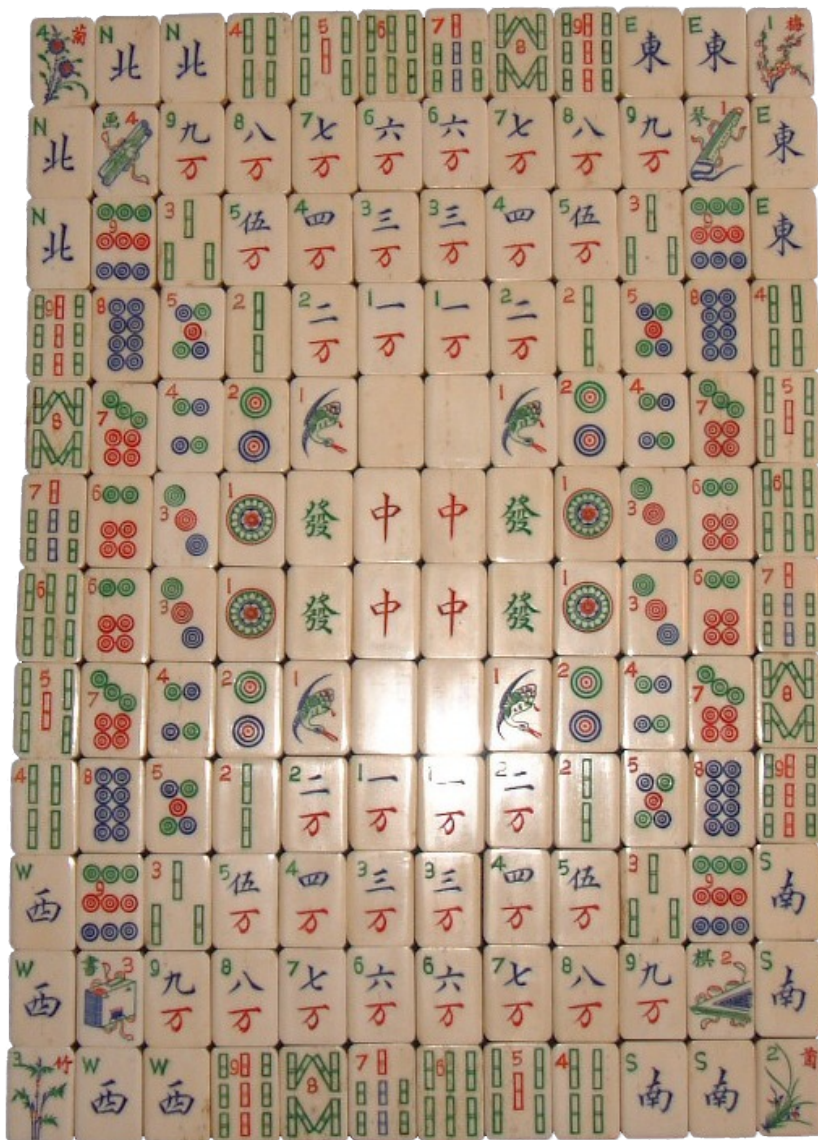


MAH-JONG

British Rules



The tiles of a Mah-Jong set arranged in the Symbolic Square

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Introduction

Mah-Jong (variously known as Mah-Jongg, Mahjongg, Majong and Mahjong) is a charming Chinese game played with engraved tiles. Traditionally, the tiles have been made from ivory or bone dove-tailed into bamboo. But a variety of other materials has also been used including wood, Bakelite, resin and modern plastic.

The exotic tiles, the oriental associations and the rituals which surround the game lend it a certain mystique and perhaps make it somewhat forbidding. However, although the rules are quite intricate, the rudiments of play are surprisingly easy to master and it is not unusual for a beginner to do quite well.

Origins of the Game

Although there have been claims for its antiquity, it seems most likely that the game originated in the Nongpo area of China in the latter half of the nineteenth century. It quickly spread to other countries in the early part of the twentieth century, becoming popular in the West in the 1920's.

Forms of the Game

Along the way the rules mutated into a variety of national forms; Hong Kong, Japanese, Taiwanese, Vietnamese, Western Classical, American, etc. Even within one country there are home grown variations. This lack of standardisation is reflected in the many books which have been written on the subject. And it's shared by the, often obscure, rule books that accompany Mah-Jong sets. It's a confusion that can be quite frustrating for the newcomer trying to learn the game.

Which Rules to Play by ?

The rules explained here follow those set out in **“Mah-Jong - Know the Game”** by Gwyn Headley and Yvonne Seeley. It was written in collaboration with the **British Mah-Jong Association (BMJA)** in an attempt to curtail the confusion over how to play and to allow the beginner an easier passage into the game. Unlike certain other versions, the British game is quite close to the original Chinese gambling game, but it is played differently and with only notional money.



More Information

The Headley and Seeley book also contains a short history of the game, something on tactics and etiquette and - for the more serious player - tournament play rules and

“The Complete Book of Mah-Jongg” by A. D. Millington is considered to be an authoritative but perhaps over wordy guide to classical Chinese Mah-Jongg. Besides delving into the minutia of these rules it covers the history, philosophy and symbolism of the game and assesses its various rival forms.



“The Great Mahjong Book: History, Lore and Play” by Jelte Rep is a beautifully illustrated and well written book about the history of Mah-Jong and the rules that are used in various countries.



Mah-Jong British Rules website

The **Mah-Jong, British Rules web site** can be found at: www.MahJongBritishRules.com

Besides explaining the BMJA rules, it contains lots of other information:

- Examples of Mah-Jong sets and some advice about where to buy one
- Shops in the UK and Ireland that sell Mah-Jong sets (and their suppliers)
- Web sites that sell Mah-Jong sets
- Other Mah-Jong sites, their content, and an indication of how interesting it is
- Some help finding Mah-Jong groups and teachers, and contacting others

Equipment

The Tiles

A Mah-Jong set has **144 tiles** (traditionally made from ivory or bone, dove-tailed into bamboo). These can be divided into sets of **Characters, Circles, Bamboos, Dragons, Winds, Flowers and Seasons**. Characters, Circles and Bamboos are known as “**suits**”. Often there also 4 spare, blank tiles and sometimes another 4 Joker tiles.

Tiles can be classified into “**Major**” and “**Minor**” tiles. Major tiles are worth more than Minor tiles. Suit tiles have both types. Dragons and Winds are Major tiles, but are also known as “**Honour**” tiles as they are able to increase your score further by doubling. **Flowers and Seasons are bonus tiles**.

Characters

There are **4 sets of 9 tiles** numbered 1 to 9 and show the Chinese symbol for the numbers 10,000 to 90,000. The One and Nine of Characters are Major tiles. The Two to Eight of Characters are Minor tiles.



The appropriate Arabic numeral is also marked on the tile.
It's typical of sets made for export to the West.

Circles

There are **4 sets of 9 tiles** numbered 1 to 9. The tiles show the appropriate number of circles. The One and Nine of Circles are Major tiles. The Two to Eight of Circles are Minor tiles.



Bamboos

There are **4 sets of 9 tiles** numbered 1 to 9. The tiles show the appropriate number of bamboos, except for the One of Bamboos which often shows a picture of a bird (usually a sparrow or rice-bird).

The One and Nine of Bamboos are Major tiles. The Two to Eight of Bamboos are Minor tiles.



Dragons

There are **4 Red Dragons**, **4 Green Dragons** and **4 White Dragons**. White Dragons are traditionally denoted by a blank tile and sometimes by a rectangle. **All Dragons are Honour tiles.**



Red Dragon White Dragon Green Dragon



East Wind South Wind West Wind North Wind

1 2 3 4

Winds

There are **4 East Winds**, **4 West Winds**, **4 North Winds** and **4 South Winds**. East Wind has special significance. Winds are sequenced as follows: **1 East**, **2 South**, **3 West**, **4 North**.

By this sequence, East and West are the opposite of our world view. **All Winds are Honour tiles.**

Flowers and Seasons

There are **4 Flower tiles** and **4 Season tiles**, numbered 1 to 4. This number associates the tile with the Wind of the same number. The depiction of Flowers and Seasons varies between sets. Note that in the Flower tiles shown below, Bamboo and Chrysanthemum are not in the normal order.



- 1 Plum
- 2 Orchid (Lily)
- 3 Bamboo (normally 4)
- 4 Chrysanthemum (normally 3)

The actual illustrations are thought to depict the Four Arts of the Chinese Scholar

Normally Sometimes



- 1 Spring • Fisher • Zither (a stringed instrument)
- 2 Summer • Woodcutter • Board Game (Go / Weiqi)
- 3 Autumn • Farmer • Calligraphy
- 4 Winter • Scholar • Painting

Plain tiles

Most sets have 4 spare plain tiles of use when a tile is lost. (They often look exactly the same as a White Dragon).



Jokers

Some sets also have 4 Joker tiles. These are “wild” and are used to replace the 2 of Bamboos in a special form of the game called the “Goulash”.

Accessories

Dice







Two dice are used at the start of the game to determine where the wall is to be broken prior to dealing out the tiles. The 1 and 4 on the dice are red - an auspicious colour - and the other numbers black.

Tallies

There are 4 types of tally in a set and they are traditionally made from bone or ivory. The number of dots on a tally is not necessarily indicative of its value. At the beginning of the game each player is given tallies with a total value of 2,000 points. There are several varieties of tally sticks.

Here is one typical set:

	Value	No. of Sticks per Player	Total Points
	2 points	10	20
	10 points	8	80
	100 points	9	900
	500 points	2	1,000

In practice, you may find 2,000 points for each player to be insufficient. In this case, I would suggest introducing another token to stand for 1,000 points and to distribute (say) 3 of these to each player. One might, for example, use a 10p (or 10 cents) coin.

Wind discs and the Tong Box

Some sets include four small counters which denote the four winds.

These are used to determine who is to be what wind at the start of the game.



They are then placed in a “*tong box*” (or “*chuang-tzu*”) to show the Prevailing Wind (initially East).

When they are not present then the normal Wind tiles are used instead.

Sometimes the game includes a Wind disk indicator.



Tong box or chuang-tzu

Racks

Four racks are used to hold each player’s tiles. Sometimes one of the racks is darker coloured and is used by East Wind. This rack is passed around the players as East Wind changes.



The larger, decorated rack has a lift up lid which reveals compartments where tallies can be stored