



Picking up a just-discarded tile to make a *peng*, or a set of three

Contrary to many misconceptions, it's actually fairly simple and accessible, and learning to play it offers an opportunity to immerse oneself in a unique and entertaining aspect of Chinese culture.



Alexander Bushroe is a dab at playing the traditional Chinese game of mahjong. — All photos/Courtesy of Alexander Bushroe

Unmasking a tiled tradition: Mahjong from its origins to today



Alexander Bushroe is from Florida, USA, and has resided in China since 2009. He graduated from Clemson University and the Dalian University of Technology, and loves to delve into the idiosyncrasies of life in Shanghai and everywhere else. In Alexander's column, "The Commotion Metric," you'll find him stopping to smell the flowers and examining the perks and quirks of life in Shanghai.

Alexander Bushroe

Gaming culture has long been alive and well here in China as a pastime, from the ancient precursor to modern-day football known as *cuju* to Chinese chess (*xiangqi*), to the plethora of games played in China today using regular playing cards. But, of course, when thinking of traditional Chinese games, the first to come to mind for most is mahjong (麻将 *majiang* in Chinese *pinyin*).

Even if you're not well-versed in how the game is played, you very likely are at least vaguely familiar with how the game looks, with its various rectangular tiles embossed with Chinese characters, circles, lines, numbers and other symbols. The tiles, traditionally made of bamboo or ivory but nowadays usually of acrylic or plastic, are shuffled and stacked, lined up and rearranged, drawn and discarded until a winner emerges.

Those of us who used earlier versions of Microsoft's Windows operating system likely remember a game called Mahjong using these tiles that was installed as a default program in the

"Games" folder next to Minesweeper and Solitaire. However, anyone who has seen an actual game of mahjong played knows that this Windows version, in which tiles are stacked into some sort of tower that is gradually deconstructed, does not resemble in the slightest the game of mahjong as it is played in China.

Despite carrying a cultural gravitas that would seem to imply the game originated in ancient times, the game of mahjong only dates back to the late Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) in the latter half of the 19th century.

Originally called "sparrow cards," the game can trace its origins back as far as to the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907) to a type of game that shared some basic aesthetic similarities to its modern counterpart, although it was more of a dice-style game than like mahjong itself.

Over the subsequent centuries and through dynastic overturns, the game and its playing methods evolved into the sequentially played mahjong of the present day, the oldest historically recorded set of which dates to 1875. Its explosion in popularity thereafter

allowed it to flourish in the subsequent decades, then survive a period during which it was banned in the "cultural revolution" (1966-1976), a ban which was later reversed.

Despite perhaps seeming mysterious to the uninitiated, it is actually a fairly simple game somewhat similar to the card game rummy, in which the tiles, which are separated into suits and ranks, are arranged to form combinations of two, three and four. Filling a hand with these melded combinations allows a player to complete a hand and *hupai* (和牌), or win the round.

I must add a disclaimer here and acknowledge that mahjong, among many other parlor-style games, is often used as a vehicle for gambling. Firstly, I do not endorse gambling outside of specific venues and areas legally designated for that purpose. However, it's important to note that mahjong, unlike, for example, most poker-style games, is still meaningful and fun when played for simply the pride of winning instead of for cash. This is because the gameplay itself doesn't involve in-game wagering and isn't a battle of gambling chutzpah