

A Brief History of the Game - Mahjong

Mahjong has often been called “the game of thousand intelligences”.

Mahjong, also spelled **majiang**, **mah jongg**, and numerous other variants, is a **game** that originated in **China**. It is commonly played by four players (with some three-player variations found in **South Korea** and **Japan** and Brockway).

In Chinese the name Mahjong... means “sparrow” or “cackling bird”... which they say was named because the “clacking” of the tiles resemble bird noises. The game and its regional variants are widely played throughout Eastern and South Eastern Asia and have a small following in Western countries. Similar to the Western card game **rummy**, mahjong is a **game of skill**, strategy, and calculation and involves a degree of chance.

As with many games there is a gambling element that can be added, however I have never learned that part of the game. Where I am concerned the game is about the challenge of winning not monetary gain.

The game was imported to the United States in the 1920s. The first mahjong sets that were sold in the U.S. were sold by **Abercrombie & Fitch** in 1920. It became such a success in **Washington, D.C.**, that the co-owner of the company, **Ezra Fitch**, sent emissaries to Chinese villages to buy every mahjong set they could find. Abercrombie & Fitch sold a total of 12,000 mahjong sets that year.

Also in 1920, **Joseph Park Babcock** published his book *Rules of Mah-Jongg*, also known as the "red book". This was the earliest version of mahjong known in America. Babcock had learned mahjong while living in China. His rules simplified the game to make it easier for Americans to take up, and his version was common through the mahjong fad of the 1920s. Later, when the 1920s fad died out, many of Babcock's simplifications were abandoned.

The game has taken on a number of trademarked names, such as "**Pung Chow**" and the "**Game of Thousand Intelligences**". Mahjong nights at that time in America often involved dressing and decorating rooms in Chinese style. Several hit songs were recorded during the mahjong fad, most notably "Since Ma Is Playing Mah Jong" by **Eddie Cantor**. By the 1930s, many revisions of the rules developed that were substantially different from Babcock's classical version.

The most common form, which eventually became "American Mahjong", was most popular among **Jewish** women. Standardization came with the formation of the National Mah Jongg League (NMJL) in 1937, along with the first American mahjong rulebook, *Maajh: The American Version of the Ancient Chinese Game*.

The NMJL was founded by Jewish players and is considered a Jewish organization. In 1986, the National Mah Jongg League conducted their first Mah Jongg Cruise Tournament, in conjunction with Mah Jongg Madness. In 2010, this large scale seagoing event hosted its 25th Silver Anniversary Cruise, with players from all over the States and Canada participating.

In recent years, a second organization has formed, the American Mah Jongg Association. The AMJA currently hosts tournaments all across North America, with their signature event being at the **Trump Taj Mahal Casino Resort** in **Atlantic City, New Jersey**.

This game is very addictive once you are in command of the skills needed to play.

It is very interesting that the next two discoveries are somewhat at odds with each other...

1. Prolonged playing of mahjong may trigger **epileptic seizures** according to a 2007 study. To date there are 23 reported cases of mahjong-induced seizures in the English medical literature.
2. Studies by doctors have also shown in Hong Kong that the game is beneficial for individuals suffering from dementia or cognitive memory difficulties, leading to the development of mahjong therapy.