

where success depends on how much money one is willing to risk. Rounds are simply played and a winner is determined at their conclusion.

The tiles, each of which has four copies in the full mahjong set, are separated into three different suits, much like playing cards have four — spades, hearts, clubs and diamonds. Other tiles with characters like the four cardinal directions and the four seasons, among others, are included as well. There are a staggering number of divergent ways to play that differ across locations around the country and the continent.

The variations to the basic version of the game are somewhat comparable to the different regional dialects around the country — a standard version exists, like the Mandarin of mahjong, but different regional styles add twists and turns to spice up the experience.

Whether it's on the street, at home or elsewhere, this internationally recognized but particularly nationally beloved pastime is a classic staple of traditional games in China. If you're interested in learning a bit more about the tiles themselves and the actual mahjong gameplay, check out the second part of this series, titled "Mahjong basics: A brief tutorial to a classic Chinese pastime." 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.

A brief tutorial on a classic Chinese pastime

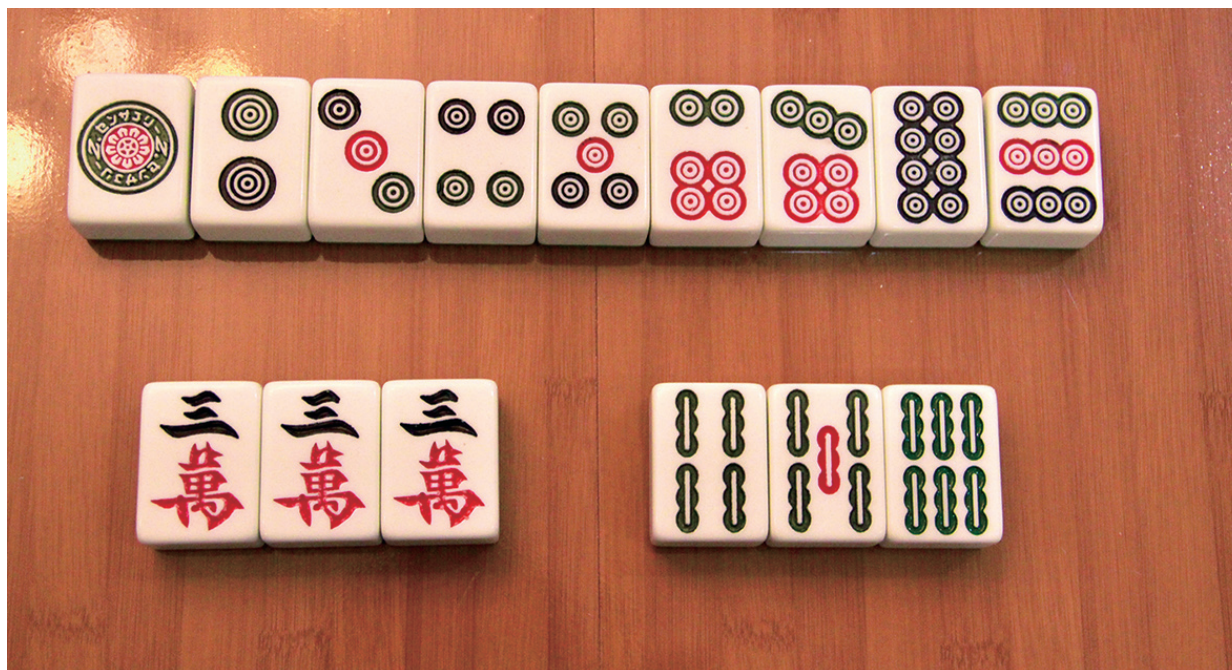
Many visitors to China and folks who've taken up residence here have seen it played, but few have decided to learn the game.

Here I'll share some elementary knowledge and give a brief introductory tutorial on mahjong. Hopefully, those of you who are interested in learning some of the basics and perhaps giving it a try can get started here.

Let's look at some of the types of tiles used and basic rules to develop an understanding of how the game works.

While playing cards are divided into four suits — spades, hearts, clubs and diamonds — mahjong tiles have three basic suits plus a few other tiles that fall outside of the suited categories.

The three suits include dots (*tong*筒 or *bing*饼 in Chinese), bamboo (*tiao*条 or *suo*索) and numbers (*wan*万). These are not direct translations, but rather what the tiles are commonly called in Chinese. Each of the suits is numbered



Tiles of the dot, number and bamboo suits

from 1 to 9, and there are four identical tiles of each value in a complete mahjong set.

These tiles, through drawing, discarding and snatching up other players' unwanted tiles, are arranged into sets of three or four identical tiles or runs of three consecutive tiles of the same suit (for example, 3 dots, 4 dots and 5 dots) with the goal of filling out a complete hand with these complementary tile groups.

Outside of the suited tiles, each of the four cardinal directions is represented — north, south, east and west — with four copies of each of these directional "wind" tiles. In addition, four each of a red *zhong*中, or middle; a green *fa*发, for wealth; and a plain white tile round out the basic tiles in a mahjong set.

These tiles, unlike their suited counterparts, can only be arranged in sets of three or four identical tiles and cannot be combined with any other tile than their identical copies.

Mahjong sets also include eight "flower" tiles, four of which represent the four seasons and four of which depict four different types of flower or plant, but these are simply bonus tiles for additional points and do not directly affect gameplay. Upon entering a player's hand, these tiles are placed aside and bonus points are awarded to be counted after the hand.

Altogether, with four copies of each main tile plus the eight flower tiles, a standard mahjong set consists of 144 pieces.

Each player begins each round with 13 tiles and starts their turn by drawing one additional tile to reach 14, incorporating it into the tiles in their hand, then

choosing one to discard in the middle of the table, ending the turn. After each turn, a player must have exactly 13 tiles in their possession.

Aside from simply drawing one tile and discarding another to complete a turn, there are four basic moves a player can complete: *peng* (碰 set of three), *gang* (杠 set of four), *chi* (吃 sequence of three), and *hu* (和 completed hand and victory).

In lieu of drawing from the stack, a player, if possessing a pair of identical tiles — let's say, two 6-bamboo tiles — can, upon an opponent discarding an additional 6-bamboo, jump in and shout, "Peng!" and snap it up, making a set of three. When doing so, the player reveals that set of three identical tiles face-up on the table. It still is counted as part of the 13 tiles in the player's hand. They then discard a tile, and the next player in rotation begins.

If a player has three identical tiles in their hand, but all three have been drawn from the stack without using the *peng* method, that player can perform a *gang*, or securing a set of four, once the fourth tile is discarded or drawn. That player then draws an additional tile and discards one. This leaves that player with 14 tiles remaining, making the *gang* move the only time a player can exceed 13 tiles after a hand.

If a player wins a hand with a set of 4, they are awarded an additional point.

The next move, *chi*, creates a run of three consecutive tiles of the same suit (for example, 6, 7 and 8 dots or 2, 3 and 4 bamboo). If a tile is discarded by the player directly to one's left (and only the left-side player for this particular move) that would allow the next player



The additional directional tiles plus *zhong*, *fa* and white

to make three consecutive tiles, they can then take it instead of drawing from the stack, completing that set and getting closer to a fully formed, winning hand.

To win, turn your hand (upon acquiring your 14th tile to begin a turn) into four groups of three tiles — identical or consecutive melds are both acceptable — plus an additional pair, known as the "eyes," and you've completed the *hu* and secured victory.

Though it may seem complex and mysterious to those who've not tried it, the game is quite fun and its principles are not too hard to grasp.

Hopefully, this basic tutorial has provided some insight as to how mahjong is played. For further reference, search for mahjong rules and strategies online or ask a friend familiar with the game.

Good luck on your journey into learning this entertaining and beautiful pastime!