

## FAQ 7d. About the "Bits & Pieces" That Come With Mah-Jongg Sets

The bits and pieces discussed on this page are:

- **Sticks and chips**
- **Wind Indicators (AKA "Bettors")**
- **Racks**
- **Dice**

If your set is missing some of these pieces, read FAQs 7j (tips for buyers) and 7k (where to buy mah-jongg stuff), and you can also check our Accessories For Sale bulletin board and you can post on our Accessories Wanted bulletin board. You can get to the FAQs and bulletin boards by clicking the links in the navigation frame at the left. What, no nav frame? [Click here.](#)

**Cards** and **tiles** are discussed on other chapters of this FAQ (see nav frame at left; or go back to the main FAQ 7 page to link to those chapters).

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### STICKS AND CHIPS

I am often asked how to use **chips** or **sticks**.



Some sets come with big poker chips (left). Some sets come with smaller round chips (center) with square holes in them (like old Chinese coins). Chips (left) and sticks (right) are used to help players keep score during the game. If your set comes with these pieces, fine. Use them or don't use them. If your set doesn't come with these pieces, maybe it isn't supposed to! Don't have a cow, man!\*

\* (My grandpa was a dairy farmer -- would you believe he *never once* said "Don't have a cow"?)

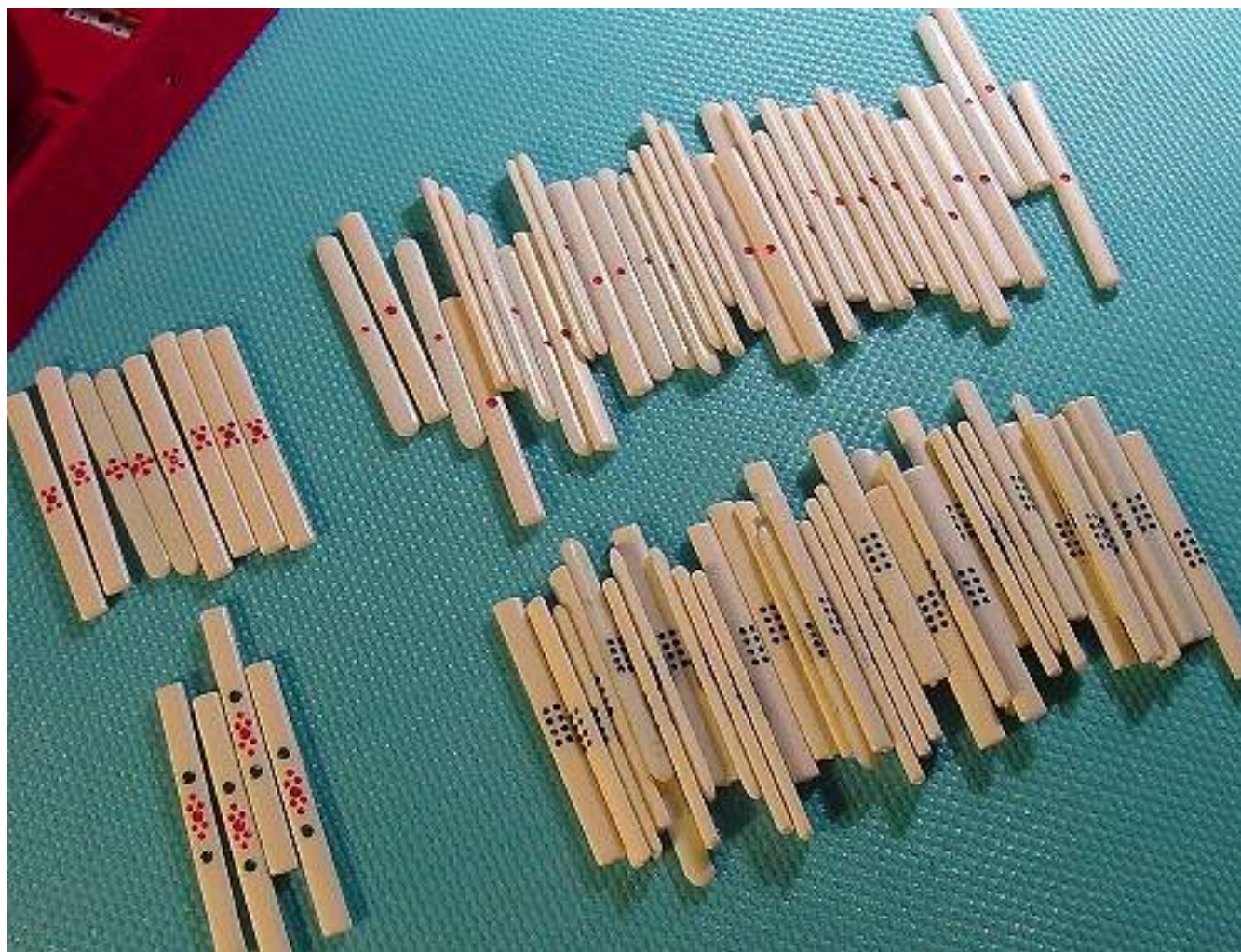
Here's the FAQ:

**Q: What are these stick things [or these coin things] and how are they used in mah-jongg?**

**A: When starting play, each player has the same amount of chips or sticks as everybody else. At the**



**conclusion of a hand of mah-jongg, non-winners give chips or sticks to the winner. At the conclusion of play, the player with the most chips or sticks is ahead.** Think of the chips or sticks as money (and in fact, many players play for money - if chips or sticks are used during play, then they convert to cash). Scoring sticks (aka "bones") come in different denominations - different spot configurations. If I tried to describe all the different spot configurations, it would just confuse things -- I have seen at least five different systems of spots! So forget about the spots. The number of spots doesn't matter as much as the number of sticks. Just make sure that each player gets the same number of each denomination of stick. You wouldn't be way off track to assign the highest point value to the least-numerous stick denomination, and the lowest point value to the most-numerous stick denomination, and so on. **The same principles also apply to coins (round chips with or without square holes). Divvy up the coins by color, divide into 4 equal stacks, and use just as described below for sticks.**



Let's say you have a Japanese mah-jongg set with 40 of one kind of sticks, 36 of another, 8 of a third, and only 4 of the last kind of sticks. See the photo above. Observant readers may note that some of these sticks are replacements (note: most of the sticks have squared ends. When I got the set, I counted the sticks and noted that some were missing, so filled in with replacement sticks with rounded ends.)

You can distribute the sticks among the players as follows:

**40 sticks (10 per player)** -- the least valuable sticks. Either 2 points, 100 points, or 10 cents, depending on which game you play. (Chinese game -- 2 points. Japanese game -- 100. American game -- 10 cents) In the picture above, this would be the sticks with eight black dots.

**36 sticks (9 per player)** -- the 2nd least valuable sticks. Either 10 points, 500 points, or 25 cents, depending on which game you play. In the picture above, the sticks with one red dot.

**8 sticks (2 per player)** -- the 2nd most valuable sticks. Either 100 points, 1,000 points, or 50 cents, depending on which game you play. In the picture above, the sticks with five red dots.

**4 sticks (1 per player)** -- the most valuable sticks. Either 500 points, 10,000 points, or 1 dollar, depending on which game you play. In the picture above, the sticks with seven red and two green dots.

A Chinese set usually comes with a different number of sticks. **For Chinese Classical you need:**

- Two 500-point sticks each player.
- Nine 100-point sticks each player.
- Eight 10-point sticks each player.
- Ten 2-point sticks each player.

**For Western mah-jongg you need:**

- Four 1000-point sticks each player.
- Ten 500-point sticks each player.
- Nine 100-point sticks each player.
- Ten 10-point sticks each player.

(That's according to Strauser & Evans; Thompson & Maloney say to use the *Chinese* stick allocation described above.)

**Robertson says for Western you should have:**

- Two 4000-point sticks each player.
- Seven 1000-point sticks each player.
- Eight 500-point sticks each player.
- Ten 100-point sticks each player.

For **Japanese *riichi-dora majan*** you should have:

- One 10,000-point stick each player (total: 4)
- Two 5,000-point sticks each player (total: 8)
- Nine 1,000-point sticks each player (total: 36)
- Ten 100-point sticks each player (total: 40)

Clearly, the stick allocations depend on the scoring system you use. Each author uses different scoring systems, even when describing the same basic rules.

If you don't have the specified exact number of sticks, don't worry about it. Just leave out any odd ones, and give each player the same amount, and set your limits accordingly. Or substitute poker sticks, chips, or coins. Or keep score on paper.

There may also be other point systems you want to assign to the sticks, depending on the scoring system you use. For example, **Kohnen** mentions two different Chinese systems: 10-50-100-500, and 10-100-500-1000. Just assign a point system that works for your scoring system, and make sure all your players agree on it. There's no "mah-jongg police" who will arrest you for doing it wrong. Just be ready to change your system when you learn a better one.

If you wanted to use sticks to play **American-style mah-jongg**, you could assign them to be representative of American coins. The following assumes you are playing with a **\$5 "pie."**

If you have Japanese sticks, it's pretty simple. Distribute the sticks equally between the four players -- each player will have one, two, nine, and ten of the various stick denominations.

- The one stick is a dollar.
- The two sticks are fifty cents each.
- Drop one of the nine sticks (put the extra aside) and call them quarters.
- The ten sticks are dimes.



That equals \$5.

**If you have Chinese sticks**, each player has two, nine, nine, and ten of the various stick denominations. So this system might work:

- Two fifty-cent sticks per player.
- Ten quarter sticks per player.
- Nine dime sticks per player.
- The remaining sticks also have to be called dimes. Use only six (put the other three aside).

...Something like that might be the best breakdown for a \$5 "pie" for American play if your set came with Chinese-style sticks.



One of my American groups uses the **colored plastic coins** to represent the \$5 pie. We break it down as follows:

- The blue coins are fifty cents (four per player = \$2)
- The red coins are twenty-five cents (eight per player = \$2)
- The green, white, and yellow\* coins are all ten cents (ten per player = \$1)

*\* It's rare for sets to come with enough of the greens, whites, or yellows to give each player ten, so we had to improvise. See the point? It's okay to improvise. There is no "mah-jongg police" to come tell you you're doing it wrong!*

The NMJL rulebook describes an entirely different breakdown for the coins:

- Two coins of [Color 1 @ ]-- worth 200 points (\$2.00) each (total value: 400 points)
- Four coins of [Color 2 @@] -- worth 100 points (\$1.00) each (total value: 400 points)
- Six coins of [Color 3 @@@] -- worth 25 points (\$.25) each (total value: 150 points)
- Ten coins of [Color 4 @@@@] -- worth 5 points (\$.05) each (total value: 50 points)
- TOTAL OF ALL COINS = 1,000 points (\$10.00)

@ (Color 1 is whichever color is represented the least in your set)

@@ (Color 2 is whichever color is represented second-least in your set)

@@@ (Color 3 is whichever color is represented second-most in your set)

@@@@ (Color 4 is whichever color is represented most in your set)

NOTE that the NMJL assumes that you play with a \$10 pie! Most groups here in Los Angeles (where I live) use a \$5 pie. Some even play with a \$3 pie. Or even less. The point is this: **You have to adjust your use of the coins -- or the sticks -- to how YOU and your group play the game.** **Anybody** can say "Here's how it's supposed to be done." *But what if that doesn't work for the way your group does things?* Mah-Jongg players have to be flexible. See [FAQ 14](#) for more about table rules.

In general, your best bet is always to get a good book describing your kind of mah-jongg, and use the scoring system defined therein. Most good books on un-American styles describe how to use the sticks ([see FAQ 3](#)).

If your set doesn't come with sticks or coins, you could do what Ingo Bojak suggested on [the mahjong newsgroup](#) on October 26, 2003:

My set didn't come with the right amount of chips for Chinese Classical. ... I then decided to simply buy a replacement pack of Monopoly money. It was about AU\$8,- (US\$6,-). It's a good size for playing and it's compact and light to carry. Also, somehow it's quite nice to play with "money".

Great idea, Ingo! I imagine the Monopoly money would easily fit right into most mah-jongg carrying cases.

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## WIND INDICATORS

Not all sets come with wind indicators, and not all wind indicators are alike. Observe five different kinds of wind indicator in this picture:



1. Four wind discs and a cylindrical container (called by Babcock the "Mingg").
2. Rotatable wind disk with window. In the window of this bakelite piece you see a number rather than a Chinese wind character.
3. Cube in holder. Typically, four faces of the cube show a wind character, and the other two faces show a red or green dragon character.
4. Cylindrical style wind indicator. Rotate the cylinder to bring the current prevailing wind character into view.
5. Japanese two-sided wind indicator. East and South only.

The wind indicator is placed by the first player who deals (this player is called "Original East"), to indicate the *prevailing wind*, which determines the structure of an "un-American" game.

**American** players (by which shorthand I mean players of the American game) don't use a *prevailing wind*, so the original purpose of these wind indicators is lost to American players. When American players have a wind indicator with numbers or Roman letters (E, S, W, N rather than the kanji characters), they use it as a "bettor," if it is used at all. It is set by a fifth player (also called the bettor) to indicate which player the bettor thinks will win the hand.





Hong Kong players also use a triangular piece to indicate which player was "Original East" (AKA "Home Base" or, in American mah-jongg, "Pivot"), to make it easier to know when the prevailing wind is supposed to change and when the game is supposed to end. My mah-jongg table (pictured in [FAQ 7f](#)) even has a soft-plastic flap in each corner, to hold this triangular marker.

# RACKS

American players require racks to hold and organize their concealed and exposed tiles, and to straighten and serve the walls. In Asia, players just stand their tiles on end and build the walls without any guides ("Racks? *Racks? We don't need no steenkeeng racks!*"). (^\_^) That said, some players of Asian variants use straightedges or "rulers" for building the walls and keeping the tiles in the hand lined up straight. (More on "rulers" below -- some American players call rulers "pushers.")

Newbies, players who are just starting out, or folks who are unacquainted with the game but either have acquired a set or want to learn the game, often don't know what these rack thingies are called. Sometimes folks will refer to them as "trays" or "boards" or "stands." *The term is RACKS.* A "tray" (in mah-jongg terms) is an open-topped box that holds the tiles in the carrying case, keeping the tiles from rattling around loosely inside the case. I don't know *what* the heck a "board" or "stand" is (in mah-jongg terms)!

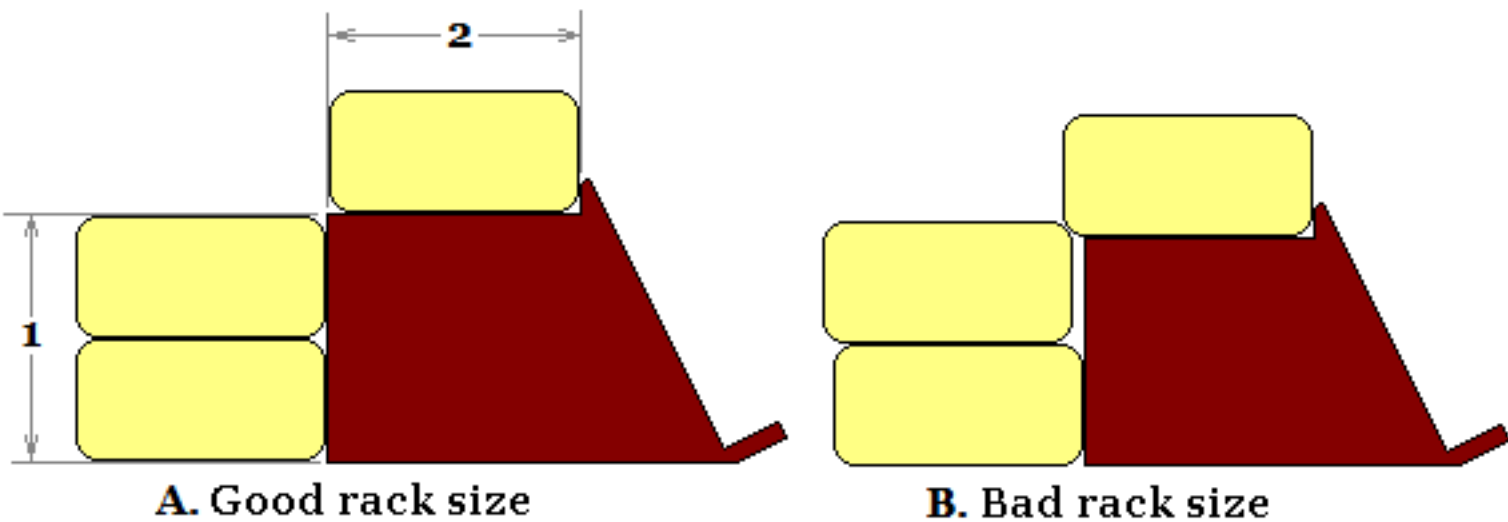
Racks come in a variety of styles. Most modern racks have chip holders on the left end.



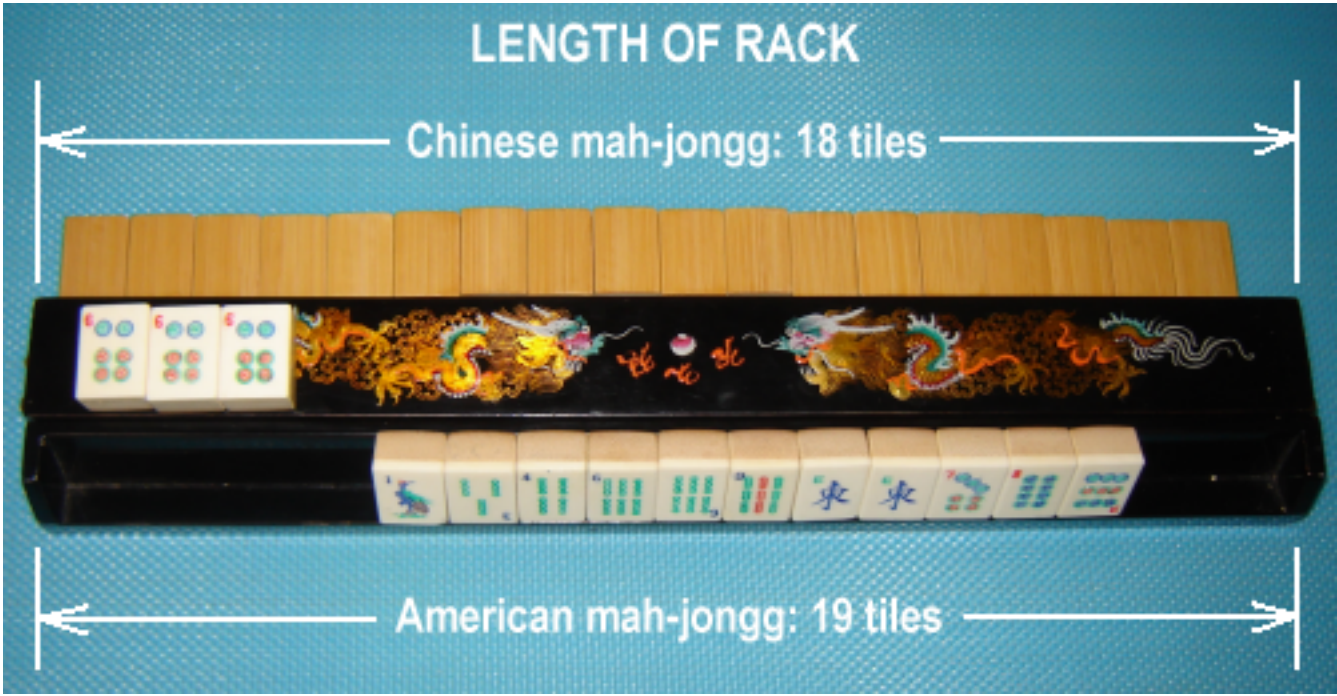
Some things to note about the picture above (from top to bottom):

- 1. (Top) Bakelite rack with chip holder (maroon).
- 2. Modern plastic rack (bright green) with chip holder and a transparent "Helping Hand" for swinging out the wall without having to cover one's racked tiles. The helping hand was designed by Lois Madow, president of [the AMJA](#).
- 3. Older burgundy-colored wooden rack with metal end piece (permitting sliding tiles to the left without them falling off the rack). Note that this rack has no top shelf.
- 4. Old green wooden rack with top shelf but no end piece.
- 5. (Bottom) Underside of wooden rack, showing scoring table. (For scoring in the complicated classical manner, before the invention of the American game.)

One thing to watch out for when buying racks. Tile sizes vary - rack sizes vary. See the cross-section diagram below.



- 1. The back of the rack should be at least as high as the thickness of two of your tiles.
- 2. The horizontal top surface of the rack should be at least as wide as the longest dimension of one of your tiles. You can see in example B what can happen when the back is too short and the top is not wide enough.
- 3. The length of the rack is another matter. It's unlikely that you'll find racks as long as the width of 19 of your tiles (most rack makers make them 18 tiles long). It's normal for American players to have to make the wall one tile longer than the rack (or make a separate "tail"). Don't worry too much about the rack length, unless you plan to make your own racks.



Many older American-style sets came with five racks. The reason for the 5th rack is simple - so 5 people could play. Now I suppose you're saying to yourself, "why would 5 racks be needed for 5 players?" And the answer to



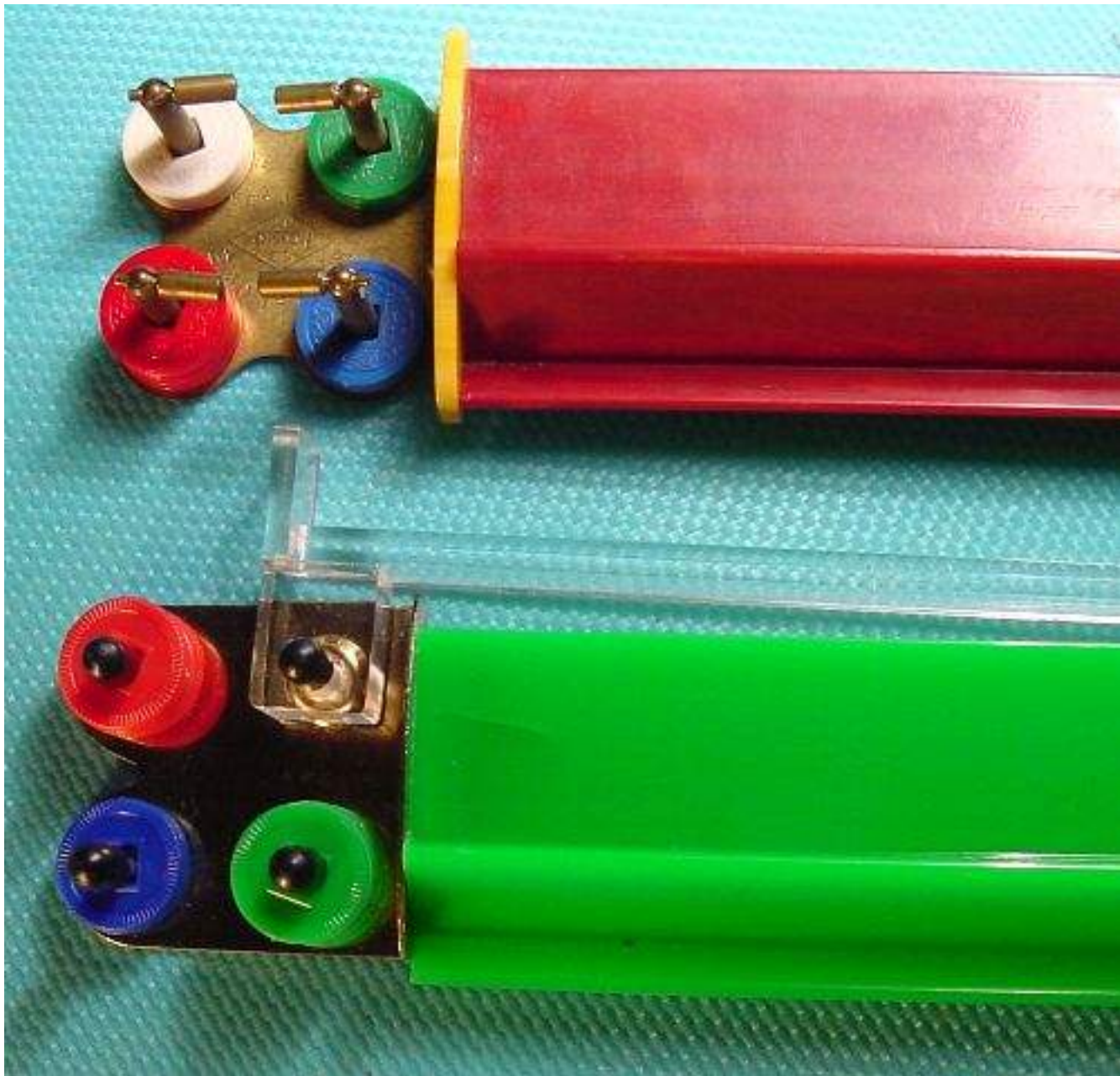
that is, "they aren't. Any more."

So I can hear your next question, so I'll answer that too. "Because Americans used to use the chips."

Folks used to keep score with the chips, which were stored on the end of the rack. So when you got up from the table temporarily to let another person sit in your seat, naturally you'd have needed to take your chips (thus your rack) with you.

Now that most people have dispensed with the chips (and just exchange coins instead, cutting out the middle step), people ask why five racks.

And now you know.



Closeup of the chip holders. The rack at the top of the picture has the bend-over type of chip pole. The rack at the bottom has the type of chip pole that requires a rubber cap to keep the chips from falling off. Also note how the "Helping Hand" fits over the upper right pole. Below: a rack with a cup for holding chips.





Racks are not to be confused with "trays." Trays (above) are used to contain tiles so they don't rattle around loose in the case.

## RULERS

Some Chinese players use rulers to make straight walls and keep the hand tiles neatly lined up. Rulers come in two sizes, regular and large. If you use the large Hong Kong type of tiles, you need the large ruler - otherwise the regular ruler is right for you. If you play American mah-jongg and want to use them as "pushers," the regular size is probably right (I don't know, I've never tried using rulers as "pushers" since I have "helping hands" as shown above).



A set of rulers has three of one color and the fourth of an alternate color. The specially-colored ruler is used to denote the dealer, or sometimes the "original east" player.

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## DICE

Sets may come with two or three or even more dice. In my opinion, the dice that usually come with sets are too small. I like to substitute larger dice (like the ones you can buy at Las Vegas casinos).



From left to right:

- Tiny bone dice from an antique set. These often came in a little wooden box with sliding top. Note that the side of the die marked "1" has no paint -- it's instead just an indentation. And the "4" is red.
- Three red dice from a bakelite set (probably circa 1950s or 1960s).
- Three dice from a modern Chinese-made plastic set. Again note how the "4" is red -- and nowadays the "1" has a big red dot. This is pretty typical for mah-jongg dice.

John Low related a story to explain why some Chinese dice have a red 4 on them (Nov. 25, 2005):

Also, the popular reason as to why "4" on Chinese dice is red, is because one of the Kings during the Tang Dynasty (618-907AD) was playing a gambling dice game with someone. And the King rolled 6 dice, requiring exactly 2 of them to be "4" in order to win big money. And it did occur, and the King was very happy, so he decreed that all of the 4's be painted red representing good luck.

Ironically, this conflicts with ordinary Chinese and Japanese thinking that the number "4" is bad because it sounds like "si/shi" which can mean "Death".

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## YAKITORI MARKERS

I lied when I said I was just going to discuss chips, sticks, wind indicators, racks, and dice. I am such a reprobate. (^\_^)

Players of the modern Japanese game often use yakitori markers. Each player has a marker (thus four are needed), facing up (as seen below). When a player wins a hand, the player "flips his chicken." At the end



of the game if someone still has his skewered chicken facing up, that player must pay a penalty to the other players. Some players use an optional "phoenix" rule, which decrees that when everybody's chicken is flipped in the first round, they all turn face up again.



The orange markers on the left are less expensive than the ivory-colored ones on the right. The image depicts a skewered chicken (*yakitori* means "roast bird"), and the writing at the bottom says *ya ki to ri*.

Yakitori markers do not necessarily come with Japanese sets; they can be purchased separately at game shops in Japan. I bought these at Okuno Karuta in Tokyo. [See FAQ 7m](#) for the location of that shop. The orange markers are also available from [the AMJA](#), since I purchased a number of markers from Okuno Karuta on behalf of [the AMJA](#). I have also gotten the orange markers from Hakuinkan Toy Park in Tokyo ([see FAQ 7m](#) for directions). The only place in the U.S. where yakitori markers can be purchased (that I know of) is [the AMJA website](#).

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## DREIDELS

Mah-Jongg has long been popular among Jewish circles here in the U.S. The dreidel is a game implement used in Jewish games. Usually 4-sided, it can be used as a substitute for dice. Sometimes you might come across a dreidel in a used set.



*A "put and take spinner," essentially a type of 6-sided dreidel, with English words.*

*Photo courtesy Sidney Stetson. Thanks to Pwee Keng Ho for information about put and take spinners.*

Dreidels are normally used for a game played during Hanukkah. Players begin with a number of tokens, and each player antes before a spin of the dreidel. Players either take tokens or put in tokens depending on what the dreidel says.

- SHIN - Player must put in a token.
- HEY - Player wins half the tokens.
- GIMEL - Player wins *all* the tokens in the pot.
- NUN - Player doesn't get any tokens.\*

Mah-Jongg sets don't come with dreidels, but a previous Jewish owner of the set might have put it in there. If your set has a dreidel and no dice, and you don't want to bother figuring out how to substitute the dreidel for the dice, then you can just get dice at the drugstore (right there next to the playing cards).

\* *If you need a guide to the Hebrew alphabet or would like more information about the dreidel game, [click here](#) to learn about how easy it is to find any kind of information on the internet.*

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Got a question about mah-jongg bits & pieces that is not addressed above? [Ask Tom](#)! The answer will be posted on [the Mah-Jongg Q&A Bulletin Board](#) - like the following...

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### *Which type of case should I get?*

>From: "dptaubenslag  
>Sent: Wednesday, December 10, 2014 4:39 PM  
>Subject: Mah-Jongg Q+A  
>My mah-jongg question or comment is:  
>I am purchasing my first Mah-Jongg set. I have decided on my choices for tiles and all-in-one racks but I am not sure what case to choose. I can select a hard silver aluminum case ( not with wheels and handle, do not want those options ) or a soft canvas type case with sleeves and zipper storage inside. Not sure which is more functional? Weight of case not an issue.  
>Please give me your opinion and/ or reasoning in regard to each.  
>Thank you,  
>Regards,  
>Patty



Hi, Patty. I personally would absolutely never buy a soft case. I understand why some people might prefer that (see "Pro" below), but to me there's a huge "Con." Here are the pros and cons of the soft case:

CON: In a soft case, the tiles will eventually get scuffed from rubbing and banging against each other willy-nilly in the big "duffel o'tiles."

PRO: With a soft case, there's no laborious process of having to place the tiles back in orderly trays after playing with them. Only a neat freak (like Tom Sloper) would want to go to all that trouble! Just throw everything in the bag, zip it up, and off you go like Waltzing Matilda.

Great question, Patty. I'll add this to FAQ 7-D.

May the tiles be with you.

Tom Sloper

トム・スローパー

湯姆 斯洛珀

Creator of [the weekly Mah-Jongg column](#) and the [Mah-Jongg FAQs](#) -- [donations appreciated](#).

Author of "[The Red Dragon & The West Wind](#)," the definitive book on Mah-Jongg [East](#) & [West](#).

Los Angeles, California, USA



### *Which type of case, part 3*

>From: Catherine H

>Sent: Wednesday, December 10, 2014 7:12 PM

>Subject: Hard case vs. soft bag perspective

>Hello Tom... I hope you don't mind that I add my thoughts to the Patty's question about types of cases. When I bought my first set, I got the hard aluminum case because I wasn't aware of other options being a total newbie. I found it quite heavy and bulky to carry. For my second set a couple of months later, I got the soft velour bag with the wraps and TRAYs from Amazon. I have since bought two more sets of tiles and an additional velour bag with wraps and more trays.

>

>Since getting the soft bags, I have not even opened the hard case set. For me as a small-framed female with slight joint issues, the hard case puts too much strain on my elbow and wrist since all the weight is concentrated through the arm. The soft bags have shoulder straps which is so much more comfortable to carry since the weight is more evenly distributed. I recommend this same set up to all my friends looking for a set for this reason.

>

>I also am a neat-freak (engineer, what can I say?) when it comes to my MJ sets and always put the tiles back into their trays and secure them in the wraps. I would never throw my precious tiles willy-nilly into a bag!

>Just offering a female perspective... no Waltzing Matilda here! LOL

>Catherine H



Hi Catherine,

Of course I'm delighted to have other opinions. So there are trays that work in a bag, because they're not open-top? Or they fit tightly into some kind of wraps, you say? Having trays in a lightweight carrier with shoulder straps does indeed sound like a best-of-both-worlds kind of situation.

May the tiles be with you.

Tom Sloper

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Los Angeles, California, USA

December 10, 2014

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