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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 longer. 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 many variations on the basic game. In this manual, we will get you started quickly with beginner-friendly Cantonese-style rules for gameplay flow, and scoring based on the Chinese Official Rules (MCR fan list). We will also provide a simple guide to scoring and direct you to books and websites that can 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 rolled, and rituals involving seating, allocation, and exchange of tiles begin. The first player to complete a winning hand (typically 14 tiles arranged as four sets and one pair) and call 'Mahjong' ends that hand. 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.

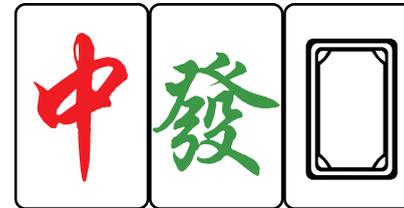
The 144 tiles are divided into four groups with their subgroups:

I. HONORS (28 tiles)

Winds (风牌, fēngpái) (16 tiles - 4 of each)

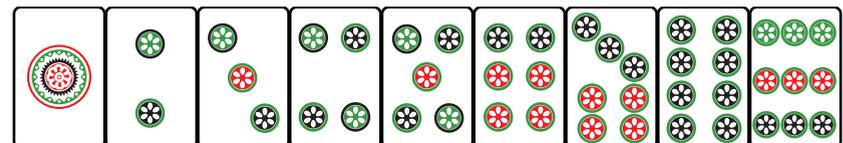


Dragons (三元牌, sānyuánpái) (12 tiles - 4 of each)

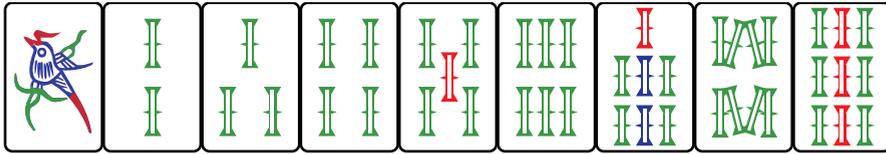


2. SUITS (108 tiles)

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 Flower and Season tiles. In this case, it becomes a 136-tile game. If you're learning the game for the first time, you may want to leave them out too. Flower and Season tiles are used as follows:

If a player draws a Flower or Season tile, they must immediately expose it, set it aside, and draw a replacement tile from the Dead Wall. If this occurs during your turn, draw the replacement tile immediately, then discard one tile as normal. There are two advantages to having Flower and Season tiles:

1. Each Flower or Season tile adds 1 fan to the final score.
2. Some house rules award an immediate win if a player collects all eight Flower/Season tiles. Other groups score them as bonuses instead. Agree on this rule before you begin playing.

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 wall.

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



NORTH



SOUTH



EAST



WEST

B. Spinning Indicators



GET STARTED PLAYING!

Chinese Mahjong can be easily divided into eight stages:

- Seating Arrangements (方位, fāngwèi)
- Choose the Dealer (打庄, dǎzhuāng)
- Shuffle and Build the Walls (叠牌, diépái)
- Break the Wall (开牌, kāipái)
- Arrange the Tiles (做牌, zuòpái)
- Call Mahjong! (和牌, húpái)
- Scoring (算牌, suànpái)
- 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.

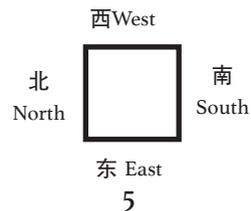
Mahjong is unique in that there are no hard and fast rules for play, and if mahjong players are coming together from different places, they must first agree on the rules. Some say that this is what gives mahjong its special charm.

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.

• 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.

• 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.

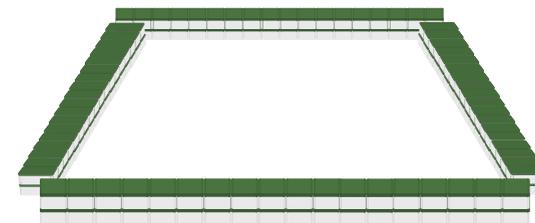
The simple way is for each player to roll the dice in turn. The player with the highest number becomes the dealer and is now "East".

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".

• 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.

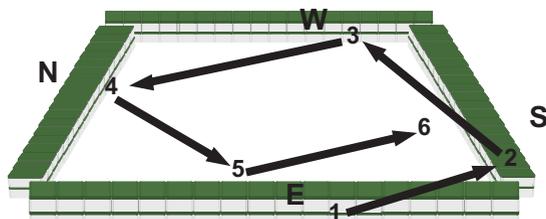
Then, each player builds a wall of tiles 18 tiles long and two tiles high. It will look like the picture below:



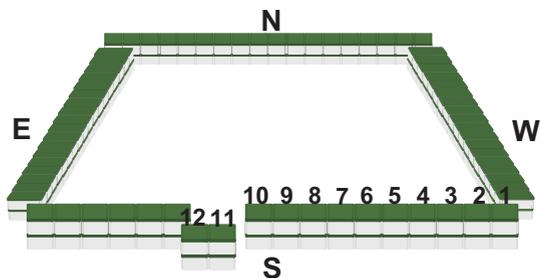
• Break the Wall (开牌, kāipái)

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.

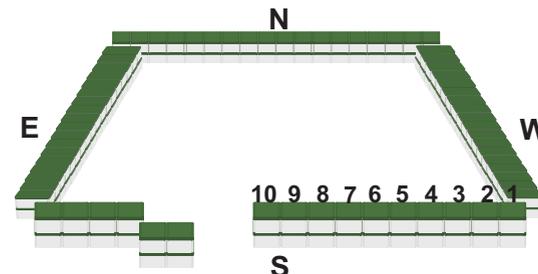
The player sitting on the chosen side for the wall break then rolls the dice and adds the total from their roll and the total from the dealer's roll to determine where to start breaking the wall. Starting from the right side of the chosen player's wall, count off the stack of tiles (right to left) until 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 left of the break are the Live Wall (where players draw tiles). A small reserved section near the break is the Dead Wall (on the right side of the break), used for replacement tiles (for Kongs and Flowers/Seasons). Before starting, agree on how many tiles/stacks form the Dead Wall (a common beginner approach is to reserve 7 stacks / 14 tiles).



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



Example (continued): The South player then rolls a 1 and 3 for a total of 4, which they then add 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.



Continuing counter-clockwise, each player takes sets of four tiles until all players have 12 tiles.

Note: Players take turns counter-clockwise (i.e., to the player on your right, when seated East–South–West–North). Tiles are drawn from the Live Wall starting at the break, continuing along the wall in order.

Next, the dealer takes an additional two tiles, giving them 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 their two tiles. They can either take two tiles immediately and then every player after them takes their one tile. Or they can take one tile first, every other player takes their one tile, and then the dealer takes their second tile. The dealer discards one tile to begin the round.

Now, if a player should pick a Flower or Season tile, this player must immediately expose it, set it aside, and draw a replacement tile from the “Dead Wall”. If this occurs during your turn, draw the replacement tile immediately, then discard one tile as normal. The Flower and Season tiles will be used for scoring later.

• Arranging the Tiles (做牌, zuòpái)

Now the strategizing begins. Each player arranges the tiles in their hand (on a rack, if you use one) in a logical order so they can start to realize their 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:

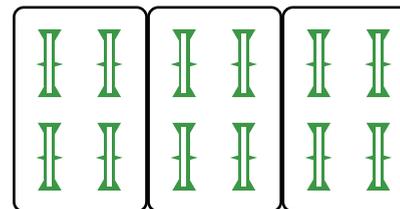


There are two kinds of chows:

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 the most recent discard (the player who just played before you). 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 immediately (before the next player draws or claims the discard), 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 (杠, gàng)



A kong is four identical tiles. When you form a kong, you must declare it and set it in front of you. For a concealed kong, place the four tiles face down as a set. For an exposed (melded) kong, place the four tiles face up. There are three types of kong: concealed, exposed (melded, made from a discard), and added (formed by adding a fourth tile to an already exposed pung).

After declaring any kong, draw one replacement tile from the Dead Wall. Then continue your turn normally and discard one tile. Play continues to the right with the next player.

Note: You may claim an exposed (melded) kong using another player's most recent discard. Concealed and added kongs are made only from your own tiles.

Play in Rounds

Play starts with the dealer (East). The dealer ends their turn by discarding a tile face up into the center of the table. Remember, the dealer started with 14 tiles, so now they 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 may either 1) claim the discard from East if it completes 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, they can declare pung/kong and claim the discard. If they declare pung/kong, then they would take their 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 their 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 their 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

• 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. Some special winning hands (such as Seven Pairs) do not follow this structure—use the scoring chart below if your group allows these hands.

A player can either draw the winning tile from the wall on their turn, in which case they declare “Mahjong” and reveal their hand (a completed 14-

tile 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 their 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.

• 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 minimal-scoring “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). In many Chinese Official (competition-style) rules, a winning hand must reach a minimum fan total (commonly 8 fans) to be valid. If you are playing casually, you may ignore this—just agree before you start. Each flower and season tile adds an extra fan to the winning player's score. (Optional house rule: some groups award 1 fan if you have no flower/season tiles.)

If Mahjong is declared by claiming another player's discard, 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!

• 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 is one full dealer rotation: East, then South, then West, then North), for a minimum of 16 individual games. This number could be much larger if the dealer wins and remains the dealer for multiple games before passing the deal.

SCORING EXAMPLES

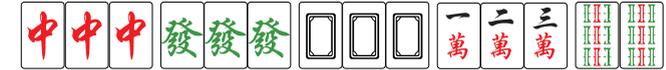
• 88 Fans (八十八番)

Big Four Winds
大四喜



Four pungs or kongs, one of each Wind tile (East, South, West, North)

Big 3 Dragons
大三元



All Green
绿一色



Only uses green tiles: 2, 3, 4, 6, 8 Bams and Green Dragon

Nine Gates
九莲宝灯



Thirteen Orphans
十三幺



• 64 Fans (六十四番)

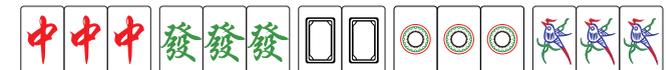
All Terminals
清幺九



Little Four Winds
小四喜



Little 3 Dragons
小三元



All Honors
字一色



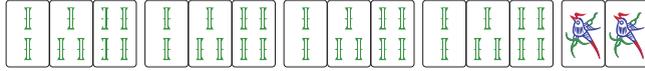
Pure Chows
一色双龙会



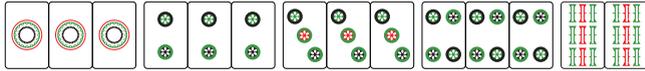
Two terminal chows (123 and 789) in the same suit (each appears twice), plus a pair of 5 in that suit.

• 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

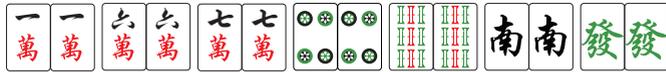


All Terminals and Honors
混幺九



• 24 Fans (二十四番)

Seven Pairs
七对



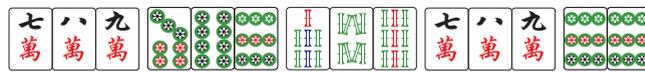
Greater Honors
七星不靠



Full Flush
清一色



Upper Tiles
全大

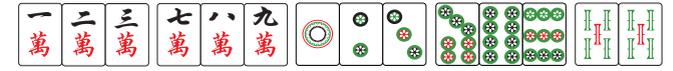


• 16 Fans (十六番)

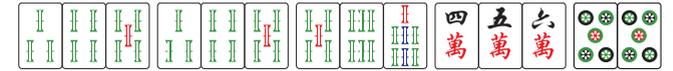
Pure Straight
清龙



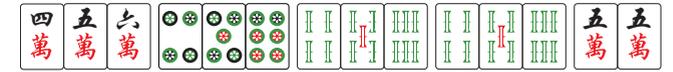
3 Suited Chows
三色双龙会



Pure Shifted Chows
一色三步高



All Fives
全带五

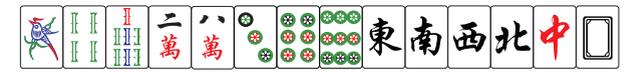


Triple Pung
三同刻

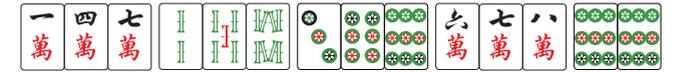


• 12 Fans (十二番)

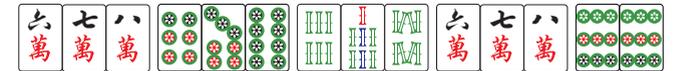
Knitted Straight
全不靠



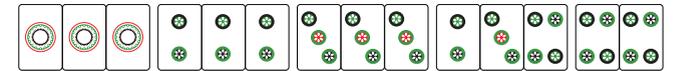
Lesser Honors
组合龙



Upper Four
大于五



Lower Four
小于五



Three Big Winds
三风刻

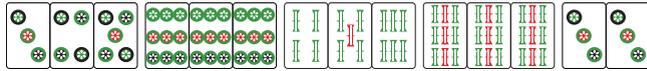


• 8 Fans (八番)

Mixed Straight
花龙



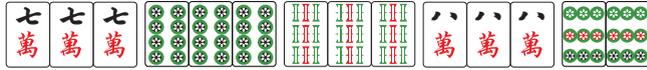
Reversible Tiles
推不倒



Mixed 3 Chow
三色三同顺

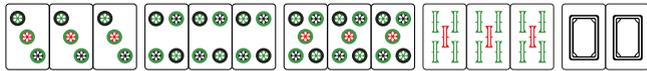


Mixed Pungs
三色三节高



• 6 Fans (六番)

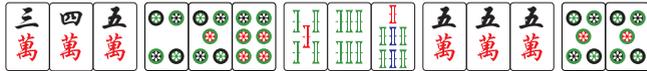
All Pungs
碰碰和



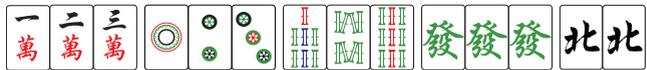
Half Flush
混一色



Mixed Chows
三色三步高



All Types
五门齐



• 4 Fans (四番)

Outside Hand
全带么



Two Melded Kongs
双明杠



• 2 Fans (二番)

Dragon Pung
箭刻



Prevalent Wind (table wind)
圈风刻



Seat Wind (player wind)
门风刻



All Chows
平和

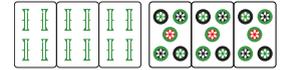


Four sequences and a pair, no honor tiles or terminal tiles

Tile Hog
四归一



Two Concealed Pungs
双暗刻

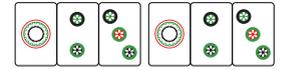


Concealed Kong
暗杠



• 1 Fan (一番)

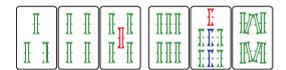
Pure Double Chow
一般高



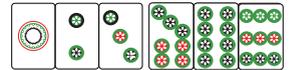
Mixed Double Chow
喜相逢



Short Straight
连六



Two Terminal Chows
老少副



Pung of Terminals
么九刻



Melded Kong
明杠



A detailed website on Mahjong knowledge and lore:

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

Mahjong Care instructions:

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

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

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