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How to play Mah Jong

How to play, score and win the game of Mah Jong.
Compiled by Victor Choong.
(Notes taken and adapted from various sources)



How To Play Mah Jong



Introduction

Mah Jong is a traditional Chinese tile game with many variations.

This is an ancient game widely played in China and Japan.

Nowadays Mah Jong is played around the world, by many cultures in many forms, with variations in play and scoring.

These notes present a traditional Chinese variation of Mah Jong.

Mah Jong is played regularly and is often associated with gambling and serious competition.

For those who simply love games, Mah Jong can be played with the same enthusiasm and competitive spirit for "chips" signifying points.

The version explained in the following pages is played with 'chips' for a 'friendly' game.

One warning, however: Mah Jong is very addictive!

The game resembles playing card games like Gin Rummy. Many assert that playing cards are derived from the ancient tile game of Mah Jong.

In the absence of the beautiful sets, often made of bone and bamboo, the game may also be played with special cards.

The literal translation of "Mah Jong" is "flax/hemp" "sparrow clattering".

Those who play the game love the sound of the tiles as they are mixed together prior to the start of each hand.

Listening carefully, players hear the sound of the flax blowing in the wind and the sparrows clattering.

These notes should help the novice learn to play the game of Mah Jong.

Ideally, four interested players should study the notes together, and find their way through a few hands.

Before long, you will be playing with certainty and confidence, and enjoying this game of skill and luck.

The following notes are for playing Mah Jong with rectangular tiles.

The main object of the game is to assemble a hand of certain tiles and to arrange the tiles into sets.

Some sets have English numbers and words to help the player.

A true Chinese set will not have any other numbers or words appearing on the tiles.

The players will then need to memorise the numbers or characters on the tiles.

Good Luck !!



How To Play Mah Jong



Tiles

Let us look at the different kinds of tiles and sets you will find.

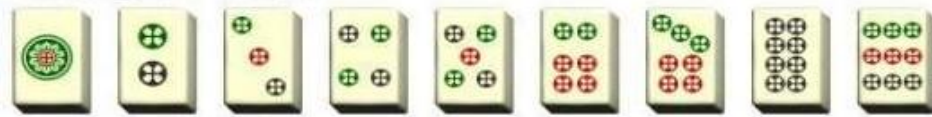
A complete set contains 144 tiles.

The tiles fall into four categories: suits, honour tiles, flowers and seasons.

There are three suits: The Circles, the Sticks and the Characters.

The circles (also called dots or balls),

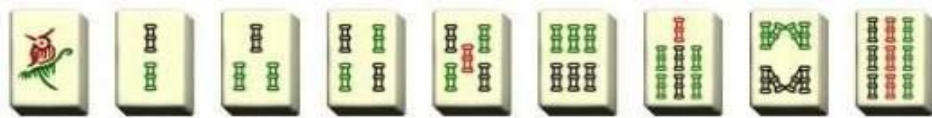
The circle tiles are numbered 1 through 9, and there are four of each number.



The sticks (also called bamboos),

The stick tiles are numbered 1 through 9, and there are four of each number.

The 1 bamboo is usually a bird.



The characters (also called maan or wan).

The character tiles are numbered 1 through 9, and there are four of each number.



The character suit consists of Chinese characters for the numerals.

The character on top of the tile face is the numeral; the character below that is the Chinese symbol 'maan' meaning 10,000.



How To Play Mah Jong



There are two types of Honour tiles:

The Winds (East, South, West and North),

The Dragons (Red, Green and White).

The Winds

Just as there are four of each suit number, there are four of each wind.

This set of tiles will be inscribed with the Chinese characters for the four compass directions, representing the four winds.



East
(dong)

South
(nan)

West
(xi)

North
(pak)

The Dragons

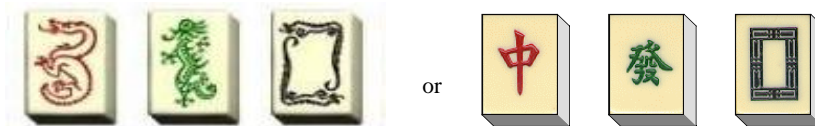
Just as there are four of each wind, there are four of each dragon.

The dragons can appear on some sets as dragons in the colours in red, green and white.

The Red Dragon has the Chinese character (in red) for Cheung, symbolising the "centre" or "animal" order of life, including humans.

The Green Dragon has the Chinese character (in green) for Fa (Fa Choy), symbolising the "lower" or "plant" order of life or "commence" or "begin good luck".

The White Dragon (also known as white board or 'pak pan') may have a rectangle on the tile, symbolising the "higher" order of spiritual beings.



Red

Green

White

or

Red

Green

White



How To Play Mah Jong



Flowers tiles.

There are eight "flower tiles" in each Mah Jong set.

Four of them represent different flower blossoms.

The other four represent the four seasons.

The Flowers

Each of the Flower tiles represent a different flower, and is associated with a specific wind.

When drawn, they are declared and a substitute is drawn.

These tiles, corresponding with the winning player's wind may double the winning score one or more times (this will be explained in the scoring section).



Plum
(East)

Orchid
(South)

Chrys
(West)

Bamboo
(North)

The Seasons

These are just like the Flower tiles.

They do not enter play except to enhance the score of a player's hand.

When drawn, they are declared and a substitute is drawn.



Spring
(East)

Summer
(South)

Autumn
(West)

Winter
(North)

Do not worry about memorising the appearance or characters of the flower and season tiles.

Just remember the correspondence between the numbers on the tiles and the four wind directions:

- 1 = East
- 2 = South
- 3 = West
- 4 = North



How To Play Mah Jong



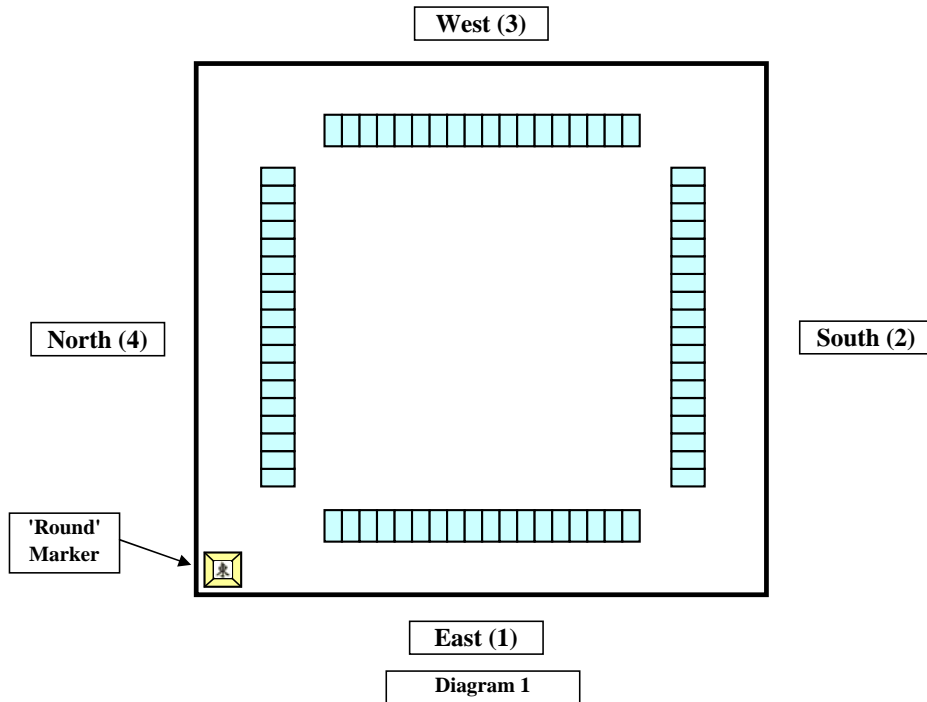
The Game

Mah Jong is ideally played by four people seated around a specially made table. (Three or five can play a modified version). A card table can be used as an alternative.

A full game consists of 16 hands of play, falling within 4 rounds. The rounds are named after the four directions: East, South, West and North.

- East round : The first four hands.
- South round: The second four hands.
- West round: The third four hands.
- North round: The fourth four hands.

In each hand, each of the players is assigned a wind or direction. The first player (the dealer) is always East. To his right is South: to the right of South is West: and to the right of West is North. The order of play, beginning with East is therefore counter clockwise.



Included in each Mah Jong set are three dice and a 'round' marker (see diagram 1).

The wind on the marker is changed at the end of each round. The dice will remain with the dealer until he loses his game and is then passed on to the next person to his right.

In the traditional game only the winner scores points.

In a typical game, each player begins with 5000 points, (or an agreed amount). If 'chips' are used there should be a range of value chips e.g. 500, 200, 100 and 10, totalling to 5000 for each player.



How To Play Mah Jong



Beginning the game

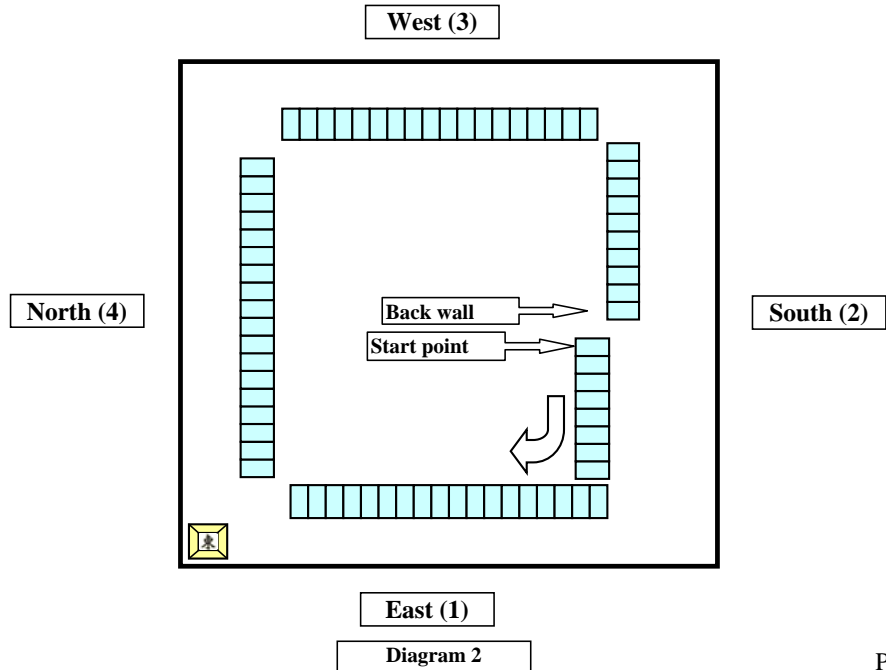
Before play begins, the seating has to be determined. Here is an easy method to use.

Shuffle up four different Wind tiles face down and place them on the table. Then pick a player to throw the three dice and the spots is then added together. Assuming the thrower as (1) we then proceed to count anti clockwise around the players up to the sum of the spots shown on the dice. The selected player will then pick one of the four Wind tiles and the rest will follow in turn to pick up each of the remaining tiles. The Player who has drawn the East tile will have the choice to pick his spot to sit. The others will then have to sit as per their drawn Winds around the table.

This method is also used to determine which player assumes the East and starts the game.

Building the wall

1. Place the tiles face down and shuffle around.
2. Arrange 18 stacks (a stack is two tiles, one on top of the other) in a horizontal row in front of each player, making a square like the wall of a city.
3. To break the wall and determine where to begin distributing tiles to the players, the dealer rolls the dice and counts players anti clockwise, beginning with himself to the total number shown.
4. For example if the dice total is 10 (see diagram 2), South will break the wall after counting ten from the right of his wall.
5. The dealer then picks up the first two stacks (4 tiles), then the player to his right takes the next two, and so on.
6. After each player has taken three double stacks, the players then take 1 more stack in turn giving them a total of 13 tiles each.
7. The dealer then takes one more tile to give him the first discard to start the game.
8. If any player has any Flower or Season tiles, they declare so right away, turn face up in front of them, and draw a substitute tile from the back wall for each flower/season.





How To Play Mah Jong



Rounds

A round is complete when all four players have held and lost their deals.

A double wind occurs when a player's own wind coincides with the prevailing wind. This situation has special value to a winning player when the score is tallied.

Penalties:

- * If Mah Jong is declared by mistake AND the other players have displayed their hands, the hand ends.
If this is done by the dealer then he/she has to pay the other players a penalty of say 100 points each.
If a non dealer then he/she has to pay 100 to the dealer and 50 to each of the other players.
If no other players' hand are displayed at the time of the false "out" the hand continues and the offender cannot go out until after his next turn.
(Penalty payment can be predetermined before game starts and is usually no more than the price of a 'limit' game.)
- * If at anytime a player (for whatever reason) has more or less than 13 tiles (and one extra for the Kong), that player may not go out and must continue to play.
This player may try to cause a draw by playing defensively.
- * If a player melds an incorrect sequence, triplet or four and the next player has begun, the same penalty as above is levied.
If the next player has not begun, no penalty is assessed.
- * If a tile is discarded by mistake, it may not be reclaimed.
- * If a player is "calling" and misses the needed discard, the player may not get the same discard until after his next draw from the wall.

Scoring and Payment

There are many variations in scoring so it is best to agree upon "house rules" before a game begins.

Whether the winning player is the dealer or non-dealer, and whether the winning tile is from the wall or a discard, affects both the scoring and payment.

The following suggestions are one of the simplest forms of payment.

This is based on "doubles" or "no doubles" scored by the winner.

Please refer to the Scoring Table for easy reckoning.

Doubles	non	1	2	3	4	5
Points	10/20	20/40	40/80	80/160	160/320	320/640

The winning player will usually collect double points from the player who is responsible for discarding the winning tile, and single points from the rest. If the winning player draws his own card to finish then he collects double points from everyone.

A winning hand with no doubles is considered as a "chicken" game.
A winning hand with five doubles or more is considered as a "limit" game.

- * In some 'house rules' a player may not go out without a minimum of 1 double.

The following page will explain how doubles are derived.



How To Play Mah Jong



Doubles

- ** 1 Double A Flower or Season tile that corresponds to the player's position.
e.g. The dealer will always have the position 1 and the player to
his right will have position 2 and so on.
- ** 1 Double A triplet (or fours) of any Wind tiles to the player with the same Wind.
2 Doubles When the player's own Wind coincides with the prevailing Wind.
- ** 1 Double A triplet (or fours) of any of the three Dragons.
- ** 3 Doubles A hand with only 1 suit of tiles e.g. Sticks.
- ** 2 Doubles A hand with 1 suit of tiles and a mixture of Winds and Dragons.
(Wind and Dragon tiles will be extra in this case.)
- ** 1 Double If the winner draws a tile from the wall for his game.
- ** 1 Doubles If the winner draws a tile from the back wall for his game.
- ** 1 Double If the winner "robs" an open Kong from another player for his game.
- ** 3 Doubles Heavenly Twins - 7 different pairs of tiles. (optional)
- ** 1 Double A mixed hand with 4 sets of suit tiles in sequence and a pair.
- ** 2 Doubles A mixed hand with 4 sets of suit tiles in triplets (or fours) and a pair.
- ** 1 Double If the pair in a winning hand is 2, 5 or 8 of any suit. (optional)
- ** 3 Doubles Two complete sets and a pair of the three Dragons.



Limit Hands

Listed here are a few hands that are automatic Limit Hands.

- ** **Three Big Dragons.** A hand with 3 complete sets of Dragons (red, green and white) and any other set and pair.
- ** **Little Four Winds.** A hand with 3 complete sets of Winds and a pair of the 4th Wind.
- ** **Big Four Winds.** A hand with 4 complete sets of Winds and any pair.
- ** **All Honours.** A hand with only Wind and Dragon tiles. (4 sets and a pair)
- ** **Four Concealed Triplets.** A concealed hand with 4 triplets of any kind. The pair alone can use a discard.
- ** **Heavenly Hand.** A dealer goes out immediately with the hand the dealer is dealt.
- ** **Earthly Hand.** A non dealer goes out on the First discard by the dealer. Or if self drawn the player's first turn (before a Pong, Chee or Kong is declared).
- ** **Nine Gates.** A hand which contains only one suit AND has a triplet of 1's a run from 2 to 8 and a triplet of 9's. It must be completely concealed and the player can actually go out on any tile of the suit. This hand is therefore a true nine chance hand, with 9 openings or 'gates'.
- ** **Thirteen Wonders.** A hand of entirely end tiles and honour tiles, and contains 1 tile of each; 3 different Dragons, 4 different Winds, 3 different 1's and 3 different 9's. The hand must be concealed but the player can go out on a discard of the tile needed.