

MAH-JONG

British Rules

Free Sample of Book

containing

- **Introduction**
- **Equipment**
- **Learning the Game by Stages**
- **The Game**
(first page: The Aim of the Game & General Strategy)

Peter Gregory

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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 penalties.

“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 **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.**



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.



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

Learning the Game by Stages

For the newcomer to Mah-Jong, who maybe finds all the rules rather daunting, here is a way of gently easing yourself into the game. A very basic, pared-down version of the game is suggested first, followed by a number of steps which will lead you towards the full game.

Stage 1 - Some basic rules

Mah-Jong is meant to be played by four people. This version works OK with three, but is less satisfactory with two. No scoring is involved.

The aim of the game

The winner is the first player to declare a **Mah-Jong** hand consisting of 4 sets and a pair. Here's an example:



A set can be a **pung** (3 identical tiles) or a **chow** (a run of 3 tiles in the same suit), though only one of these is allowed.

Overview of the game

To get to this winning position you first build a four-sided City wall from the tiles and deal out a portion of these to each player. Players then try to form sets of tiles. Each turn entails:

- Picking a tile from the wall or claiming one discarded by another player
- Discarding an unwanted tile .
...until you finally get a completed hand and cry **Mah-Jong !**

Preparing to play

- Remove the 4 Season tiles and the 4 Flower tiles (also the 4 spare and 4 joker tiles, if present).
- Shuffle the tiles, face down, and build 4 walls, each 17 tiles long and 2 tiles high.
- Move the walls to the centre of the table until their ends meet.
- Each player then throws the dice to find who will deal out the tiles and start the game.
- The player with the highest score breaks the wall in front of him (it does not matter where) and deals out 14 tiles to himself and 13 to each of the other players. The tiles are taken from the break point in a clockwise direction.

Each player then arranges his tiles (in a rack, if there are any) so that only he can see them.

Note that the tile next to the last dealt tile will be the one to be used next in the game. It marks the **start of the live wall**.

Playing the game

Play is started by the dealer discarding one of his tiles. Discarding a tile involves laying it face upwards in the centre of the table and describing it to the others. For example, “*Five of Circles*”.

Normally, the turn then passes to the player on the **right** (moving in an **anti-clockwise** direction). This player can do one of two things:

- Pick up a tile from the start of the live wall and discard it, or another, from his hand.
- Claim the discarded “*Five of Circles*” by calling **chow**, **pung** or **Mah-Jong**.

A **chow** is a run of 3 tiles from the same suit (for example: *Three, Four and Five of Circles*). Only one chow is allowed (and none are allowed if there are fewer than 4 players).

A **pung** is 3 identical tiles (for example: 3 “*Five of Circles*” tiles).

The chow or pung is then laid face upwards on the table in front of the player (exposing it to the other players) and a tile from the hand is normally discarded.

If this player is able to form a winning hand (4 sets and a pair) from this new tile, then he does not make a discard. Instead he calls **Mah-Jong** to announce that he has won the game.

This may involve claiming the “*Five of Circles*” to form a **pair** (rather than a chow or a pung).

However, this next turn could be interrupted by one of the other players claiming the discarded “*Five of Circles*”. This can be done in two ways:

- By calling **pung**.

The player uses the claimed tile to form a set of 3 tiles and exposes it to the others. He then discards an unwanted tile from his hand. The turn then passes to the player on his right. Players between the claimer and the discarder lose a turn.

- By calling **Mah-Jong**.

To do this, the player must be able to form a winning hand from the tiles. The claimed tile thus goes towards making a **pung** or a **pair** of identical tiles.

It’s possible that more than one player may want to claim the same tile. The rules of precedence are as follows:

- A **pung** takes precedence over a **chow**.
- **Mah-Jong** takes precedence over a **chow** or **pung**.
- If more than one player can make **Mah-Jong** with the discarded tile, then the nearest player to the right of the discarder (i.e. going in an anti-clockwise direction) takes precedence.

Any discarded tiles which have not been claimed are dead and play no further part in the game. Play continues in this fashion until someone goes Mah-Jong or all the tiles are used up, in which case it’s a drawn game.

Stage 2 - Introducing the winds and some scoring

The game is changed to introduce the Winds and the correct way to deal out the tiles.

Each player becomes one of the four Winds: North, South, East and West. **East Wind** has special significance and will be the **Prevailing Wind**. See *'Determine the Prevailing Wind'* on page 15.

A limited form of scoring is introduced. This changes the nature of the game. Rather than simply aiming to go Mah-Jong, the goal is to obtain more points than anyone else. It's reckoned over one or more sessions. A session ends when someone goes Mah-Jong or the game is drawn.

These changes are added to the previous rules, replacing some as indicated.

The aim of the game

The winner is the player with the most points after one or more sessions.

Preparing to play

- First, **determine who is to be North, South, East and West Wind**. See page 15.
If there are 3 players they choose from 3 winds, which must include East.
If there are 2 players they choose from West and East winds.
- After moving the four walls to the centre of the table **deal out the tiles**. See page 17.
- Each player is given some paper to record his score. It should show two columns headed "**Paid**" and "**Received**". Some more paper to add up the scores is also useful.

Playing the game

Play is started by East Wind discarding one of his tiles. The game then continues as previously described until someone goes Mah-Jong. There is no scoring if the game is drawn.

Note that an **exposed set** is one that has been punged or chowed and placed on the table for the other players to see. A **concealed set** is one that remains in the hand until the end of the game.

After Mah-Jong has been declared each player places his hand on the table. The tiles of exposed pungs are all set face-up. A concealed pung has the middle tile turned face-down.

Scoring

- First, **work out the basic score for each player** as follows:
See *'Minor Tiles'*, *'Major Tiles'* and *'Honour Tiles'* on page 24.



Chows

No points are scored for chows (exposed or concealed).

Pungs

	Exposed	Concealed
Minor tiles	2 points	4 points
Major tiles	4 points	8 points



Exposed minor pung 2



Concealed minor pung 4



Exposed major pung 4



Concealed major pung 8

Pairs of Honour tiles

2 points are scored for a pair of **Dragons**, for a pair of **East Winds** (the prevailing wind) or for a pair of the **player's own wind**.



A pair of
Dragons



A pair of
East Winds



A pair of the
player's
own wind **S**

For the player who goes Mah-Jong

He receives **20** points. Another **2** points are given if the winning tile was drawn from the wall.

- **Then, double each player's basic score** for each of the following types of honour tile pungs.

Pung of the player's **own Wind**



S

Pung of the **East Wind**



Pung of **Dragons**



So if a player has a basic score of 10 points and gets 2 doubles, his final score is 40 points.

If the player who is East Wind collects a pung of East Winds then that counts as 2 doubles; one because it's the player's own wind and one because it's the prevailing wind.

Doubling could take a player's score over 1,000 points. However, the score awarded is never more than this amount. There is a **limit of 1,000 points** to avoid excessive scores.

- **Finally, settle up by exchanging points.**

The player who goes Mah-Jong is paid first by each player. He should note of the number of points won in the "Received" column and the other players should note their losses in the "Paid" column.

The players who didn't go Mah-Jong then exchange points based on the differences in their scores. When you've stop playing the columns can be summed. *See 'Settling Up' on page 34.*

Next session

If the player who was East Wind declared Mah-Jong, or the game was drawn, then he remains East Wind. If another player declared Mah-Jong, the winds rotate in an **anti-clockwise** fashion so that the player who was South Wind now becomes East Wind.

When there are fewer than four players, East Wind always exists.

Stage 3 - Introducing flowers, seasons, kongs and the kong box

We now start with the full complement of 144 tiles. At this point we can learn how to build the walls correctly and how to determine where a break should be made before the dealing begins.

The Flower and Season tiles are known as **bonus tiles** and give the game its largest element of luck. They can make a significant difference to the score. A kong is a set of 4 identical tiles and scores four times the pung equivalent.

The acquisition of a kong or a bonus tile depletes the number of tiles available to form further sets. This is rectified by taking a tile from the **kong box created at the end of the live wall**.

The aim of the game

The winner is the player with the most points after one or more sessions.

Preparing to play

- Add the 4 Season tiles and the 4 Flower tiles.
- Shuffle the tiles and build the walls. *See pages 15 and 16.*
- Break into one wall and create the kong box. *See page 16.*
- Deal out the tiles.
- Select out any Flower or Season tiles. *See page 17.*

Playing the game

Kongs and bonus tiles introduce some complications to the play, but bring us much closer to the full form of the game. For an explanation of these rules see the appropriate pages.

- Collecting sets. *See page 18.*
- Obtaining a new tile. Claiming the discarded tile. *See page 18.*
- Flower and Season tiles. Concealed sets. *See page 19.*
Converting a pung to a kong. One for Mah-Jong. Robbing the kong
- Finishing the game. *See page 20.*

Scoring

Calculating the basic score now needs to take account of kongs and bonus tiles. They are scored as follows:

Kongs

	Exposed	Concealed
Minor tiles	8 points	16 points
Major tiles	16 points	32 points



Exposed minor kong 8



Concealed minor kong 16



Exposed major kong 16



Concealed major kong 32



Flowers and Seasons

4 points for each flower or season.

There are also some additional doubles.

- Having your **own Flower**
(1 = East Wind, 2 = South Wind, 3 = West Wind, 4 = North Wind)
- Having your **own Season**
(1 = East Wind, 2 = South Wind, 3 = West Wind, 4 = North Wind)



E



- Holding a complete **set of Flowers**
(double twice - includes own Flower double)



W

- Holding a complete **set of Seasons**
(double twice - includes own Season double)



- **Original call** – when a player is fishing after his first discard
(and does not alter his hand)

Stage 4 - Introducing Additional Doubles

There are more doubles available to the player who goes **Mah-Jong**. *See pages 26 and 27.*
These have a strong influence on what a player decides to collect.

It gives a reason, for example, to avoid chows and to try to collect tiles from the same suit.
Aiming for as many doubles as possible is generally a good strategy for achieving a high score.

Stage 5 - Introducing Special Hands

There are a number of special hands which, because they are unusual, score 500 or 1,000 points. Not surprisingly, a lot of luck is required to go out with such a hand. *See pages 28 to 30.*

Some of these special hands do not conform to the 4 sets and a pair but, nevertheless, allow you to declare **Mah-Jong**. Collecting such hands is risky because, if you are not successful, you could end up with a hand which is worth no points.

Doubling doesn't apply to special hands, but it can apply to any additional bonus tiles. *See page 27.*

At this point it may worth looking at some example hands to check that you properly understand how to score Mah-Jong. *See pages 31 to 33.*

Stage 6 - Using Tallies

Using tallies, rather than scoring sheets, adds to the charm of the game. They take a little getting used to as the points markings are somewhat counter intuitive. They do vary as well. You may need to make your own decisions on what each tally is worth. The rules give each player tallies worth a total of 2,000 points. *See page 7.*

Perhaps one criticism of the rules is that the tally points distributed at the start are not many, so that a player who loses heavily could find himself with none left. Introducing some additional tokens (each standing for 1,000 points) gets around this problem.

Stage 7 - Playing the Goulash

There is a special form of the game which is played after a drawn game (where no one has been able to declare **Mah-Jong** and so no scores are made). This is called **the goulash** and involves the use of **Joker tiles**. If there are no Joker tiles in the set then the **Two of Bamboos** tile becomes "wild".

The game starts with three exchanges of unwanted tiles. *See page 21.*

The Game

The Aim of the Game

The aim of the game is **to win the most points**, often represented by the special tokens (called tallies). You can play any number of sessions until you decide to finish. A session consists of:

- **Building** a four-sided City **wall** from the tiles
- **Dealing** out a portion of the tiles to each player
- **Assembling the tiles into sets or a special hand** by:
 - Picking a tile from the wall or claiming one discarded by another player
 - Discarding a tile you no longer want
 - . . . until a completed hand is obtained
 - The first player to do this wins the session and cries **Mah-Jong !**
- **Scoring then exchanging tallies** based on who wins and the sets collected

Example hand

The player who was South Wind went Mah-Jong with the following (exposed) hand.

It scored 544 points and South Wind collected 2.176 points in tallies from the other three players.



Number of people

Four people are needed to play the game, though it can be made to work quite well with three. There are also versions for 2 and 5 people.

General Strategy

Winning is **helped by skill and knowledge** of the game, but there is a **large element of luck**.

The game is made more interesting and exciting if people **aim to achieve a high score** in each session, rather than complete a Mah-Jong as quickly as possible. To this end it is better to collect sets of the high scoring tiles (called Major tiles) and to look for combinations which will double your basic score.

Watching the tiles that other people are discarding and claiming may allow you to determine what they are collecting and so influence your play.

The winner is not necessarily the one who declares Mah-Jong, as payments are also made between the other players based on the value of any sets in their hands.

Go to www.MahJongBritishRules.com/eBook and click on the appropriate download button or follow the guides which explain the complete procedure.

Summary of remainder of book

Variations of Play

Settling Up

Summary of Scoring

