- 148 tiles: 19 stacks for dealer and player opposite, 18 for rest
- 152 tiles: 19 stacks for each player

The dealer throws three dice and sums up the total. Counting counterclockwise so that the dealer is 1, a player's row is chosen. Starting at the right edge, "sum" tiles are counted and shifted to the right.

The dealer now takes a block of four tiles to the *left* of the divide.

The player to the dealer's right takes four tiles to the left, and players (counterclockwise) take blocks of four tiles (clockwise) until all players have 12 tiles (for 13-tile variations) or 16 (for 16-tile variations). In 13-tile variations, each player then takes one more tile, to make a 13-tile hand. In practice, in order to speed up the dealing procedure, the dealer often takes one extra tile during the dealing procedure to start his turn.

The board is now ready, and new tiles will be taken from the wall where the dealing left off, proceeding clockwise. In some special cases discussed later, tiles are taken from the other end of the wall, commonly referred to as the back end of the wall. In some variations, a group of tiles at the back end, known as the dead wall, is reserved for

this purpose instead. In such variations, the dead wall may be visually separated from the main wall, but it is not required.

Unless the dealer has already won (see below), the dealer then discards a tile. The dealing process with tiles is ritualized and complex to prevent cheating. Casual players, or players with mahjong playing cards, may wish to simply shuffle well and deal out the tiles with fewer ceremonial procedures.

## Charleston

In the American variations, it is required that before each hand begins, a Charleston is enacted. In the first round, three tiles are passed to the player on one's right; in the next round, the tiles are passed to the player opposite, followed by three tiles passed to the left. If all players are in agreement, a second Charleston is performed; however, any player may decide to stop passing after the first Charleston is complete. The Charleston is followed by an optional pass to the player across of one, two, or three tiles. The Charleston, a distinctive feature of American mahjong, may have been borrowed from card games such as Hearts.

## Gameplay

Each player is dealt either thirteen tiles (for 13-tile variations) or sixteen tiles (for 16-tile variations). If a player is dealt a hand of tiles that is determined to be a winning hand (known as a "heavenly win", 天胡), he or she may declare victory immediately before the game even begins. However, this scenario of victory occurs very rarely.

A turn involves a player's drawing a tile from the wall (or draw pile) and then placing it in his or her hand; the player then discards a tile onto the table. This signals the end of his or her turn, prompting the player to the right to make his or her move. Some variants encourage each player to loudly announce the name of the tile being discarded as a form of courtesy. Many variations require that discarded tiles be placed in an orderly fashion in front of the player, while some require that they be placed face down.

During gameplay, the number of tiles maintained by each player should always be the same; i.e., thirteen or sixteen. A player *must* discard a tile after picking up one. Failure to do so rules that player effectively out of winning, since a winning combination could *never* be built with one extra tile or fewer, but the player is obliged to continue until someone else wins.

A distinctive feature of West tiles: when three players drop the West tile, the fourth player will usually avoid discarding another West in the following turn. This is caused by a superstition that says, when all the players discard a West ("西") together, all players will die ("歸西") or be cursed with bad luck (see tetraphobia). During the West Prevailing Wind round, players will also avoid throwing in the One Circle during the first move, because One Circle sounds like "together" in Cantonese and Mandarin; thus, "to die all together" ("一同歸西"). In fact, because of this superstition, some variants require players to restart the game when all tiles of one kind of wind are discarded either in the first four turns, or during any four turns during the game.<sup>[*citation needed*]</sup>

## Melds

When a player discards a tile, any other player may "call" or "bid" for it in order to complete a meld (a certain set of tiles) in his own hand. The disadvantage of doing this is that the player must now expose the completed meld to the other players, giving them an idea of what type of hand he or she is creating. This also creates an element of strategy as, in many variations, discarding a tile that allows another player to win the game requires the discarding player to lose points, or pay the winner more, in a game for money.

Most variants, with the notable exception of American mahjong, allow three types of melds. When a meld is declared through a discard, the player must state the type of meld to be declared and place the meld face up. (As for the Japanese variant, callings to make melds are different from the actual names of the types of melds, favoring the original Chinese names over the Japanese translation.) The player must then discard a tile, and play continues to the right. Because of this, turns may be skipped in the process.

- **Pong**, or **Pung** (碰 pinyin pèng, Japanese: 刻子 *kōtsu*)—A *Pong*, or *Pung*, is a set of three identical tiles.

For example: ; ; ; .

In American mahjong, where it is possible to meld Flower tiles, a Pong may also refer to a meld of three of the four Flower tiles in a single group. American mahjong may also have hands requiring a *knitted triplet*—three tiles of identical rank but of different suits.

- **Kong** (槓/杠 pinyin gàng, Japanese: 槓子 *kantsu*)—A *Kong* is a set of four identical tiles.

For example: ; .

Because all other melds contain three tiles, a Kong must be immediately exposed when explicitly declared. If the fourth tile is formed from a discard, it is said to be an *exposed Kong* (明槓/明杠, pinyin *míng gàng*). If all four tiles were formed in the hand, it is said to be a *concealed Kong* (暗槓/暗杠, pinyin *àn gàng*). In some forms of play, the outer two tiles of a concealed Kong are flipped to indicate its concealed status. It is also possible to form an exposed Kong if the player has an exposed Pung and draws the fourth tile. In any case, a player must draw an extra tile from the back end of the wall, or from the dead wall, if it exists, and discard as normal. Play then continues to the right. Once a Kong is formed, it cannot be split up, i.e., to use one tile as part of a Chow, and thus, it may be advantageous not to immediately declare a Kong.

- **Sheung**, or **Chow** (上, in some versions 吃 *chi*, Japanese: 順子 *shuntsu*)—A *Sheung* or *Chow* is a meld of three suited tiles in sequence.

For example: ; ; ; .

Unlike other melds, an exposed Sheung may only be declared off the discard of the player on the left. The only exception is when the player needs that tile to form a Sheung to win. In this case, a Sheung can be declared at any opponent's turn. American mahjong does not have a formal *Sheung* (Sheungs cannot be declared), but some hands may require that similar sequences be constructed in the hand. Some American variations may also have the *knitted sequence*, where the three tiles are of three different suits. Sequences of higher length are usually not permissible, unless it forms more than one meld.

- **Eye** (將 *jiàng*, in some versions 眼 *yǎn*, Japanese: 対子 *toitsu* or 雀頭 *jantō*; also *Pair*)—The pair, while not a meld (and thus cannot be declared or formed with a discard, except if completing the pair completes the hand), is the final component to the standard hand. It consists of any two identical tiles.

For example, this hand  uses two  as the eyes.

American mahjong hands may have tile constructions that are *not* melds, such as "NEWS" (having one of each Wind). As they are not melds, they cannot be formed off discards, and in some variations, cannot be constructed in part or in whole by Joker tiles. In the Chinese official (and several other) rulesets, there are further hands, such as Seven Pairs or Thirteen Orphans.

When two or more players call for a discarded tile, a player taking the tile to win the hand has precedence over all others, followed by *Pong* or *Kong* declarations, and lastly, *Chows*. In American mahjong, where it may be possible for two players needing the same tile for melds, the meld of a higher number of identical tiles takes precedence. If two or more players call for a meld of the same precedence (or to win), the player closest to the right wins out. In particular, if a call to win overrides a call to form a kong, such a move is called "robbing the Kong", and may give a scoring bonus. The game may be declared an abortive draw if two or more players call a tile for the win though, again depending on the variation.

There is generally an informal convention as to the amount of time allowed to make a call for a discarded tile before the next player takes their turn. In American mahjong, this "window of opportunity" is explicitly stated in the rules; whereas in other variants, it is generally considered that when the next player's turn starts, i.e., the tile leaves the wall, the opportunity has been lost.

## Flowers

Flower tiles, when dealt or drawn, must be immediately replaced by a tile from the dead wall (or if no dead wall

exists, the back end of the wall). With the exception of American mahjong, they are immediately exposed, placed in view on the table on front of the player's tiles. At the start of each round, where two or more players may have Flower tiles, Flower tiles are replaced starting with the dealer and moving to the right. Flower tiles may or may not have point value; in some variations, possession of all the Flower tiles wins the round regardless of the actual contents of the hand.

In American mahjong, Flower tiles are not instantly exposed and replaced, as they may be melded with other Flower tiles in the same group (in essence, they are treated as if they were another set of honor tiles) or be used as a requirement of a winning hand. Early versions of American mahjong used Flower tiles as Joker tiles.

## Jokers

A feature of several variations of mahjong, most notably American variations, is the notion of some number of □ Joker tiles. They may be used as a wild card: a substitute for any tile in a hand, or, in some variations, only tiles in melds. Another variation is that the Joker tile may *not* be used for melding. Depending on the variation, a player may replace a Joker tile that is part of an exposed meld belonging to any player with the tile it represents.

Rules governing discarding Joker tiles also exist; some variations permit the Joker tile to take on the identity of any tile, and others only permit the Joker tile to take on the identity of the previously discarded tile (or the absence of a tile, if it is the first discard).

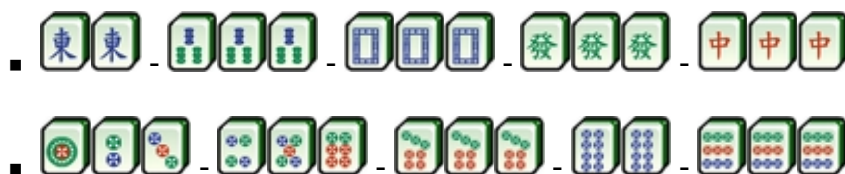
Joker tiles may or may not have an impact on scoring, depending on the variation. Some special hands may require the use of Joker tiles (for example, to represent a "fifth tile" of a certain suited or honor tile).

In American mahjong, it is illegal to pass Jokers during the Charleston.

## Winning

A player wins the round by creating a standard mahjong hand, which consists of a certain number of melds (namely, four for 13-tile variations and five for 16-tile variations) and a pair. If a player needs only one more tile to complete his winning hand and another player discards the tile he needs, he may claim it immediately, regardless of who discarded it or what part of his hand it completes.

Examples of winning hands (split into melds and pair for clarity):



In Western Classical variants, this is known as creating a *mahjong*, and the process of winning is called *going mahjong*.






Variations may have special nonstandard hands that a player can make (in this sense, American mahjong is a variant where *only* special hands exist).

Some variations may require that winning hands be of some point value. If a player declares victory but is discovered not to be holding a winning hand, he or she suffers a penalty of having to pay all the opposing players (called a *zaa3 wu2*, or *zhà hú* [詐胡] in Cantonese and Mandarin, respectively, or literally translated, "fake hand"). In some versions a player needs a very demanding winning hand to win such as 5 fan Hong Kong mahjong.

Winning is called *hú* (胡) in Chinese, and *agari* (アガリ) or *hōra* (和了) in Japanese. If the player wins by drawing a tile from a wall during his turn, a special name is given to this type of win in Chinese and Japanese: *zì mō* (自摸) in Chinese and *tsumo* (自摸, ツモ) in Japanese, while when the player wins by taking a tile cast off by another player, in Japanese it is called *ron* (栄, ロン).



## Ready hands

When a hand is one tile short of winning (for example: , waiting for: , , or , as  can be eyes), the hand is said to be a ready hand (Traditional Chinese: 聽牌; Simplified Chinese: 听牌; Japanese: *tenpai* [聴牌]), or more figuratively, "on the pot". The player holding a ready hand is said to be *waiting* for certain tiles. It is common to be waiting for two or three tiles, and some variations award points for a hand that is waiting for one tile. In 13-tile mahjong, the largest number of tiles for which a player can wait is 13 (the *thirteen wonders*, or *thirteen orphans*, a nonstandard special hand). Ready hands must be declared in some variations of mahjong, while other variations prohibit the same.

Some variations of mahjong, most notably Japanese and Korean ones, allow a player to declare *rīchi* (立直; sometimes known as *reach*, as it is phonetically similar). A declaration of *rīchi* is a promise that any tile drawn by the player is immediately discarded unless it constitutes a win. Standard requirements for *rīchi* are that the hand be *closed* or have no melds declared (other than a concealed kong) and that players already have points for declaration of *rīchi*. A player who declares *rīchi* and wins usually receives a point bonus for their hand directly, and a player who won with *rīchi* also has the advantage to open the inner *dora* (ドラ, from "dra"gon) which leads to higher possibilities to match such a card, thus has more chance to grant additional bonus. However, a player who declares *rīchi* and loses is usually penalized in some fashion. Declaring a nonexistent *rīchi* is also penalized in some way.

In some variations, a situation in which all four players declare a *rīchi* is an automatic drawn game, as it reduces the game down to pure luck, i.e., who gets their needed tile first.


## Draws

If only the dead wall remains (or if no dead wall exists and the wall is depleted) and no one has won, the round is drawn (流局 *liú jú*, 黃莊 *huáng zhuāng*, Japanese *ryūkyoku*), or "goulashed". A new round begins, and depending on the variant, the Game Wind may change. For example, in most playing circles in Singapore, if there is at least one Kong when the round is a draw, the following player of the dealer becomes the next dealer; otherwise, the dealer remains dealer.

Japanese mahjong has a special rule called *sanchahō* (三家和), which is, if three players claim the same discard in order to win, the round is drawn. One reason for this is that there are cases in which bars of 1,000 points for declaring *rīchi* cannot be divided by three. The rule is treated the same as "abortive draws".

## Abortive draws

In Japanese mahjong, rules allow abortive draws to be declared while tiles are still available. They can be declared under the following conditions:

- 九種么九牌倒牌 (*kyūshu yaochūhai tōhai*): On a player's first turn when no meld has been declared yet, if a player has nine different terminal or honor tiles, the player may declare the round to be drawn (for example, , but could also go for the nonstandard *thirteen wonders* hand as well).
- 四風子連打 (*sūfontsu rendā*): On the first turn without any meld declarations, if all four players discard the same Wind tile, the round is drawn.
- 四家立直 (*sūcha rīchi*): If all four players declare *rīchi*, the round is drawn.
- 四槓算了 (*sūkan sanra*): The round is drawn when the fourth Kong is declared, unless all four Kongs were declared by a single player. Still, the round is drawn when another player declares a fifth Kong.

## Turns and rounds

If the dealer wins the game, he will remain the dealer. Otherwise, the player to the right becomes dealer, and that

player's Wind becomes the Game Wind, in the sequence East-South-West-North.

After the Wind returns to East (i.e., each player has been the dealer), a **round** is complete and the Prevailing Wind will change, again in the sequence East-South-West-North. A full game of mahjong ends after when the North Prevailing Wind round is over. It is often regarded as an unlucky act to stop the gameplay at the West round, as the Chinese word for West (西) has a similar sound to the word for death (死).

However, the Japanese variation differs in that the game starts on the East round, where a special table Wind is assigned to all games in that round. The dealer is also always considered East seat, so when the dealership passes to the next player, it reassigns all the seat Winds to the next player, although nobody actually moves around. After every player has been East at least once, the East round is over and the South round begins. Play usually ends after the South round; however, if none of the players has more than a certain amount, usually 30,000, then play will continue to the West, and possibly even to the North round.

The Korean variation is similar to the Japanese one, though east paying double is optional. In some three player versions (three player versions not being frowned upon in Korea) two North tiles are removed, meaning it can only be used as a pair. This leaves three rounds of three games. This is often doubled to last 18 games, which can be played surprisingly fast in a three player game.

## Scoring

*Main article: Scoring in mahjong*

Scoring in mahjong involves points, with a monetary value for points agreed upon by players. Although in many variations scoreless hands are possible, many require that hands be of some point value in order to win the round.

While the basic gameplay is more or less the same throughout mahjong, the greatest divergence between variations lies in the scoring systems. Like the gameplay, there is a generalized system of scoring, based on the method of winning and the winning hand, from which Chinese and Japanese (among notable systems) base their roots. American mahjong generally has greatly divergent scoring rules, as well as greatly divergent gameplay rules.

Because of the large differences between the various systems of scoring (especially for Chinese variants), groups of players will often agree on particular scoring rules before a game. As with gameplay, many attempts have been made to create an international standard of scoring, but most are not widely accepted.

**Points** (terminology of which differs from variation to variation) are obtained by matching the winning hand and the winning condition with a specific set of criteria, with different criteria scoring different values. Some of these criteria may be subsets of other criteria (for example, having a meld of one Dragon versus having a meld of all of them), and in these cases, only the most general criterion is scored. The points obtained may be translated into scores for each player using some (typically exponential) functions. When gambling with mahjong, these scores are typically directly translated into sums of money. Some criteria may be also in terms of both points and score.

## Mahjong in Unicode

The Unicode range for mahjong is U+1F000 .. U+1F02F. Grey areas indicate non-assigned code points.

Mahjong Tiles																
Unicode.org chart (PDF)																
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	A	B	C	D	E	F
U+1f00x																
U+1f01x																
U+1f02x																

## See also

- Mahjong video game
- Games played with Mahjong equipment
- Mahjong culture
- Mahjong solitaire
- Mahjong movie
- Singaporean Mahjong scoring rules
- World Mahjong Organization
- World Mahjong Championship

中文

**This article contains Chinese text.**  
Without proper rendering support, you may see question marks, boxes, or other symbols instead of Chinese characters.

## Footnotes

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## External links

- Mahjong at the Open Directory Project
- Wiki-Mahjong page with rules of mahjong and extensive database of variations, terminology and examples]

Retrieved from "<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahjong>"

Categories: Chinese ancient games | Chinese games | Chinese inventions | Chinese words and phrases | Mahjong | Gambling games

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