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HOW TO PLAY CHINESE MAHJONG

INTRODUCTION

Mahjong, with its colorful playing pieces and fascinating rituals, is undeniably one of China's favorite pastimes. It is often played by families and friends in marathon sessions that can start in the evening and last until sunrise the next day, and sometimes even beyond. Chinese Mahjong equipment is simpler than its Western counterpart; racks are rarely used, and there are no joker tiles.

There are, however, many regional variations with unique rules and complex scoring methods. Cantonese, Shanghainese, Taiwanese, and Fukienese are just a few of the myriad variations on the basic game. In this manual, we will get you started quickly with simple mahjong rules based on the Cantonese game (the simplest variation), terms in English and Mandarin Chinese, and scoring based on the Chinese Official Rules. We will also provide you with a simple guide to scoring, and we will direct you to books and Web sites that will help you add sophistication and advanced strategy to your game.

Certain rules never change. Chinese Mahjong is always played with four players seated around a table, with one player designated as the dealer for a given round. Tiles are shuffled, dice are cast, and rituals involving seating, allocation, and exchange of tiles begin. The first player to match a hand of (usually) 13 tiles and thus 'call Mahjong' ends the game. Subsequently, tiles are scored, a winner is declared, and chips or money are exchanged.

In playing mahjong, you will constantly have to make strategic decisions. Some decisions will make you want to jump for joy, and some will make you want to take it back. Is it preferable to discard a tile and gain an advantage? Or would it be more prudent to stay with a decent hand? You'll feel the exhilaration of winning a hand as well as regret for not having been bold enough to make a different choice. Like poker, you will learn a lot about your opponents as you play mahjong and adjust your strategy according to their strengths and weaknesses.

IDENTIFY YOUR TILES

Your Chinese mahjong set has 144 tiles. There may be several blank tiles included in case some get lost, but these are not used in playing the game.

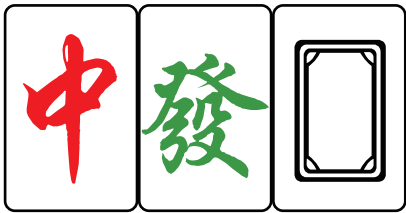
The 144 tiles are divided into four groups with their subgroups:

1. HONORS (28 tiles)

Winds 风牌 fēngpái (16 tiles - 4 of each)

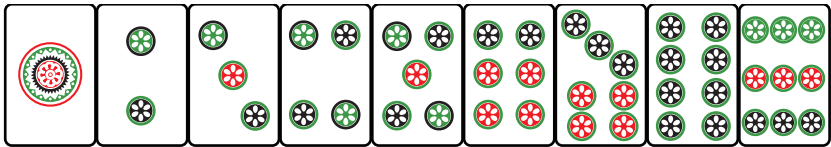


Dragons 三元牌 sānyuánpái (12 tiles - 4 of each)

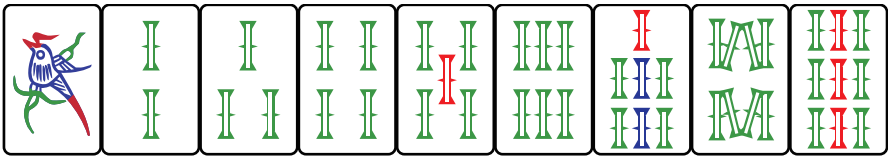


2. SUITS (108 tiles)

Circles or Dots 筒子牌 tongzipái (36 tiles - 4 of each)



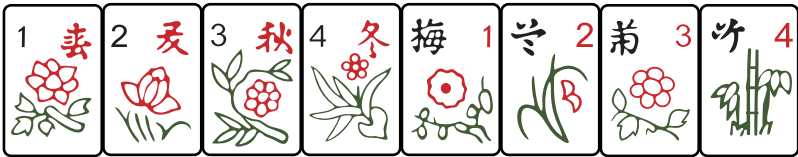
Bamboos or Bams 索子牌 suozipái (36 tiles - 4 of each)



Characters or Craks 万子牌 wànzipái (36 tiles - 4 of each)



3. FLOWER and SEASONS TILES 花牌 huāpái (8 tiles)



Many Chinese players choose to play without flowers and seasons tiles. In this case, it becomes a 136 tile game. And if you're learning the game for the first time, you may want to leave them out too. Flowers and seasons tiles are used as follows:

If a player draws a flower or seasons tile, they must immediately expose it, set it aside, and draw another tile. There are two advantages to having possession of flower and seasons tiles:

- 1. Each flower or season tile is good for an extra point in the final scoring.
- 2. If a player accumulates all eight of the flower and seasons tiles, they then win that round outright.

4. BLANKS

Your set may contain several blank tiles. These are spares in case you misplace other tiles in your set. They are not used in playing the game.

IDENTIFY ALL THE OTHER PLAYING PIECES

1. DICE

Your set will include two or three dice. Dice are used at the beginning of the game for selecting seating arrangements, selecting the dealer, and breaking the walls.

2. INDICATORS

Indicators with the Chinese characters “north”, “south”, “east”, and “west” are used to help the players choose and remember who sits where. Like racks, they are preferred by some players but not mandatory. Indicators may vary from set to set, but there are two basic types:

A. Coin Indicators



B. Spinning Indicators



GET STARTED PLAYING!

Chinese Mahjong can be easily divided into seven stages:

1. Seating Arrangements 方位 fāngwèi
2. Choose the Dealer 打庄 dǎzhuāng
3. Shuffle and Build the Wall 叠牌 diépái
4. Break the Walls 开牌 kāipái
5. Arrange the Tiles 做牌 zuòpái
6. Call Mahjong! 和牌 húpái
7. Scoring 算牌 suànpái
8. Rounds

Most of the variations in mahjong games across China involve Stage 1 (seating arrangement) and Stage 7 (scoring). There are also variations in the number of tiles used to play and rituals involving the exchange of tiles.

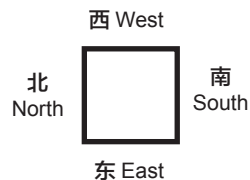
Mahjong is unique in that there are no hard and fast rules for play, and if mahjong players are coming together from different places, they must first agree on the rules. Some say that this is what gives mahjong its special charm.

One important thing to agree on is scoring (more on that later) and whether you will be playing for chips or real money. In either case, everyone starts out with a bankroll. If you're playing with chips, assign point values to each kind of chip and give each player 1000 points to start with. If you're playing for money, each player starts off with \$1 in dimes, \$10 in ones, or whatever you decide.

1. Seating Arrangements 方位 fāngwèi

Seating arrangements are important to Chinese mahjong players for two reasons. First of all, where you sit can mean good or bad feng shui (a system of Chinese geomancy based on compass direction and the placement of household objects). Second, it would be all too easy for two players to cheat by handing each other favorable discards (more on that later), so it's a good idea to make seating arrangements random and changeable. Beginners can skip this stage.

This is what a mahjong seating arrangement looks like:



Note that it's not arranged like a Western map. It's arranged in Chinese style according to the phrase, "east-south-west-north", as it's recited in Chinese.

If you have coin wind indicators, you can choose seating arrangements by having each player pick a coin at random to determine which seat they are in. If no coin indicators are available, you can also choose one of each wind tile, place them face down, shuffle, and each player picks a tile to determine their seat.

2. Choose the Dealer 打庄 dǎzhuāng

The player seated in "East" starts as the dealer. If you skipped step 1 and randomly sat down around the table, then there are a couple of easy ways to determine the "East" seat.

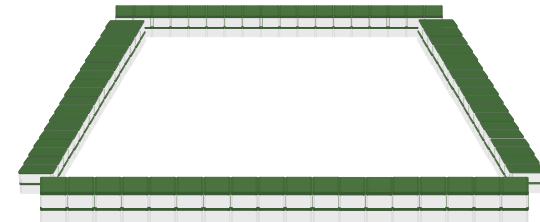
The simple way is for each player to roll the dice in turn. The player with the highest number becomes the dealer and is now "East".

The second, and more traditional Chinese way to do this, is for one chosen player (i.e. the host/hostess) to roll the dice, and then count around the circle in a counter-clockwise direction to the total number on the dice. The last player counted becomes the dealer and is now "East".

3. Shuffle and Build the Walls 叠牌 diépái

All 144 tiles are thrown into the center of the table face down and shuffled as loudly and vigorously as possible.

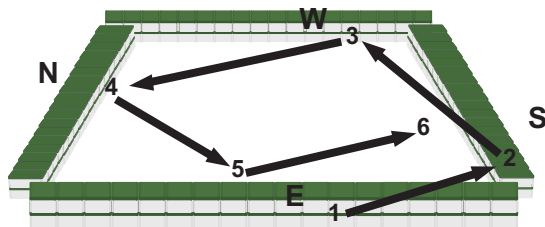
Then, each player builds a wall of tiles 18 tiles long and two tiles high. It will look like the picture below:



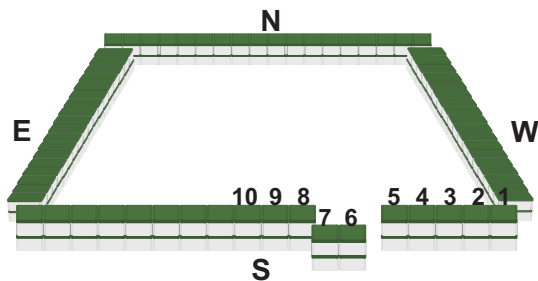
4. Break the Walls 开牌 kāipái

First, to determine which side to start breaking the wall, the dealer (East) rolls the dice and, beginning with himself, counts off players around the table in a counter-clockwise direction until the total of the dice roll is reached. This is the side where the breaking of the wall will begin.

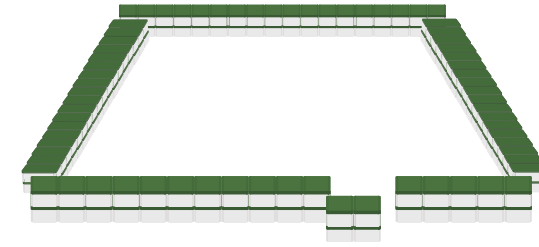
The player sitting on the chosen side for the wall break then rolls the dice and adds the total from their roll and the total from the dealer's roll to determine where to start breaking the wall. Starting from the right side of the chosen player's wall, count off the stack of tiles (right to left) until the total from both dice rolls is reached. The wall is broken at this location, and the dealer takes the next four tiles to the left (two from the top row and two from the bottom row) for himself. The tiles to the right of the break are known as the "Dead Wall", while the tiles to the left are known as the "Live Wall"



Example: If the dealer rolls a 2 and 4, he counts off a total of 6 in a counter-clockwise direction starting from himself. The chosen side will be South.



Example (continued): The South player then rolls a 1 and 3 for a total of 4, which she then adds to the previous dealer roll of 6 for a grand total of 10. 10 stacks of tiles are counted off on the South wall starting from right to left. The dealer then takes the 11th and 12th stacks.



The next player, to the right of the dealer, picks up where the dealer left off and takes the next four tiles (two from the top and two from the bottom) for herself. And continuing in a counter-clockwise direction, the next player takes the next four tiles (two top and two bottom). This process continues until each player has 12 tiles.

Note: Players take turns in a counter-clockwise direction. However, tiles are taken from the wall in a clockwise direction.

Next, the dealer takes an additional two tiles, giving him a total of 14 tiles. Every other player, in turn, takes one tile, giving each other player a total of 13 tiles. There are two ways the dealer can take his two tiles. He can either take two tiles immediately and then every player after him takes their one tile. Or he can take one tile first, every other player takes their one tile, and then the dealer takes his second tile.

Now, if a player should pick a flower or seasons tile, this player places it face up in their corner and takes a replacement tile from the "Dead Wall". The flower and seasons tiles will be used for scoring later.

5. Arranging the Tiles 做牌 zuòpái

Now the strategizing begins. Each player arranges the tiles on his rack in a logical order so he can start to realize his goal of putting together a perfect MAHJONG HAND.

The goal of mahjong: to match your tiles into a winning **MAHJONG HAND** such as a **concealed** or **exposed CHOW**, **PUNG**, or **KONG**.

Note: Start by arranging your tiles with the obvious matches on the left, and the tiles that you'd like to discard on the right. You may change your mind later, but this is a good place to start.

Watch the other players closely as they arrange and discard their tiles, and try to guess what they're trying to do.

CHOW 吃牌 chīpái

A chow is three tiles in a sequence. Example:



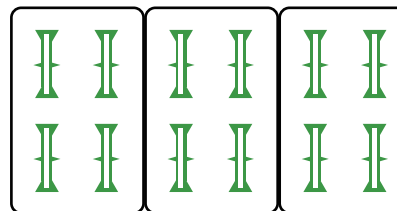
There are two kinds of chows:

1. A **concealed chow** that is secret and drawn from the wall when it's your turn.
2. An **exposed chow** that is gained from a discard by a player whose turn was right before yours. To claim a chow, declare "chow" out loud, claim the previous player's discard, and reveal your new chow sequence for all to see. After your discard, play resumes with the player to your right.

Note: You can only claim chows from the discards of the player to your left.

PUNG 碰牌 pèngpái

A pung is three identical tiles. Example:



There are two kinds of pungs:

1. A **concealed pung** that is secret, and drawn from the wall when it's your turn.
2. An **exposed pung** that is gained from a discard by any player. To claim a pung, declare "pung" out loud before the next person takes her turn, claim the player's discard, and reveal your new pung sequence for all to see. After your discard, play resumes with the player to your right.

Note: You can claim pungs from any player.

KONG 开杠 kāigàng

A kong is four identical tiles, but comes with a few special rules. Example:



A **concealed kong** is secret, and drawn from the wall when it's your turn. At that point, you have a choice: either declare your **kong** to the other players or keep it secret. If you declare it, place the four tiles face down in front of your hand, draw a replacement tile from the "Dead Wall", and then discard a tile to end your turn. Otherwise, you can keep the kong in your hand to give you the flexibility of using three of the tiles as a pung and the remaining tiles as a chow. You can always declare a concealed kong at a later time during your turn after you draw a tile from the wall or a replacement tile.

An **exposed kong** is gained from a discard by any player. To claim a kong, declare 'kong' out loud, claim the discard, and reveal the new kong sequence for all to see. Then draw a replacement tile from the 'Dead Wall' and discard a tile. Play continues to the right with the next player.

Note: You can claim kongs from any player.

Play in Rounds

Play starts with the dealer (East). The dealer ends his turn by discarding a tile face up into the center of the table. Remember, the dealer started with 14 tiles, so now he will be down to 13 tiles, the same as all the other players.

Play continues in a counter-clockwise direction, with South being the next to take a turn. South has the option to either 1) claim the discard from North if it can be used to make a chow, pung, or kong, or 2) draw a tile from the Live Wall.

Note: If either West or North is able to use East's discard to make a pung or kong, she can declare pung/kong and claim the discard. If she declares pung/kong, then she would take her turn (skipping South) by claiming the discard, revealing the pung/kong (drawing a replacement tile from the dead wall if kong was declared), and then discarding a tile. Play would then continue with the player to the right of the player who declared pung/kong.

If no one claims East's discard, then South would take her turn by drawing a tile from the Live Wall, and then discarding a tile face up in the center of the table. Play then continues counter-clockwise around the table to the West, then North, then back to the East again.

This process continues as each player tries to improve her hand, regularly calling out “pung,” “chow,” and “kong.” Caution must be used here: since each tile you discard is seen by the other players, it won't be long before they figure out what kind of hand you are trying to build.

Note: If multiple players want to claim a discard, the discard goes to the player with the highest priority based on the following:

1. Declaring Mahjong (explained in the next section)
2. Pung or Kong
3. Chow

6. Call Mahjong (Winning the Game) 和牌 húpái

A winning hand in Mahjong consists of a combination of 4 sets of chows, pungs, or kongs plus 1 pair.

A player can either draw the winning tile from the wall on their turn, in which case they declare “Mahjong” and reveal her hand. A player can also win off a discard by another player. In this case, the player declares “Mahjong” to claim the discarded tile and then reveals her hand.

Once Mahjong is declared, the game is over and it's time for scoring the winner's hand!

It may also happen that no one has declared Mahjong, but you run out of tiles in the wall. In this case, the current game ends in a draw with no winner.

7. Scoring 算牌 suànpái

There are many ways to score the winner's hand.

One traditional Chinese way goes as follows. The value of the winning player's hand is determined by the number of 'fans' (番 fān) it earns. According to the attached chart, a hand can be worth as little as zero fans for the all-too-easy “chicken hand” (鸡和 jīhé) all the way up to 88 fans for something extraordinary like the once-in-a-lifetime “thirteen orphans” (十三幺 shísānyāo). Also, each flower and season tile adds an extra fan to the winning player's score (or one fan is added if you have none at all).

If Mahjong was declared off a discard from another player, then the one who discarded the winning tile is the only one required to pay the winner. If Mahjong was achieved by self-draw, then all three other participants pay the winner. Payment would be based on the agreed-upon scoring at the beginning of the game. For example, 1 “fan” = 1 chip.

There are many, many variations to the rules of scoring. Scoring is where regional variations and traditions among families and friends come into play. So make up some rules and traditions of your own, have fun, and always be open to new ways to play!

8. Finishing the Game

Once the winner has been paid, you can begin another game. If the dealer won the hand, or there was no winner due to the tiles running out, then the dealer stays the same for the next game. Otherwise, the person to the right of the dealer becomes the new dealer.

A full game of Mahjong consists of 4 rounds (each round being one cycle of East-South-West-North being the dealer), for a minimum of 16 individual games. This number could be much larger if the dealer wins and continues as the dealer for a few games before passing on the deal.

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SCORING EXAMPLES

88 Fans 八十八番

Big Four Winds 大四喜



Big 3 Dragons 大三元



All Green 绿一色



Shifted Pairs 九莲宝灯



Thirteen Orphans 十三么



64 Fans 六十四番

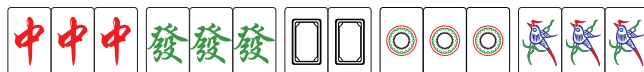
All Terminals 清么九



Little Four Winds 小四喜



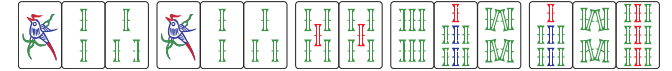
Little 3 Dragons 小三元



All Honors 字一色

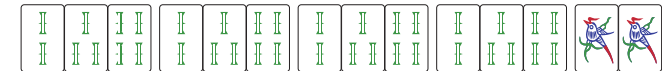


Pure Chows 一色双龙会

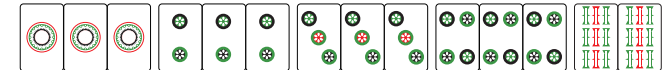


48 Fans 四十八番

Quad Chow 一色四同顺



Four Pungs 一色四节高



32 Fans 三十二番

Four Chows 一色四步高



3 Kongs 三杠

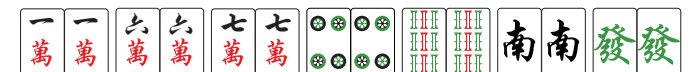


All Honors 混么九



24 Fans 二十四番

Seven Pairs 七对



Greater Honors 七星不靠



Full Flush 清一色



Upper Tiles 全大

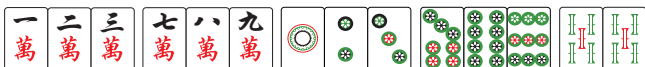


16 Fans 十六番

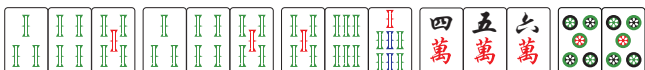
Pure Straight 清龙



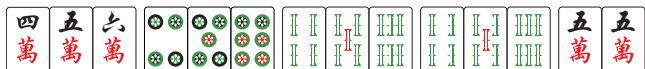
3 Suited Chows 三色双龙会



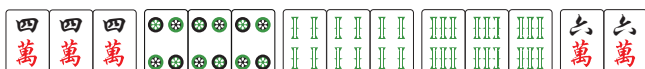
Pure Chows 一色三步高



All Fives 全带五

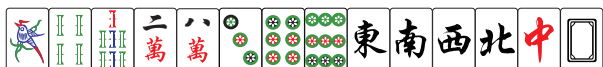


Triple Pung 三同刻

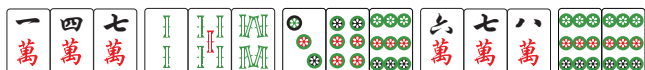


12 Fans 十二番

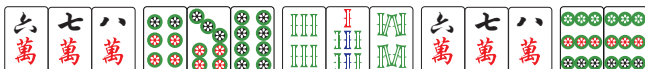
Knitted Straight 全不靠



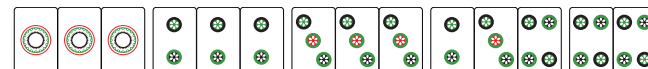
Lesser Honors 组合龙



Upper Four 大于五



Lower Four 小于五



Three Big Winds 三风刻



8 Fans 八番

Mixed Straight 花龙



Reversible Tiles 推不倒



Mixed 3 Chow 三色三同顺

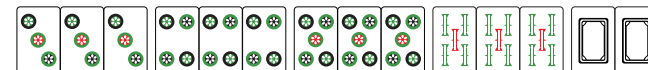


Mixed Pungs 三色三节高



6 Fans 六番

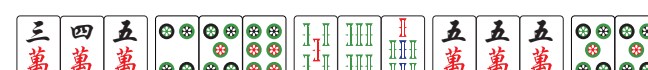
All Pungs 碰碰和



One Type 混一色



Mixed Chows 三色三步高



All Types 五门齐



4 Fans 四番

Outside Hand 全带幺



Two Melded Kongs 双明幺



2 Fans 二番

Dragon Pung 箭刻



Prevalent Wind (table wind) 圈风刻



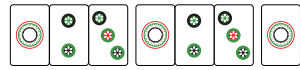
Seat Wind (seat wind) 门风刻



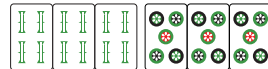
All Chows 平和



Tile Hog 四归一



Two Concealed Pungs 双暗刻



Concealed Kong 暗杠



1Fan 一番

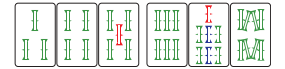
Pure Double Chow 一般高



Mixed Double Chow 喜相逢



Short Straight 连六



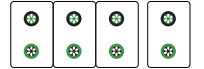
Two Terminal Chows 老少副



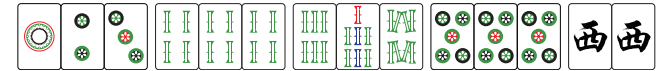
Pung of Terminals 幺九刻



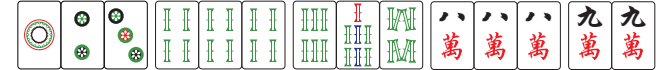
Melded Kong 明杠



One Voided Suit 缺一门



No Honors 无字



Flower Tiles 花牌



0Fan 无番

Chicken Hand 鸡和



Chows, pungs, kongs, and eyes with various (non-consistent) suits. This hand is too easy - avoid it!

RECOMMENDED READING AND RESOURCES

Books

The Book of Mah jong: An Illustrated Guide by Amy Lo, Tuttle Publishing: 2001. ISBN 0-8048-3302-8

This excellent book describes in great detail the Cantonese, Shanghainese, Taiwanese, and 12 Tile game, as well as a primer on strategy.

Mah-Jongg: From Shanghai to Miami Beach by Christina Cavallaro and Anita Luu, Chronicle Books: 2005. ISBN 0-8118-4733-0

Another wonderful and useful book that contains detailed descriptions of both the Chinese and American game, as well as delicious recipes, mahjong history, and mahjong equipment.

Web Sites

Wikipedia.org contains a detailed entry on mahjong, as well as links to other great sites. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahjong>

A detailed website on Mahjong knowledge and lore:

<http://www.sloperama.com/mjfaq.html>

The electronic version of this rule book can also be found at:

<http://www.ymimports.com>

Mahjong Care instructions:

<http://www.sloperama.com/majexchange/cleaning.htm>

<https://www.mahjongnews.com/index.php/columns/176-washuptiles.html>

<http://mahjonggmentor.com/clean-your-mah-jongg-set/>