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- Playing mahjong the Cantonese way
- Seeing what makes Cantonese mahjong unique
- Getting the (mahjong) party started
- Having the wind in your sails

Chapter 1
Setting Up to Play

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Cantonese mahjong is the most popular mahjong style among Chinese communities worldwide. Its widespread popularity stems from the migration of Cantonese workers overseas, who brought this game to entertain themselves during long journeys and challenging times overseas. Mahjong's social nature provided a bonding tool for Cantonese immigrants in unfamiliar and often hostile environments. Today, Cantonese mahjong remains a unifying cultural practice for the Chinese-diaspora communities. Knowing how to play a game of Cantonese mahjong will surely impress your Chinese friends or in-laws.

In addition to its historical roots, Cantonese mahjong's relative simplicity has helped solidify its dominance. With fewer nuanced rules and scoring complexities compared to other mahjong styles, it serves as an excellent foundation for learning other variants. Its simplicity allows new learners to quickly grasp the basics and build confidence before exploring more advanced strategies.

Exploring the Unique Nature of Cantonese Mahjong

Cantonese mahjong uses a **Fan (番)**-based scoring system, where Fan works like a multiplier that can dramatically boost your points depending on how you win. (I dig into the nitty-gritty of Fan scoring in Chapter 4.)

A typical game flows like this:

1. Choose the first dealer.
2. Build the tile wall.
3. Break the wall and deal the initial hands.
4. Play by drawing, discarding, and calling tiles.
5. Someone wins with a winning hand — or the wall runs out and it's a draw.
6. Add up the Fan score based on the winning hand's value and winning conditions.
7. Convert the Fan score into points or the monetary amount for payouts.
8. Reset the table to start a new hand.

The following is what this flow means in practice:

- Not every hand ends with a winner; a draw happens quite often too.
- Not all wins are equal — some will score small while others can rack up huge payouts.
- Winning a hand isn't the same as winning the game. You'll usually play multiple hands, and only the final tallies crown the ultimate winner.

Dissecting Your Mahjong Set

Every mahjong set is going to have mahjong tiles along with a few non-tile components. Seems pretty straightforward. However, the devil is in the details.

Keeping all those tile numbers straight in your head

Mahjong is a game of both skill and luck. The skill lies in understanding the probabilities of drawing certain tiles and strategically working toward those goals, while luck determines how favorable those probabilities turn out to be.

A standard Chinese mahjong set contains 144 tiles (See Figure 1-1.) — 136 are actively played toward forming a winning hand, while 8 are used for bonus scoring only.

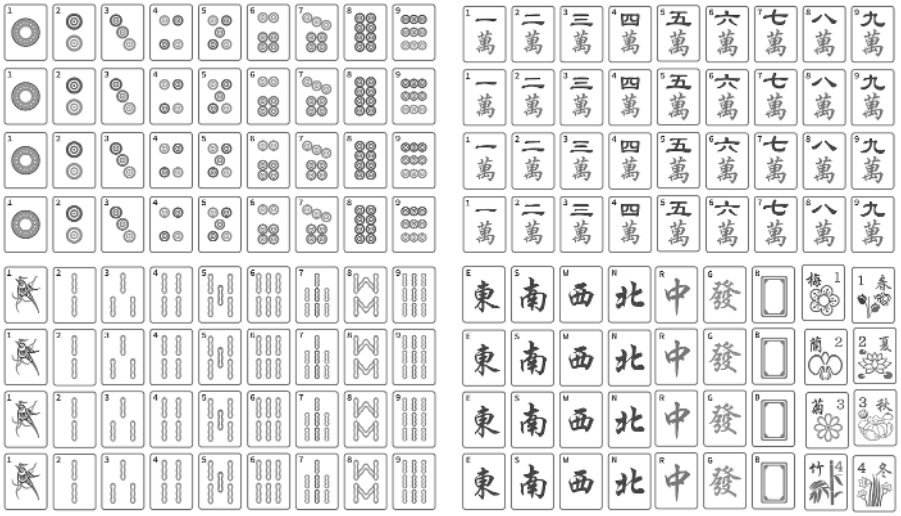


FIGURE 1-1: A complete Chinese mahjong set has 144 tiles with 42 unique patterns.

The probability of achieving a specific winning hand depends on the 13 tiles you start with, drawn randomly from the full set, and the tiles you obtain throughout the game. Each tile exists in 4 copies (except the bonus tiles), so the likelihood of getting a desired tile depends on how many remain in play. For example, if you are waiting on one specific tile to complete your winning hand, the chances of drawing it decrease as the game progresses, because other players may have discarded or retained copies of that tile.



REMEMBER

Players must constantly assess their chances of optimizing their hands with each move, balancing defensive strategies with offensive strategies. Fan scores increase with the complexity or rarity of winning hands. Certain hands, like Thirteen Orphans or Nine Gates, are so hard to assemble that achieving them is often considered to be more of a statistical miracle than a deliberate strategy. And that's where luck comes into play.

Digging deeper: Suits, Honors, and Bonus tiles

Since mahjong is a game of probability, it is crucial to know the tile numbers. Let's take the time to break them down.

The 144 tiles in your mahjong are divided into 3 suits, 2 Honor groups, and v2 Bonus groups:

» **3 Suits (數牌 108 tiles):**

Dots (筒): Circular patterns numbered 1 to 9, four copies each, 36 tiles total.

Dot Suit										
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	x4	36
										

The number of dots/circles correspond directly to the tiles' numbers, so if you are unsure of the tile number, just count the dots.



TIP

Players may refer to the Dots tiles as coins, cookies, balls, wheels, stones, or by their Chinese names, Bing (餅 "Pancake") or Tong (筒"Tube").

Bamboo / Bams (條): Squiggly stick patterns numbered 1 to 9, four copies each, 36 tiles total.

Bamboo Suit										
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	x4	36
										

As with Dots, you can count the number of lines to identify the tile number. The only exception is the One Bamboo, which is depicted as a bird (often a sparrow or a peacock) instead of a squiggly line. You can call this tile "One Bamboo" or simply "One Bam.".



TECHNICAL STUFF

In Chinese, a Bamboo tile is often called Tiew (條 "Strip") or Zuk (索 "Lasso"), and the One Bamboo is often called Zoek Zai (雀仔 "Birdie") or Yao Ji (幺雞 "One Bird").

Characters / Craks (萬): Chinese characters for numbers 1 to 9 are paired with the word "萬" (ten thousand), four copies each, 36 tiles total.

Character Suit										
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	x4	36
										

REMEMBER

TECHNICAL STUFF

The exact name you use for a tile isn't as important as making sure that everyone at the table understands each other. For convenience, it's recommended to stick to universal terms like "Dots," "Bamboo / Bams," and "Characters / Craks."

Dots come from old Chinese coins — those round copper pieces with square holes in the middle. A thousand coins strung together was called a Guan (貫), and ten Guan equaled a Wan (萬 meaning "ten thousand" or "a myriad"). That's why the three suits line up so neatly: Dots are the coins, Bamboos are the strings of coins, and Characters are the myriad unit of ten thousand coins. Different in design, but equal in value.

» **2 Honor Groups (字牌 28 tiles):**

Winds and Dragons are collectively known as Honors.

Winds (風): The Wind tiles are represented by the four cardinal directions — East (東), South (南), West (西), North (北) — each marked with its corresponding Chinese character. 4 copies each, 16 tiles total.

Winds					
East	South	West	North		
				x 4	16

The Wind tiles play a crucial role in seating positions and scoring bonuses, making them integral to both strategy and tradition.

Dragons (箭牌): 4 copies each, 12 tiles total.

Dragons				
Red	Green	White		
			x 4	12

Red Dragon (紅中) is symbolized by the character 中 ("Middle"), typically appearing in red.

Green Dragon (發財) is symbolized by the character 發 ("Get Rich"), typically appearing in in green.

White Dragon (白板) is symbolized by either an empty rectangular frame or an entirely blank tile with no pattern, hence the name 白板 (Baak Ban "White Blank") in Chinese.


TECHNICAL STUFF

The term "Dragons" originates from American Mah Jongg (see Part 2, "Mastering American Mah Jongg"), where the sets featured stylized red and green dragon motifs instead of Chinese characters. This terminology has since been adopted widely in the English-speaking world, adding a mythical flair to these tiles.


TIP

For those unfamiliar with Chinese characters, these tile patterns may seem confusing at first. However, with time and practice, your pattern recognition skills will improve, and identifying them will become much easier. If you're finding it challenging to distinguish the tiles, consider using an American mahjong set with letters or numbers engraved in the corners to assist with identification.

» **2 Bonus Groups (花牌 8 tiles):**

The bonus tiles are the Flower tiles and the Seasons tiles, often referred together as *Flowers*. They provide scoring bonuses but cannot form part of a winning hand.

Bonus Tiles									
No.	Direction	Flowers				Seasons			
1	East	Plum		x 1	4	Spring		x 1	4
2	South	Orchid		x 1		Summer		x 1	
3	West	Chrysanthemum		x 1		Fall		x 1	
4	North	Bamboo		x 1		Winter		x 1	

Flowers are a distinctive feature of Cantonese mahjong. Depending on your winning conditions, these tiles can earn you extra Fan or even trigger an automatic win, injecting a fun element of unpredictability into the game.

Flowers (花): Plum (梅), Orchid (蘭), Chrysanthemum (菊), Bamboo (竹), 1 tile each, 4 tiles total.

Seasons (季): Spring (春), Summer (夏), Autumn (秋), Winter (冬), 1 tile each, 4 tiles total.

Each set is numbered 1 through 4, aligned with the Four Winds (East, South, West, North). This alignment ties the bonus tiles directly to the structure of the game; drawing the tile that matches your Seat Wind can earn you extra bonuses, adding both strategy and a bit of fun unpredictability.

The Bamboo Flower tile is not related to the Bamboo suit.

REMEMBER

REMEMBER

Don't stress about memorizing what each pattern represents — tile designs can vary significantly between sets. The key is to focus on recognizing tile families and understanding their numerical sequences, because these are what truly matter in gameplay.

Using the accessories: Dice, Wind indicators, tile pushers, and chips

Tiles are the stars of the show, but mahjong comes with a few handy sidekicks that keep the game running smoothly. Not every mahjong set includes them, and their styles vary, but they're all designed to make play smoother. Figure 1-2 gives you a peek at what you may expect.

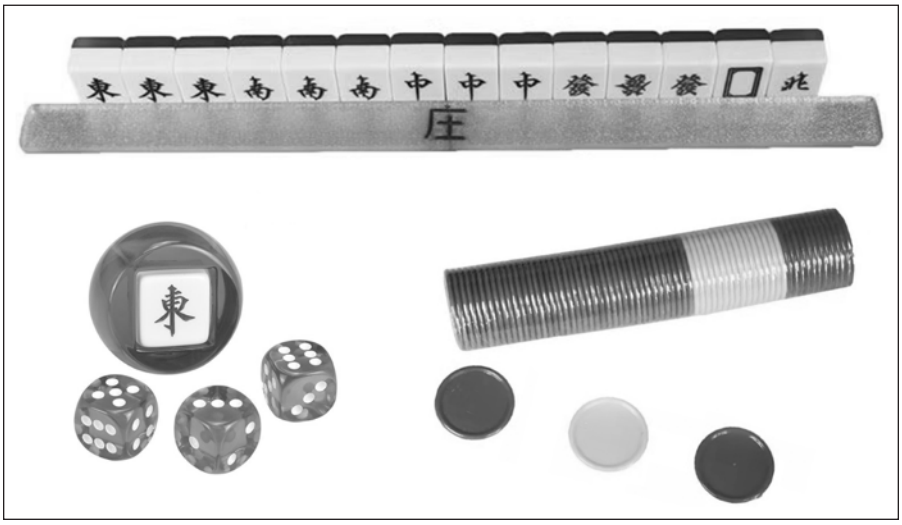


FIGURE 1-2: Mahjong accessories. Top: a tile pusher lining up a hand. Bottom row (left to right): a Wind indicator showing East, three dice, and three colors of chips.

Dice

Your mahjong set should come with two or three standard six-sided dice. These are essential at the start of the game to determine the first dealer and to decide where to break the tile wall. (See Chapter 2 for details on how to start a game.)

Wind indicator

The Wind indicator is a token that displays the current round Wind. It can take on various forms, but it is always placed at the dealer's left-hand corner to indicate two things:

- **The Seat Wind:** Who the current dealer (East) is
- **The Prevailing Wind:** What the current round Wind is

When a hand is finished, the Wind indicator is passed to the next dealer. Here's how that works:

> If Player 1 is East to start, the indicator sits at their left corner. After one hand, it shifts to Player 2's corner — now Player 2 is East, and the others rotate accordingly.



REMEMBER

If you're using an automatic table, the Wind direction and dealer status are electronically displayed, simplifying the process.

Tile pushers

Some mahjong sets include 4 pushers — long rulers that players can use to keep walls and hands lined up neatly. (One may be marked "dealer" so that you know who's in charge this round.) They're handy for organization, but if you're on an automatic table, you won't need them at all.



REMEMBER

Each player gets their own pusher. Place a pusher behind a tile wall to neatly align it or use it to pull tiles in your hand into a straight line in front of you. This is very helpful for keeping tiles neatly in line.

Choosing the first dealer

Before the dealing begins, a dealer has to be chosen. Get all four players seated, one on each side of the table.



REMEMBER

The significance of the dealer's role is that

- The dealer starts the game by making the first move.
- Dealer status affects game scoring.

  The dealer can score extra points or lose extra points.



TIP

There are two methods for determining the dealer. Both are common practices, so consult your table players for which method to use before the game starts.

- **Dice Rolling Method:**

  Each player rolls two or three dice. (Both choices are okay.) The player with the highest total becomes the dealer (East Wind).

  If there's a tie, the tied players reroll until one player prevails.

- **Wind Tile Method:**

  Find one of each Wind tiles (East, South, West, North) and shuffle them facedown.

  Each player randomly picks a tile. The player with the East Wind tile becomes the dealer.

  Players switch seats to reflect their corresponding Wind positions in relation to the East. (More on this detail in the next section.)

Assigning player positions and Seat Winds

After the dealer is chosen, each player is assigned a Seat Wind (門風) based on their position.



REMEMBER

The dealer's Seat Wind is always **East.** The player to the dealer's right is assigned **South,** the next player to the right is **West,** and the final player is **North.** (See Figure 1-3.)

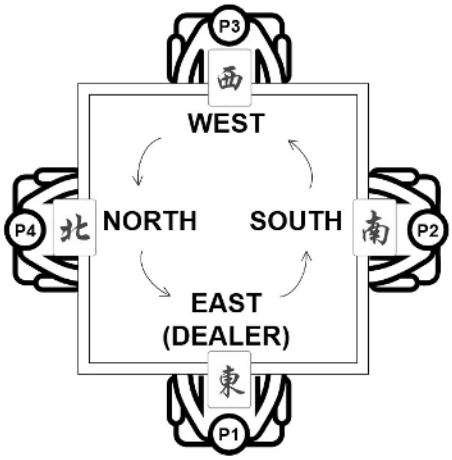


FIGURE 1-3: The four cardinal directions, East, South, West and North, will always have the same positional relation to each other.

Understanding rounds and Winds

A full mahjong game typically consists of four rounds, each corresponding to one of the Prevailing Winds: East, South, West, and North. Each round includes at least four deals, starting from the initial dealing and ending when one player finally declares a win. This structure ensures that every player gets a chance to be the dealer during a single round.

The following are other things to keep in mind:

- If the current dealer wins the hand, they retain their position as dealer as well as their Seat Wind; the dealership remains with them for the next deal.
- If the current dealer loses, the dealership (and their Seat Wind) shifts counterclockwise to the next player in line — not to the new winner!

"Wind direction" may seem an odd concept for a board game, and yet it is one of the most fun and most distinctive features of Cantonese mahjong. (Fun fact: The concept is derived from a time when marine navigation relied on trade winds for a successful voyage. Mahjong, originally a card game played during these long trips, evolved into a tile game to prevent the cards from blowing away in the wind.) Two types of "winds" rule the gameplay:

- **Prevailing Wind (round Wind 圈風):** The Wind governing a round. The game typically starts with East as the Prevailing Wind. The Prevailing Wind changes as the round ends.

» **Seat Winds (門風):** Each player is assigned a Seat Wind (East, South, West, North) based on their position relative to the dealer. The dealer always gets East, the person across from them West, the person on the dealer's left gets South, and North is always assigned to the person on the dealer's right. When the dealer changes, everybody else's Seat Wind changes as well. For example, in Figure 1-4, poor P1 has lost the hand, so P2 gets to be dealer — and gets the East Seat Wind assigned to them as well.



REMEMBER

Seat Winds (as well as Prevailing Winds) are crucial for scoring because they influence bonus points that are awarded in various winning hands. (See Chapter 4 for more on scoring.) Keeping track of the Winds adds a strategic layer to gameplay.

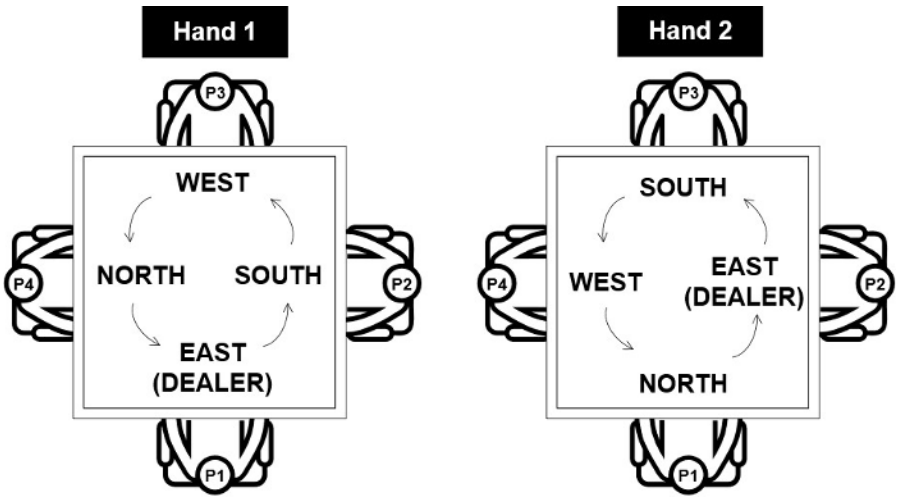


FIGURE 1-4: After each hand, the dealer baton gets handed to the person on the dealer's right.



REMEMBER

Winds can change in real life, and the same thing happens in mahjong. Figure 1-5 illustrates how the Prevailing Wind (Round Wind) and Seat Winds evolve throughout the game. For example, in Round 2 (South Wind round), notice that the East Wind remained with Player 2 for another hand. This is because P2 won consecutive hands. The East seat will remain with P2 for as long as their winning streak continues, which means that a round of a game can sometimes exceed more than four hands.

Round Wind and Seat Wind Rotation Example						
Round #	Round Wind	Hand #	Seat Wind			
			P1	P2	P3	P4
1	East	1	East	South	West	North
		2	North	East	South	West
		3	West	North	East	South
		4	South	West	North	East
2	South	1	East	South	West	North
		2	North	East	South	West
		3	North	East	South	West
		4	West	North	East	South
		5	South	West	North	East
3	West	1	East	South	West	North
		2	North	East	South	West
		3	West	North	East	South
		4	South	West	North	East
4	North	1	East	South	West	North
		2	North	East	South	West
		3	West	North	East	South
		4	South	West	North	East

FIGURE 1-5: Winning a hand means you keep the dealer position.