

FAQ 7a. Different Types of Mah-Jongg Sets

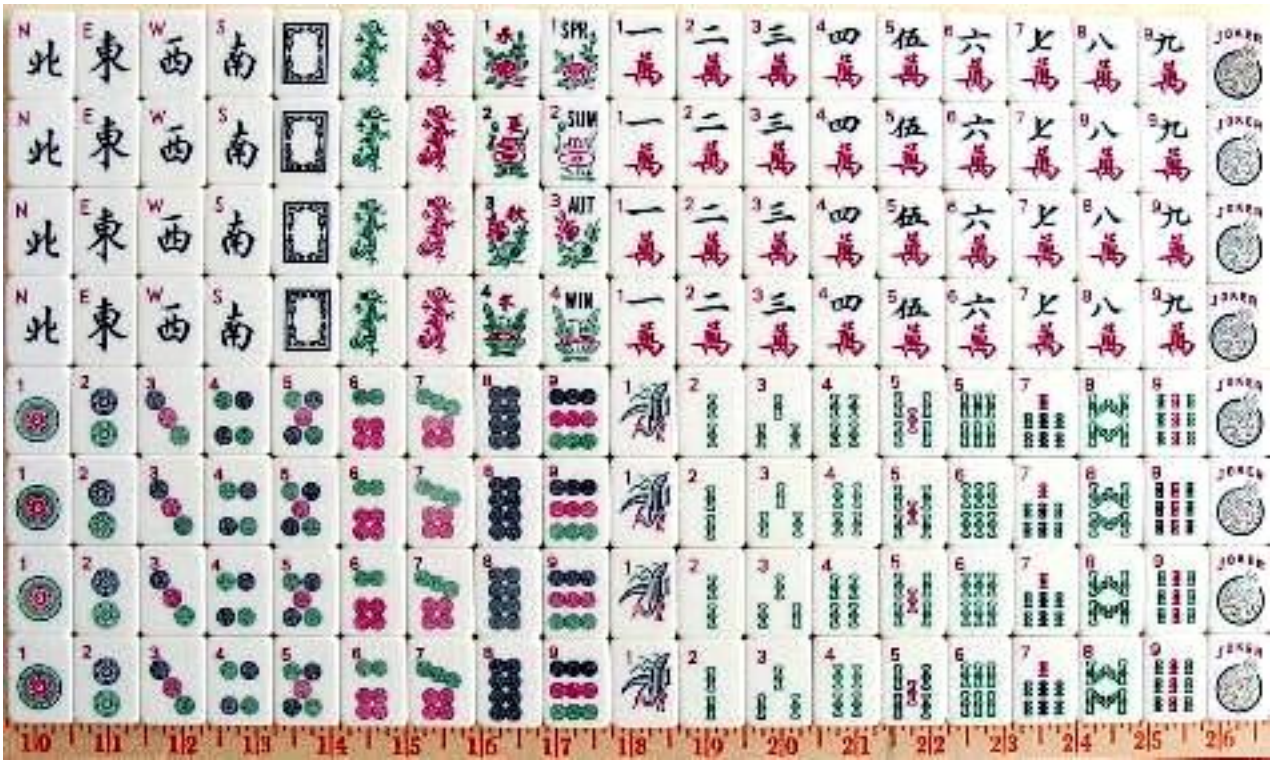
Different types of mah-jongg sets are suitable for different types of mah-jongg. You must make sure that you get the type of set that's suitable for the type of mah-jongg that you play! One of the single most important characteristics of a set is the number of tiles in it. It's not hard to count or calculate the tiles, especially when the tiles are packaged in neat even rows.

If you are interested in buying a Mah-Jongg set (either to play the game of Mah-Jongg or to play the tile-matching game of Shanghai), there are many places to shop. You should base your selection on:

- (1) the type of Mah-Jongg you wish to play (how many tiles does your game require, and does your game require any special mah-jongg tiles);
- (2) whether or not you can read the Chinese characters of the Craks suit without Western indices (Arabic numerals and Roman letters);
- (3) what looks and feels nice to you.

If you buy a beautiful set but can't use it to play, well, the set is useless for you! Somebody else may well be able to enjoy the set, but you should get a different type of set. You need to make sure you know what you need and want. This FAQ is designed to help you with that. Different sets are comprised of different numbers of tiles, and may or may not come with specific special tiles. Let's take a look at a few representative set types.

The picture below shows the tiles of a typical **modern American** set.



Please examine the picture and observe the following:

- There are 152 tiles. (Note how I laid out the tiles for the photo - 8 rows. There are 19 tiles in a row. $19 \times 8 = 152$! See, it's easy to calculate the tile count.)
- All of the suit tiles, flowers, winds, and jokers are marked with Roman letters (the letters of the English alphabet) and Arabic numerals (the kind of numbers used in the Western world).
- The red and green dragon tiles depict dragons. The white dragon uses a rectangular design (it's not blank).
- Eight of the tiles are Jokers.
- The One Bams of this set depict cranes. (The bird varies from set to set.)

When you buy an American set, it usually comes in a long case as shown below:



American sets come with four or five **racks**, two or more **dice**, and some type of **wind indicator**. American players need **a card** (shown: the 2001 NMJL card). Often these sets contain extra tiles (extra flowers, jokers, and/or blanks), and colored **chips** (circular chips with a square hole, reminiscent of old Chinese coins). *For more information about those "bits and pieces", [see FAQ 7d](#). For information about the NMJL card, [see FAQ 7i](#).* American-style sets are more expensive than Asian-style sets, due to the inclusion of extra tiles and extra accessories. A new American-style set can cost from \$80 to \$120 (and even more, for special sets of higher-quality materials). **NOTE: If you buy an American set, you can use it to play Chinese mah-jongg as well (there are more than the required number of tiles present). But Chinese sets cannot be used to play American mah-jongg (not enough tiles).** So if you might want to use your set to play American mah-jongg some day, buy an American set and you can't go wrong.

Here's a picture of an older American-style "Mah-Lowe" set, probably from the 1950s or 1960s.



I had assumed these tiles of mine were bakelite, but a radio collector friend of mine says yellow mah-jongg tiles are instead catalin (see [the Plastics FAQ](#) - FAQ 7c3). This set didn't have enough jokers to play the modern American game, but it had extra flowers, so I made joker labels on my computer printer.

This type of set typically goes for from \$90-200 on [Ebay](#) ("enrobed" tiles go for much more).

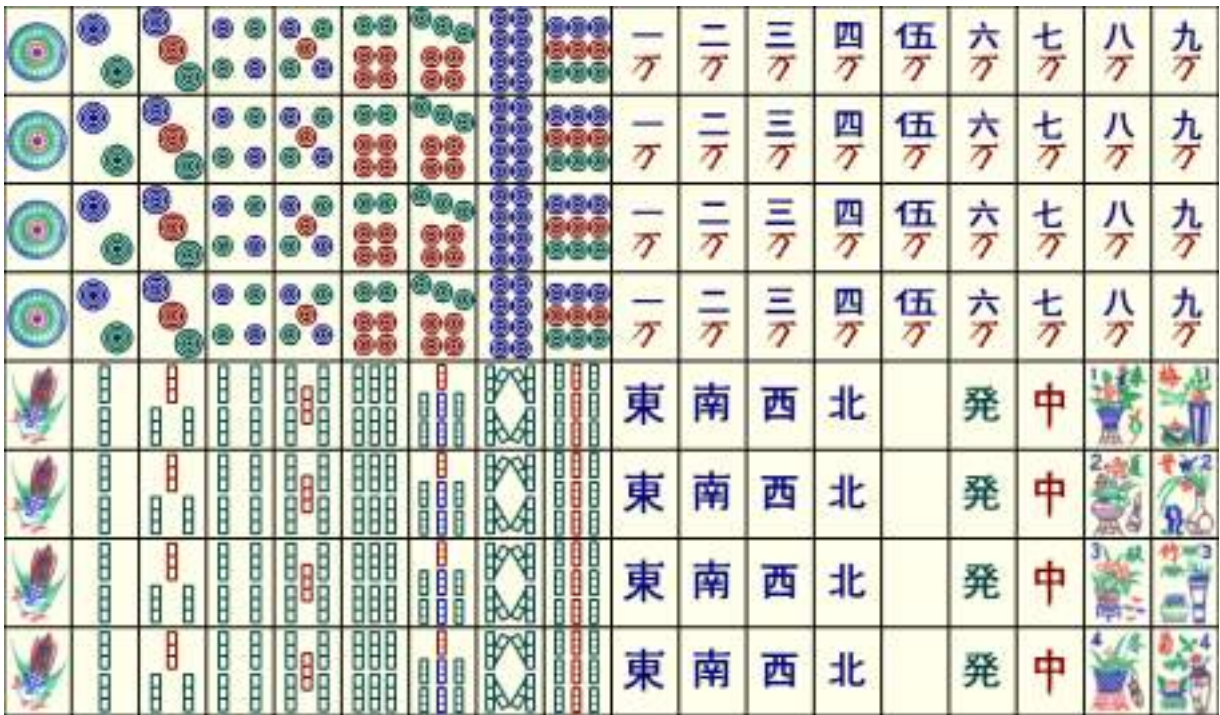


These tiles are light-colored catalin "enrobed" with darker-colored catalin or bakelite.



The backs of some enrobed tiles. Sets with enrobed tiles and [genuine ivory](#) tiles are the two most [valuable](#) types of sets.

The picture below shows the tiles of a typical **Chinese** set.



Notice the following characteristics in this set:

- There are 144 tiles in this particular set - not enough to play the American game. (Note how I laid out the tiles for this photo. 8 rows; 8 rows of 18 tiles. 18x4=144)
- There are NO Roman letters or Arabic numerals (the set is marked in Chinese only; American players would not be able to read the winds or craks).
- The red and green dragon tiles are marked with Chinese characters, not pictures of dragons; in this set the white dragons are blank.
- Note that the Craks of this set use a simplified Chinese character at the bottom.
- The One Bams depict a bird. (The bird varies from set to set, from manufacturer to manufacturer.)

Modern Chinese sets often come in cloth-covered cardboard cases or cheap vinyl cases, and are often fairly inexpensive; maybe around \$50.

Another typical sort of Chinese set which is widely available is **the 1920s set**. The tiles below are from a cowbone-and-bamboo set from the 1920s.



Boxed bone and bamboo Chinese sets, like the one below, were all the rage worldwide in the Roaring Twenties.



For a short description of the typical 1920s boxed set of bone and bamboo tiles, see [Column 610](#).

Note the characteristics typical of many 1920s sets:

- There are 148 tiles (not enough to play the *modern* American game). (Note how I laid out the tiles for this photo, in 8 rows. $18 \times 8 = 144$, $+4 = 148$.)
- There are Roman letters or Arabic numerals (many sets like this were made for export to the West).
- The red and green dragon tiles are marked with **different** Chinese characters than those that are used in modern Asian sets; four of the blank tiles are to be used as white dragons (there are no tiles marked with a rectangle in these sets), and there are four extra blanks.
- This set has 8 Flower tiles (this particular set has 4 Seasons and 4 "Game" tiles).
- To the right of the flowers note the simplified Crak character, typical of 1920s sets. Compare the craks in this set with those in the modern American and modern Japanese sets pictured above.
- Check out the beautiful peacock on the One Bam tiles.
- This set has straight-line Bam tiles. Some 1920s sets have bamboo *leaves* instead of sticks.
- Note the One Dot tiles -- each tile has a different Chinese character in the center.
- Some 1920s sets' Eight Dot tiles were in red instead of blue. Like this one.
- For more pictures of 1920s mah-jongg sets, see [FAQ 11](#).

1920s sets are available every day on [Ebay](#). Depending on condition and completeness (and quality of presentation), an 1920s set might go for \$80 or as much as \$600 (see [FAQ 7h](#)).

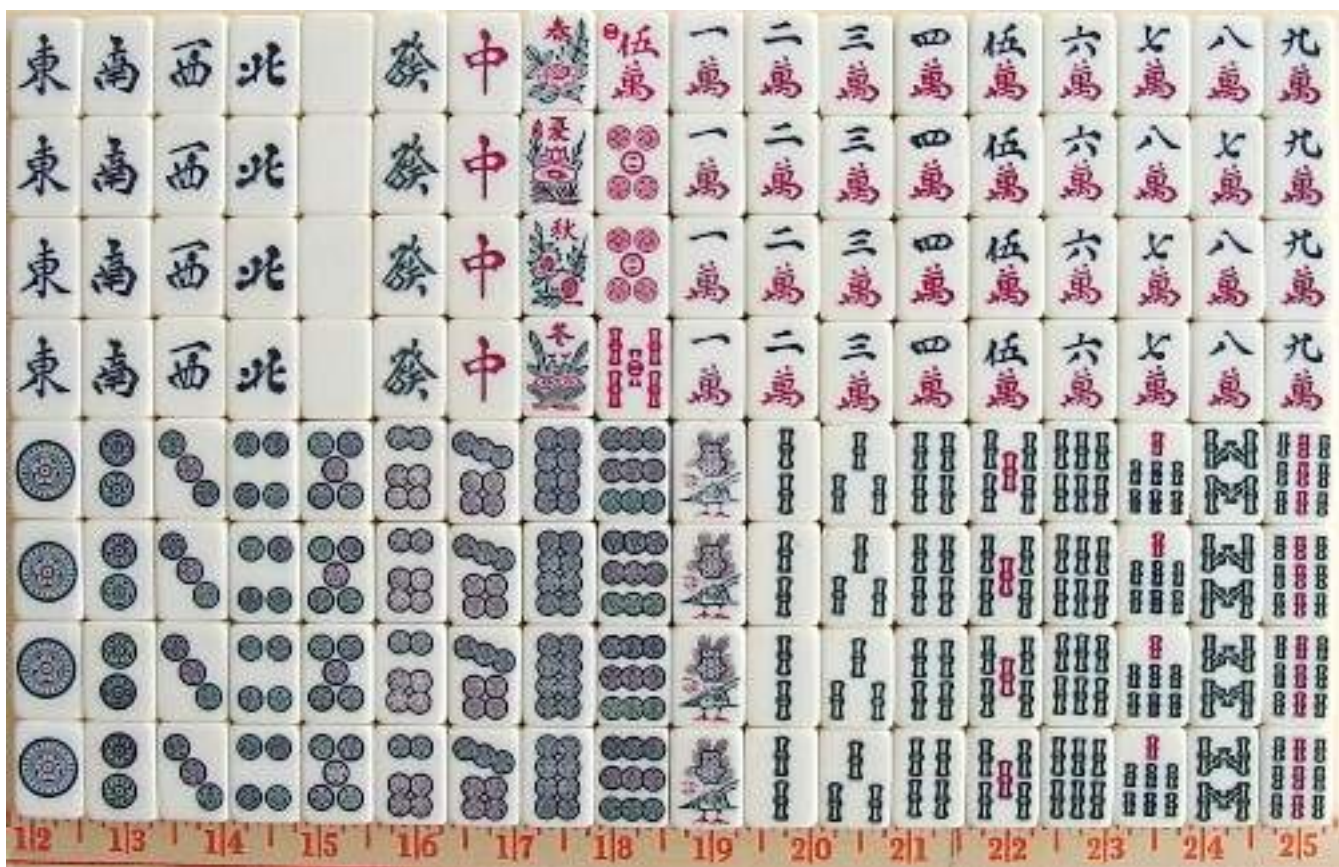
Here's a **HONG KONG** mah-jongg set:



Hong Kong sets usually are very heavy. The tiles are very large. This set comes with poker chips, 3 dice, a cubical wind indicator in holder, no Western indices on the tiles, and a cheap vinyl case. Playing with this set is an experience! Sets like this (sometimes with Western indices) are often available on [eBay](#). (Also, note how the set is packaged, with tiles laid out flat in 4 trays. Each tray is 4 rows of 9 tiles each. $4 \times 9 = 36$, $4 \times 36 = 144$. It's not hard to count the tiles when you lay them all out in even rows like this. Driving the point home: it's important to know how many tiles are in a set when buying or selling a set.)

These HK sets are the cheapest type of set. Don't pay more than \$40 max!

The picture below shows the tiles of a **modern Japanese** set.

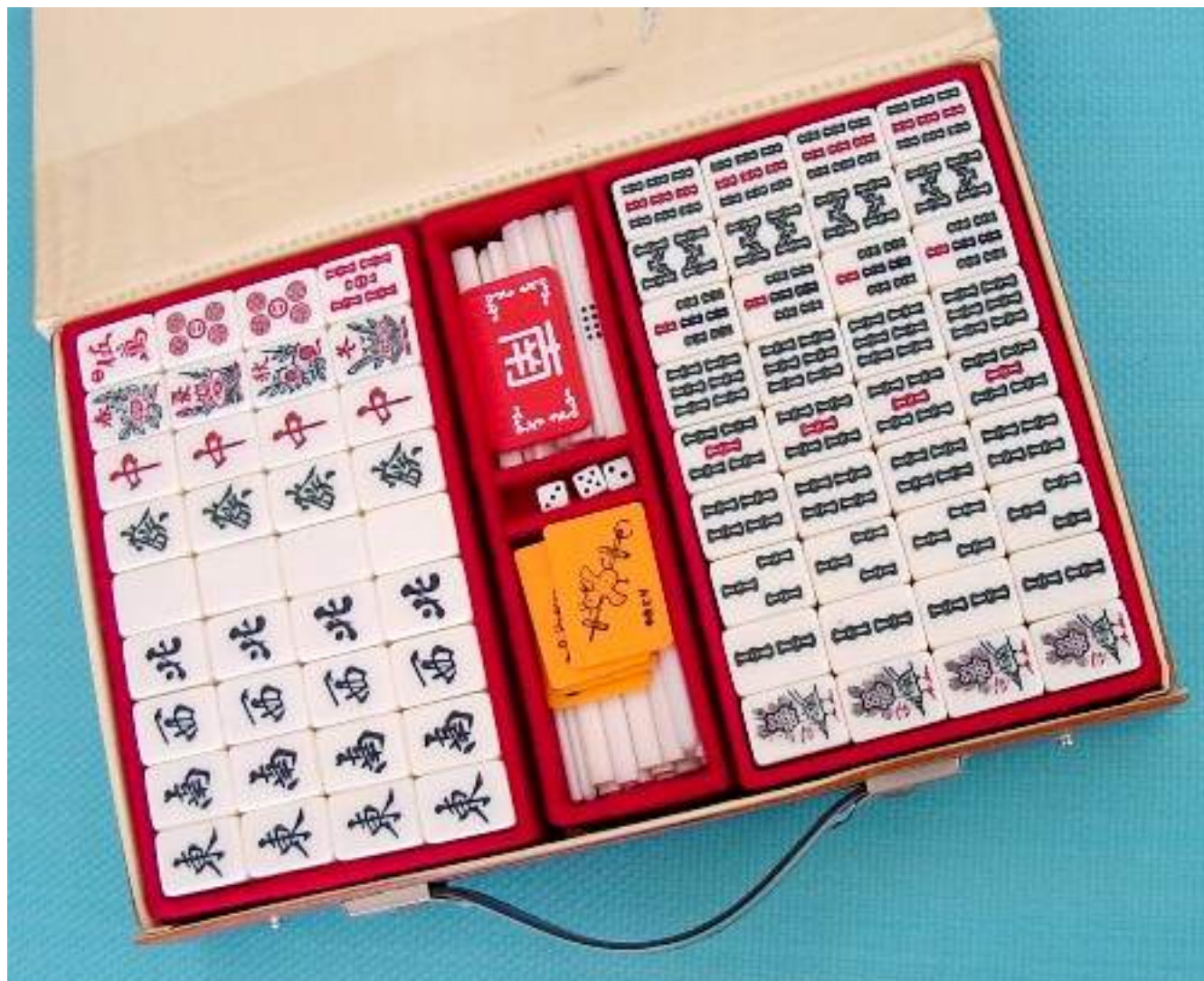


You can easily recognize the modern Japanese set because of these characteristics:

- There are 144 tiles (not enough to play the American game). (Note how I laid out the tiles in 8 rows of 18 tiles each. $18 \times 8 = 144$.)
- There are NO Roman letters or Arabic numerals (the set is marked in Chinese only; American players would not be able to read the winds or craks).
- The red and green dragon tiles are marked with Chinese characters, not pictures of dragons; the Japanese

- use blank tiles as white dragons (there are no tiles marked with a rectangle in these sets).
- This set has only 4 Flower tiles (these are Seasons).
- To the right of the flowers (to the left of the craks) there are 4 *Red Fives*. The red fives of this particular set are marked with the emblem of the manufacturer, to aid color-blind players in seeing that these are special tiles.
- Check out the stylized bird in the One Bam tiles.
- The One Dot tile (and most of the dots) contain a five-petaled design within the dot. My guess is that this is to represent the plum blossom, which was the imperial emblem of an emperor or shogun of Japanese history.

Japanese sets come in a small case with **dice**, a 2-sided **wind indicator** (seen here in red), and counting **sticks**. I have also purchased and added four **yakitori markers** (seen here in orange; these can be purchased from [the AMJA](#), since I purchased a number of these for the AMJA when I went on a trip to Japan). No racks (only Westerners seem to need racks). *For more information about those "bits and pieces", [see FAQ 7d](#).* Japanese sets are typically quite expensive (around \$110-120).



You can also find very beautiful black sets like this one:



Pictured above: a **Rummikub** set. NOT a mahjong set at all. The one pictured is probably incomplete. The only reason you might come here and ask me what such a thing is is because its rules sheet has been lost. You can get the rules for Rummikub at PressmanGames.com and at pagat.com (pagat.com being the most comprehensive resource for rules for card games - and Rummikub being essentially a card game with stiff thick cards). *Photo courtesy Colleen Paradis, July 31 2006.*



From left to right: Japanese, American, Hong Kong, and Vietnamese tiles.

TILE SIZES:

Here are the dimensions of **typical American tiles** (this is also the size of most tiles used in England and Europe today):

- H = 3cm (1-5/32")
- W = 2.1 to 2.2cm (29/32" to 7/8")
- D = 1.3 to 1.4cm (15/32" to 17/32")

Here are the dimensions of **typical Japanese tiles**:

- H = 2.5cm (1")
- W = 1.8cm (23/32")
- D = 1.6cm (19/32")

Here are the dimensions of **typical Hong Kong tiles**:

- H = 3.7cm (1-7/16")
- W = 2.8cm (1-3/32")
- D = 2.2cm (7/8")

Here are the dimensions of **typical Vietnamese tiles**:

- H = 3.6cm (1-7/16")
- W = 2.7cm (1-3/32")
- D = 2.3cm (29/32")

Bone and bamboo tiles can vary in size:

- H = 2.4 to 2.9cm (15/16" to 1-5/32")
- W = 1.75 to 2.2cm (3/4" to 7/8")
- D = 1.1 to 1.2cm (15/32" to 1/2")

And smaller bone and bamboo tiles are also not uncommon (usually made for use as "travel sets").

Tiles come in other sizes too. The Chinese are becoming increasingly fond of big tiles; American and European tiles are medium-sized; the Japanese prefer smaller thicker tiles. On a 2007 visit to San Francisco's Chinatown, in neighboring shops Kwong Sang Lung Co. and Kwong Sang Tong Co. (at 947 and 941 Grant Street respectively), I observed some sets being marked with size numbers.



This shop carried sets marked as sizes 9, 8, 7½, 7, and 小. I wasn't able to get exact measurements, and for all I know this is just one manufacturer's sizing system, but perhaps this will help:

- 9 - This corresponds roughly to Vietnamese size (above).
- 8 - Typical Hong Kong size (see above).
- 7½ - Medium large.
- 7 - Roughly corresponds to the size of typical American tiles.
- 小 ("small") - Roughly corresponds to the size of Japanese tiles, but not as thick.

The shop also sold a variety of even smaller tiles, but those were not marked with size numbers.

TABLE SETUPS:

American players often ask me "how do Chinese players play without racks and cards?". Players of any of the many un-American varieties of mah-jongg often ask me, when they see the racks and cards, "what on earth are those things?"

Let's briefly look at a few of the many flavors of mah-jongg, from the eyes of someone who is familiar with a different flavor.

First, here's how the Japanese might set up a game, if playing on a regular card table:



American players, observing this Japanese table setup, would probably remark on these unusual features:

- They don't use racks! (*They stand the tiles on end!*)
- There aren't any cards! (*How on earth can they know what this year's hands are?*)
- They place their discards in orderly rows! (*Everybody will know what you've discarded!*)
- The wall is only 17 stacks long! (*What? No jokers? No flowers?*)
- Look at that funny blank tile! (*Where is the white dragon?*)
- What on earth? That player has exposed a run of three numeric tiles in a row! (*You'd think they were playing Rummy or something!*)

For pictures of Japanese dealing machines (the special mechanical table normally used by Japanese players), [visit my "Mah-Jongg Friends" page.](#)

Now let's take a look at a typical American table setup:



Japanese players, seeing such an American table setup for the first time, would note these unusual features:

- Look at those ungainly rack things!
- What are those colored disks on the metal pegs on the ends of those rack things?
- What are those cards each player has?
- Look how they just throw the discards randomly! (*How will you remember what each person has discarded?*)
- The wall is 19 stacks long! (*There must be eight extra tiles! I guess it's those flowers and the ones that say "Joker" on them?*)
- Look how they angle a wall right into the middle of the table like that!
- Look at that strange tile with the rectangle on it! (*Where is the White?*)
- Look at those funny tiles with dragon pictures on them! (*Where are the Blue and Center tiles?*)

Chinese players, looking at an American table setup, would note an unusual feature too:

- Look at that, the winner has exposed four flowers -- but there are only ten tiles in the hand! (*It must be a mistake!*)

Finally, let's look at one type of Chinese table setup:



Note these unusual features:

- These players don't stack the tiles in the wall, but instead lie them side by side!
- Look how they put a disk on the back end of the wall!

The point: People who play one type of mah-jongg find the practices of players of other types of mah-jongg to be strange and inscrutable.

- *"Hentai!"*
- *"Ayah!"*
- *"Oy vey!"*

IN CONCLUSION:

Mah-Jongg sets come in many different configurations:

- With 144 or 148 tiles, or with 152, 160, or 168 tiles ([see FAQ 7b](#)). In Malaysia they even sell 88-tile sets intended to be used by three players.
- Sets made of plastic. Old sets made of bone, bamboo, cardboard, or a variety of types of plastic ([see FAQ 7c](#)).
- Fancy wood boxes with sliding fronts and drawers inside. Nice wood boxes with sliding tops. Faux alligator briefcases with bakelite handles. Cloth-covered cardboard boxes with cigar-box-hinged tops and cheap cloth handles. Naugahyde. Cardboard. Vinyl.
- Sets with racks, sets without racks ([see FAQ 7d](#)).
- With chips or sticks, or without ([see FAQ 7d](#)).
- Sets with 2, 3, or 4 dice.
- Sets with or without instruction booklets. Either way, it doesn't matter, because most instruction booklets are either indecipherable or describe an obsolete way of playing. If you're collecting old sets, you want those to come with a booklet. Otherwise, get a good book ([see FAQ 3](#)).
- Sets with Western indices (Roman letters and Arabic numerals) -- and sets without.
- Small tiles, big tiles, medium-size tiles.
- Sets with or without special tiles like Vietnamese jokers, Japanese red fives, or Singapore "animal" flowers ([see FAQ 7e](#)).
- Cheap poorly made sets without any extras. Well-made, beautiful, expensive sets with lots of extra bits and pieces.

You need to make sure that you get the right kind of set for the kind of mah-jongg that you play.

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