MahJong – Chinese Classical or Hong Kong/Cantonese rules

Rule info by Mandisa Washington, Some info taken from Clay Breshear's Mah Jongg site, back in 1997

How to Play

The game of mahjong has many variants – this version is sometimes referred to as the Chinese Classical or sometimes the Hong Kong/Cantonese version. The game is a set-building and wagering game, like Rummy or Poker, but played with tiles (usually plastic, but classically inlaid stone, ivory, or bamboo). Many of the rules and the suits themselves are based on traditional Confucian (or maybe Buddhist?) principles, so there's a big emphasis on unity, purity, and harmony.

Four players take turns as "dealer", playing a sequence of 16 (4x4) rounds. In each round, the goal is to be the first to form a winning hand and thus score points – the player with the most points at the end of the game wins. As a traditional gambling game, points often translate to money, and there are a wide range of house rules for scoring and payouts, as well as tricks and tips for wagering and psyching out your opponents.

These rules will basically get you to the level of friendly playing. If you want to learn to be a Chinatown shark, good luck with that!

Setting the Table

The four players are referred to by the four cardinal winds – East, South, West, and North. The "East" player is the "dealer" for the first four rounds, then South for four rounds, West for four rounds, and finally North, for a total of 16 rounds of play. Similarly, each player takes turns in this order, starting with whoever is dealer for that round.

Starting the Round

The tiles are shuffled face-down, by all the players simultaneously, generating the soon-to-be familiar clack-clack sound. Nicer mahjong halls and some hardcore players have fancy electric-shuffling tables, but it's like not racking your own balls in pool. Once all the tiles are shuffled, each player stacks up a 2-tile-high by 17-tiles-long wall, and the four walls are pushed together in a square, like a fortress or city.

The dealer of the hand is the first to pick up two stacks of tiles (4 tiles total) from the wall, but a different player must pick the spot to start from – you can determine who picks by rolling dice or by house rules.

[Here are Breshear's rules, but you should always ask how your host/the house does it: The dealer of the round throws a pair of 6-sided dice and starting with him/herself as '1', counts the players around the table up to the dice total. The last player counted throws the dice again, and starting with the rightmost stack of the wall section in front of him/her, counts out tile stacks up to the dice total. The dealer picks up the two stacks following the last counted stack.]

After the dealer, each player in sequence picks up two stacks until they each have 12 tiles, then each player picks up 1 additional tile, for a total of 13 tiles in each player's hand. The 7 stacks (14 "dead" tiles) at the end of the wall (just before where the dealer started to pick up) are removed from play for this round.
Playing a Round

Once all players have a hand of 13 tiles, the dealer of the round picks up one additional tile from the wall (continuing from where the last player stopped), starting play. Each player has the option of keeping the drawn tile and discarding a tile from the hand, discarding the drawn tile, or using the drawn tile to complete a winning hand ("declaring mahjong"), thus ending the round.

The discarded tile is "open", meaning any other player may pick it up for their own winning hand, or to complete a set. If no player picks up the discarded tile, play continues to the next player. He/she draws a successive tile from the wall, with the same options of keep-and-discard, or produce a winning hand. If a player does pick up the discarded tile, they keep-and-discard, do not draw from the wall, and then the sequence of play continues from that player. (For example: if East discards, and West picks up the tile, the next player to play will be North, because he/she comes after West. South got screwed. *sadness*)

Once the next player has drawn a tile, the previous discards are "closed", and completely unavailable for play – beginners usually leave the discarded tiles face-up for reference, but most players flip discards face-down and players are expected to track the game carefully.

Tiles

Tiles come in 3 standard suits and 2 special suits, with an optional 2 additional suits.

Standard suits are numbered 1-9:

Circles (or Balls, Coins)

Bamboo (or Cracks)

Characters (or Numerals)

Special suits have no numbers:

Winds: East – South – West – North

Dragons: Red (or Ruby) – Green (or Jade) – White (or Pearl)
The optional suits are used for scoring only:

**Flowers:** Plum – Orchid – Chrysanthemum – Bamboo

![Flowers](image)

**Seasons:** Spring – Summer – Fall/Autumn – Winter

![Seasons](image)

Every tile has 4 copies in the set, except for Flower and Season tiles, which have only 1 of each. If you draw a Flower or Season tile, just put it in front of you and to the side a bit for potential scoring at the end of the round.

**Making Hands**

A winning hand is one that is both "complete" and has at least the minimum point value. A complete hand is made up of exactly 14 tiles – 4 sets of 3 tiles plus 2 matching tiles (sometimes called "eyes").

Points (sometimes called "fan") are scored/assigned to a hand based on the nature of the sets, not the eyes, and are based on complexity and rarity. Players agree on a minimum point value at the start of the game, and a complete hand that doesn't meet that value cannot win. (There are usually big point penalties for incorrectly declaring mahjong, but not so much in a beginners' game.)

Sets can be made up of any 3 exactly matching tiles, called a "pong", or 3-in-a-row of the same standard suit (Circles, Bamboo, or Numbers), called a "chow".

You may only pick up a discarded tile for your "pong" set if you already have 2 of the 3 necessary tiles – i.e. you have two East Winds in-hand and someone throws a third. You can only pick up a discard for a "chow" from the player immediately before you in sequence, and again you must use it to complete the set. If you complete a set using a discarded tile, you must display all three tiles in the set face-up in front of you, but any other sets remain hidden in-hand. (You get more points for in-hand sets than open sets.)

In the case where you already have a pong set in-hand (3 matching tiles) and you draw the last matching tile, you may make a "kong" set (all 4 matching tiles). All four tiles are displayed in front of you, but the two middle tiles are face-down to show that it is still counted as an in-hand or hidden set. Then you draw again, but from the part of the wall that was separated out earlier. You could make a kong from a discard, but the other 3 tiles must be in-hand, and afterwards, the completed "kong" set is open ("kong" and "pong" sets score the same, so you just lost a potential point). Why would you lose a point to make a kong from discard?

If two or more players want to pick up the same tile for their sets, a "kong" trumps a "pong" which trumps a "chow". If the player is using the tile to win, a "mahjong" beats all other claims. So you might want to stop another player from making their set by stealing the tile for yourself, even though you don't really need it.
Once you have four sets of "chow", "pong", or "kong", in any combination, and two matching tiles (not part of those sets), you have a complete hand. Not counting any extra 4\textsuperscript{th} tiles from kong sets, you will have to do this with a drawn or discarded tile to bring the hand to 14. Depending on how many points the hand is worth and your strategy, you may opt to declare mahjong at that point, or break one of the sets and keep on playing. The first one to successfully declare mahjong (complete set with minimum points) wins the round.

**Scoring**

Finally, scoring the hands is probably the place where there's the most variation among mahjong players. There are some classic hands, which I'll describe here, but determining exactly which hands get how many points, or translating points into money is almost entirely house-rulled, so take that info with a grain of salt. Generally, the more complicated or rare the hand, the higher the point value.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Winning Hand</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Any mahjong from discard</td>
<td>0 fan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any mahjong from draw/Self-Pick</td>
<td>+1 fan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any mahjong from &quot;kong&quot; tile</td>
<td>+1 fan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All-Up/No sets from discard</td>
<td>+1 fan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All &quot;chow&quot; sets</td>
<td>+1 fan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All &quot;pong&quot; sets</td>
<td>+3 fan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any Dragon &quot;pong&quot;</td>
<td>+1 fan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wind of the round &quot;pong&quot;</td>
<td>+1 fan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Player's own Wind &quot;pong&quot;</td>
<td>+1 fan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-Pure/All one suit, with Wind or Dragon &quot;pong&quot;</td>
<td>+3 fan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pure/All one suit</td>
<td>+6 fan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Winds and/or Dragons</td>
<td>+7 fan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Flowers or Seasons</td>
<td>+1 fan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Player's own Flower or Season</td>
<td>+1 fan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bouquet/All four Flowers or all four Seasons</td>
<td>+2 fan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Special Hands (Maximum points):**

- All "kong" sets
- Ones and Nines/All "pong" sets of ones and nines
- Pearl Dragon/All "pong" of White Dragon and Circles
- Jade Dragon/All "pong" of Green Dragon and Bamboo
- Ruby Dragon/All "pong" of Red Dragon and Numbers
- Hidden Treasure/All "pong", all-up, Self-Pick
- Seven Pairs/Exactly what it says, seven pairs of matched tiles, all-up, Self-Pick
- Gates of Heaven/All same suit, all-up, "pong" of Ones and Nines, one each of 2 through 8, and one additional matching tile (the pattern forms a complete hand in multiple ways)
- Thirteen Unique Wonders/One of each of the following: One and Nine of each suit, one of each Wind, one of each Dragon, and one matching tile – Maximum points
The total number of fan are added up for the winning hand. Points are generally figured as 2 raised to the power of the number of fan. So a hand that scores 3 fan would get $2^3 = 2 \times 2 \times 2 = 8$ points. A super-high-scoring hand that scores 8 fan would get $2^8 = 4 \times 4 \times 4 \times 4 = 256$ points!

In each round, the total number of points gained by the winner is typically deducted evenly from the three losing players (except in the discard penalty cases described above, or some other house-ruled penalty case). You can start everyone off with a certain number of points (or chips) and go from there, or start at zero and see who's highest at the end.

At the beginning of the game players determine how much money, if any, will correspond to each point, and determine a maximum amount per round. So if the game was for 15¢ per point, a player who won a round with a 3 fan hand would earn 8 points, or $1.20, with each losing player giving up 40¢. Again, house rules may override this, and at among dedicated gamblers, or at a hall or casino, there may be additional rules for wagering during the round.

Strategy

Mahjong is one of those games that is straightforward to learn, but the fun in play is entirely in the strategy. There are loads of books in many languages, written over centuries, that detail various philosophies on playing mahjong (just like chess or go). Depending on how hardcore you want to get, you can really make a study of it, but even when playing for fun, it helps to keep some basics in mind.

1 – *A bird in the hand is better than two in the bush*

Once you've read over the scoring tables, you may find that you want to go for a difficult hand with lots of points, and break up in-hand sets to try and draw that one last tile that'll give you a golden hand. And while you're chasing that red dragon, somebody will declare mahjong. So remember, only the winner of the round gets any points. The person whose hand was almost complete gets bupkis.

2 – *Winning the game isn't always winning the round*

Mahjong has 16 rounds, in this variant at least, and the winner of the game is the one with the most points at the end. Generally the scoring works such that winners gain points at the other players' expense. So if another player seems like they're building a high-point hand, and you have a low-point hand completed (but still above the minimum), go ahead and declare mahjong. Even if it means gaining fewer points on this round, denying another player a high-scoring round may work to your advantage in the overall game.

3 – *The enemy of my enemy is my friend*

Similarly, since there are 4 matching copies of a tile, it frequently happens that 2 players split the set unknowingly, but are waiting to draw a winning tile that will never come. Meanwhile, both of the other two players are steadily completing their hands. In such a case, it can be beneficial to trash your own hand for another's benefit, just to deny a third player a high-scoring win. This is more of an endgame scenario, when one player is clearly in the lead and the goal is to stop that person's ascent, so you lose less rather than winning more.

4 – *Pay attention*

Maybe it goes without saying with a game where money is often involved, but since there's often a lot of drinking, gossiping and laughing/distractions during a mahjong game… Basically it's really easy to fall into the trap of working towards a set that has actually become impossible because the necessary tiles were discarded earlier. Another trap is not noticing a needed tile when it's discarded, then losing...
your chance once the turn moves on. The flip side of that trap is discarding a tile that some other player has been eagerly waiting on, especially when they're obviously close to winning.

One rule penalty that is a frequent house rule is the "nine pieces penalty" – if a player has three sets showing, all with the same suit, (which is a pretty damn good hand and close to completion, regardless of what other tiles are hidden) and you discard a tile of that same suit, which the player uses to declare mahjong, then you pay the points to the winner for every player (and sometimes double). Slightly less sucky, if you discard a tile that becomes someone else's winning tile, you typically have to pay double what the other two losing players pay.

5 – Chat with players

Mahjong is actually a pretty challenging game to master, and takes a fairly long while to play. So it's definitely an opportunity to chat and be social and enjoy the playing of the game itself. Winning is difficult, especially playing against experienced people (you never know which kindly aunties are actually mahjong sharks) so try not to worry too much about getting maximum points and just focus on being an attentive player. Feel free to ask players (probably when they're not playing) what their "war stories" might be, and maybe if they have any particular approaches to the game. Watching a game is good too, but again, since money is often involved, and some folks take their mahjong very seriously, make sure this is okay with your host and the players first.

Finding Players, Buying a Set

There's a huge community of mahjong players online, but they do divide up quite a bit into the different major variations, some of which are markedly different from what's described here. You can also check for some in-person meetups around the city, but since we have some particularly harsh anti-gambling laws here, you might want to be careful where you play & who you play with.

There are several online and mobile mahjong games available, but again, you've got to check out what version they're offering, and of course filter out all the mahjong-solitaire games (many are quite pretty, but not what we're aiming for here). Many of the best, wackiest, and most challenging or fun mahjong video games are sadly made exclusively for Asian markets – if you read Japanese or Chinese and have the tech capacity to play them, you can find mahjong-related games for every console ever, plus the PC.

In English though, I have a copy of what's generally regarded as the best English-language Chinese-style mahjong game available, Hong Kong Mahjong from Nine Dragons Software. It's indie software, but available online or sometimes at Best Buy or J&R (probably Amazon, too). The graphics and sounds are fun and authentic-ish, the rules are very configurable and friendly to beginners and intermediate players, and the AI comes in flavors offered as 16 computer-controlled players you can choose from, each with its own play style (and optional trash talk). It's a good way to learn the game basics and get a handle on scoring, since you can turn on/off a lot of useful options like face-up/organized discards and a mahjong alert. I've had it for years, and highly recommend it.

Buying a set can be an adventure, especially if you go online, as there are so many choices. But a trip to any of the local Chinatowns should put you on the right track to getting your own set. I picked mine up many years ago at Pearl River in Manhattan Chinatown, and it's nice quality in its own carrying case. There are standard modern sets with or without Arabic numerals, traditional sets with classic numerals and illustrations, card sets that forego tiles entirely, and of course so many themed sets – although you might have to hunt for those online.