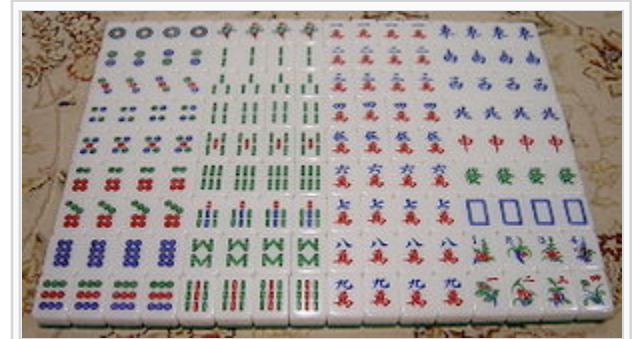


Mahjong tiles

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Mahjong tiles (麻將牌 or 麻雀牌; Mandarin: májiàngpái; Japanese: mājanpai) are tiles of Chinese origin that are used to play many games, most notably Mahjong and Mahjong solitaire. Although they are most commonly tiles, they may also refer to playing cards with similar contents as well.



Mahjong tiles

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Construction

Mahjong tiles have been constructed from various materials throughout the years. Traditionally, Mahjong tiles were constructed bone, often backed with bamboo. Bone tiles are still available but most modern sets are constructed from various plastics such as bakelite, celluloid, and more recently nylon. There are a small number of sets that have been made with ivory, but these are exceedingly rare: most sets sold as ivory are in fact made from bone. Regardless of the material used to construct the tiles, the symbols on them are almost always engraved or pressed into the material. There are generally two sizes available, the larger Chinese – Cantonese size and the smaller Chinese/Japanese/American size. Some expert players can determine the face value of their tiles without actually looking at them by feeling these engravings with their fingers.



Plastic vs. ivory/bamboo tiles

Contents

A set of Mahjong tiles will usually differ from place to place. It usually has at least 136 tiles, most commonly 144, although sets originating from America or Japan will have more.

Mahjong tiles can be organized into several categories:

Suited Tiles

The majority of Mahjong tiles are of a rank and a suit. There are three money-based suits of tiles (銅索萬), with ranks ranging from one to nine. There are four tiles of each rank and suit combination, thus there are 36 tiles in a suit, and 108 suited tiles in total. To refer to a suited tile, the rank is named, followed by the suit.

The circle suit (筒子, pinyin *tǒngzi* (barrel); also 餅/饼, pinyin *bǐng* (flatbread); Japanese 筒子 romaji *pinzu*) is represented by a series of circles.



The 1 Circle is generally a large circle of multiple colors, while the rest of the circle tiles consist of smaller circles, each circle being of one color. The 2 Circle consists of a green and a blue circle, the 3 consisting of one blue, one green, and one red circle arranged diagonally (the order the circles appear in, as well as the orientation, differs between sets). The 4 Circle has two blue circles and two green circles, arranged in a rectangle with circles of like color in opposite corners. The 5 Circle is similar to the 4 Circle, with another circle (its color depending on the set) in the middle. The 6 Circle consists of two green circles at the top and four red circles in the bottom (with a space between the green and red circles). The 7 Circle is similar to the 6 Circle, but has 3 green circles arranged diagonally from top-left to bottom-right. The 8 Circle has eight blue circles arranged in a 2x4 rectangle. The 9 Circle has three each of blue, red, and green circles, with each color occupying a row. There is some space between each row, and the middle row is always of the red circles (the blue and green, of course, depends on the orientation of the tile).

Because of the large size of the circle in the 1 Circle, it is commonly nicknamed *da bing* (大餅 pinyin *dàbǐng* lit. big pancake).

From the monetary origin of this suit, the circles represent the copper coins. (1銅=one copper coin, see picture on the right).



The bamboo suit (索子, pinyin *suǒzi* (woven thread); also 條/条, pinyin *tiáo* (strip); Japanese romaji *sōzu*), with the exception of the 1 Bamboo, which is represented by a bird, is represented by outlines of sticks.



The 2, 3, 4, 6, and 8 Bamboo are represented entirely out of green sticks, while the middle stick in the 5 Bamboo, the top stick of the seven bamboo, and the sticks along the center column of the 9 Bamboo are red. Some sets may also have the sticks along the bottom row or center column of the 7 Bamboo in blue. The 8 Bamboo has its sticks forming an M-shape and its mirror image.

The 1 Bamboo, as it is often shaped as a bird, is often referred as *the sparrow* (麻雀 - *má què*). The rumour why the 1 Bamboo is different from others is to avoid cheaters from adding more Bamboo lines to the 1 Bamboo to change it into other Bamboo tiles.

From the monetary origin of this suit, the sticks are actually rope strings (索) that tie 100 Chinese copper coins together by the square holes in the middle. (1索=100銅) Notice the repeated bumps in the sticks depict the individual coins in the strings, but they were mistaken as the knots on the bamboo plants, hence the English name of the suit.

The character suit (萬子/万子, pinyin *wànzi*, Japanese romaji *manzu*) is represented by Chinese characters.



Although some sets use simplified Chinese characters, many use traditional Chinese characters as they are more complex and considered more aesthetically pleasing. The rank of the tile is represented at the top, in blue, with Chinese numerals, while the character below (萬 *wàn* - meaning myriad) is in red. Some sets may also have a black Arabic numeral in a top corner, for the benefit of players who are not familiar with Chinese numerals. Some sets use the character 伍 for five instead of 五.

The ones and nines of each suit (幺九, pinyin *yāo jiǔ*) are collectively referred to as the *terminal tiles*.

From the monetary origin of this suit, the wans (10,000) are actually 100 strings of coins described in the bamboo suit section above. One myriad equals ten thousand coins or 100 strings of 100 coins. (1萬=100索×100銅)

Honor Tiles

Honor Tiles are tiles that do not have a rank or suit. They are divided into two categories, Wind tiles (風牌/风牌, pinyin *fēngpái*, Japanese romaji *kazepai*) and Dragon tiles (三元牌, pinyin *sānyuánpái*, Japanese romaji *sangenpai*). There are four types of Wind tiles and three types of Dragon tiles, with four of each type of honor tile. Thus, there are 16 wind tiles and 12 Dragon tiles for 28 honor tiles.

The Wind tiles consist of four kinds of tile: East (東, *dōng*, Japanese romaji *ton*), South (南, *nán*, Japanese romaji *nan*), West (西, *xī*, Japanese romaji *shā*), and North (北, *běi*, Japanese romaji *pei*).



Each type of Wind tiles corresponds to a point along the compass, written in blue traditional Chinese characters (even for sets where the Character tiles are written in simplified Chinese).

The three types of **Dragon tiles** are:



- Red (紅中/红中, pinyin *hóng zhōng*, Japanese 中 romaji *chun*) - a tile with a red traditional Chinese character (中) or a red dragon. Some sets may also have a black letter C in a corner of the tile, denoting the first letter of the Wade-Giles romanization of 中 (*chung*).
- Green (青發/青发, pinyin *qīng fā*, Japanese 發 romaji *hatsu*) - a tile with a green traditional Chinese character (發), even for sets where the Character tiles are written in simplified Chinese. Often the variant character U+24F35 𠄎 (𠄎 over 弓矢 instead of 弓受) is used. Because of its meaning (發財/发财, pinyin *fā cái* loosely means "to strike it rich"), a giant Green Dragon tile serves as a good luck charm in many Chinese households. Some sets, notably American, uses a green dragon in place of the character. Some sets may also have a black letter F in a corner of the tile, denoting the first letter of the Wade-Giles romanization of 發 (*fa*), despite the fact that many believe that the F is taken from a form of Cantonese romanization (*fat*).
- White (白板, pinyin *bái bǎn*, Japanese 白 romaji *haku*) - a tile which can be without any markings (), although most modern sets employ tiles with a blue border to distinguish them from replacement tiles. Some sets may also have a black letter P in the center of the tile, denoting the first letter of the Wade-Giles romanization of 白 (*pai*). Japanese tiles of this kind have no mark on them, and are occasionally dubbed *tofu* (bean curd) in some Japanese mahjong clubs.

Flower tiles

Flower tiles (花牌 pinyin *huāpái*, Japanese *hanapai*), which are further subdivided into groups. Each group contains four unique tiles, which are numbered from 1 to 4 or otherwise distinctly labeled. The contents of these tiles are usually artistic pictures of flowers in many colors (hence the name). Nevertheless, other non-floral themes also exist, which vary from set to set. The average set, if it contains flower tiles, will have two groups of flower tiles, differentiating in the color and/or style of the labels. Common Chinese sets will have one set of flowers in blue Arabic numerals while the other set of flowers in red Chinese numerals, numbered one to four.

In mahjong solitaire, the two groups are often called Flower tiles (not to be confused with the blanket term for all groups of flower tiles) and Season Tiles (季牌 jì pái, Japanese 季節牌 *kisetsupai*).

The four tiles in the (seasonal) Flower tile group are:



- plum 梅 *méi*
- orchid 蘭 *lán*
- chrysanthemum 菊 *jú*
- bamboo 竹 *zhú*

The four tiles in the Season tile group are:



- Spring 春 *chūn*
- Summer 夏 *xià*
- Autumn 秋 *qiū*
- Winter 冬 *dōng*

Singapore sets will provide for three groups of flowers: the Flower (Red) and Season (Black) sets, and the Animal set. Other sets may provide more groups of flower tiles.

Joker Tiles

Unique to American sets are eight Joker tiles, tiles that simply say "Joker" in a diagonal pattern on them. Often in Chinese the words 百搭 *bǎidā* 'a hundred connections' are seen. Four joker tiles are used in Shanghai style Mahjong too. Joker tiles can also be used to replace any tiles in putting together a hand.



variation of wildcard/Joker tiles.

Games Using Mahjong Tiles

Although Mahjong is what the tiles are designed for, Mahjong tiles are also used in a variety of tile-based games like dominoes.

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