

THE SYMBOLISM OF THE MAHJONG TILES

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Introduction

The text of this article is a compilation of various articles, books and webpages, and translations of Chinese characters that were checked on the 'Chinese Character Discussion' Facebook group.

Among the written sources are the following books and websites:

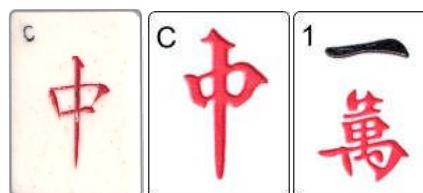
- Tom Sloper: *The Red Dragon & The West Wind, The complete guide to official Chinese & American Mah-jongg* (book)
- Eberhardt Asian Art Amsterdam: *Mah-Jongg , The Game of 1000 Wonders* (a well known Dutch booklet on mahjong)
- *Mahjong* on Wikipedia and Wikidot (mahjong.wikidot.com)
- *Sloperama*, Tom Sloper's website about Mahjong (www.sloperama.com/mahjongg/index.html)
- *Jesper Harder*, the kanji of Mahjong. A discontinued website, but still available at: (<https://web.archive.org/web/20100330002930/www.phys.au.dk/~harder/kanji.html>)
- *Lauren Mack*, A Guide to Mahjong Tile Meanings (www.thoughtco.com/explanation-of-mahjong-tiles-687561)
- *Michael Stanwick's* website about the history and different sets of Mahjong (www.themahjongtileset.co.uk)
- *Tilesnicknames*: <https://mahjongarchives.tripod.com/post/1998/9805-10.htm>

Symbolism of colors

In Chinese culture just about everything has a symbolism, including the colors. On the mahjong tiles, the predominant colors are historically red, blue (replaced by black in many modern sets), and green.

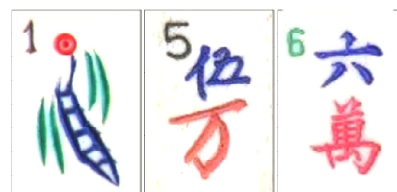
Red

In Chinese culture symbolizes blood or blood red. The deeper symbolism of red is that red blood represents life, and can also refer to humanity in general. Red is also the color of fire and the color of the warm south. Note that red is also considered a lucky color in China. At the Chinese New Year, red envelopes are often exchanged, signifying good luck.



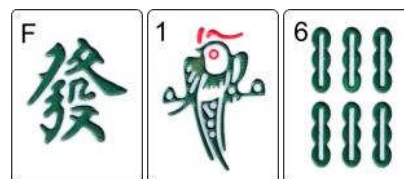
Blue

Blue symbolizes the blue sky or sky blue. The blue therefore represents the heaven, which is the symbol of purity and dignity, the latter being highly valued in China.



Green

Green symbolizes the earth, especially the lush grasses, plants and trees that give us food and building material (bamboo!) in abundance. A deeper meaning for green is nature itself, such as the power of nature, fertility and all forms of natural wealth. Green is also considered a vibrant color.



Winds

The Chinese characters on the wind tiles mean exactly what you would expect: the four positions of the compass. The four winds are called *Dōng* (east) 東, *Nán* (south) 南, *Xī* (west) 西 and *Běi* (north) 北. The winds are also known as the 'Four Happiness' tiles, *Sì xǐ pái* 四喜牌.



The turn order in mahjong is anticlockwise - which is in Asia a common way to play games. East is the main wind and corresponds to the number 1; then follows south (2), then west (3) and then north (4). There are quite a few explanations why the wind directions in mahjong are reversed, for example that they represent the celestial positions as seen from the Taoist gods in the heaven. However, the most credible explanation is a more natural one. In China, the east wind blows in the spring and this is also the main wind associated with a good harvest. The south wind blows in the summer, the west wind in the fall and the north wind in the winter. During the year, the natural order of winds in China is therefore East → South → West → North. An easy mnemonic for remembering the order of the winds in mahjong is therefore:

Eat → Soy → With → Noodles.



In mahjong the turn order is anticlockwise, and east is followed by south



East wind

On western tiles, the east wind has the letter E, which stands for 'East' in English. The Chinese character 東 is pronounced *Dōng* and means 'east' or 'the east'. The sign consists of a stylized character 日 (*Rì*) meaning 'sun' or 'day': the sun appears on the horizon. To show that the sun is on the same level as the horizon, the sign for the sun is between the 木 trees that are on the horizon (木 *Mù* = tree). The east wind represents spring, the color green, the dragon and the element wood. *Mnemonic* : with some imagination the capital 'E' can be seen in the centre.



South wind

The letter S corresponds to 'South' in English. The Chinese character 南 is pronounced *Nán* and means also 'south'. The inner part of the sign, a Y with two horizontal stripes, represents lush vegetation. The outer part represents multiplication and growth. After all, the south represents the regions in which a luxuriant vegetation spreads everywhere, ie the land of lianas. The south wind represents summer, the color red, the phoenix and the element of fire. *Mnemonic*: with some imagination you can see the 'S' as a lightning bolt.



West wind

The letter W means 'West' in English. The Chinese character 西 is pronounced *Xī* and means also 'west'. An earlier version of this Chinese sign showed a resting bird, suggesting the sunset and its direction. The west wind represents autumn, the color white, the tiger and the element metal. *Mnemonic*: The lower part forms the capital 'W'.



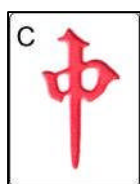
north wind

The letter N means 'North' in English. The Chinese character 北 is pronounced *Běi* and means also 'north'. The Chinese character 北 shows two people standing back to back. The Chinese emperor traditionally sat with his face facing the sun, i.e. to the south, and his back to the north. The north wind represents winter, the color black, the turtle and the element water. *Mnemonic* : The Chinese character resembles a reversed 'N'.

Dragons

The Dragons are an invention of Joseph Park Babcock, who first popularized the game in the west around 1922. Dragon tiles were invented after the wind tiles. The first of dragons which was added to the game was the white dragon (white tiles), and they originated from white reserve tiles in the mahjong sets. Around 1870 the red dragon tiles were created, while the green dragon tiles were added around 1880.

The Chinese call the dragon tiles the '*three fundamental tiles*', or *Sān yuán pái* (三元牌), and are also known as *Jiàn pái* 箭牌 meaning '*arrow tiles*' (from: shooting arrows). In fact, all the dragon tiles in the mahjong set have nothing to do with Chinese dragons, but were originally considered as three arrows. These arrows have different meanings and are derived from the ancient imperial exam: archery and knowing the main virtues of Confucius.



Red dragon

The Chinese character 中 is pronounced *Zhōng* and means 'middle' or 'centre'. This character represents 紅中 (*hóng zhōng*), meaning to have passed the Imperial Exam, which is a bull's-eye for archery and the Confucian virtue of benevolence.

The English tiles have the black letter C in the top corner, which indicates the first letter of the Anglicized 中 *zhōng*, namely '*chung*'. It is a traditional Chinese character that also denotes the name for China itself, meaning 中国 (*Zhōng guó*), which is 'land in the center', referring to the empire in the center of the world. The sign represents an arrow that splits an object in half. The red color symbolizes the Chinese dragon, the spirit of clouds, wind, sky and water. Red is both the color of fire and the color of the warm south. Since the sign also symbolizes the middle and the center, the red dragon can also be seen as the central dragon, i.e., the dragon that regulates the forces of nature. Red dragons cause both the fire from heaven (thunder and lightning) and the wonderful, warm south wind. The corresponding wind of the Red dragon in Asian 3-player mahjong is therefore the south wind.



On older tiles, released up to the 1920s, the red dragon had a different sign, 龍 *Lóng*, simply meaning "dragon". This dragon sign symbolized 'emperor' and was also the emblem for China.

Green dragon



The Chinese character on the tile symbolizes the Chinese word 發財 *Fa cái*, meaning 'get rich'. 發 *Fa* means 'arrow' and 財 *cái* means 'money' or 'wealth'.

Fa cái represents an archer releasing his drawn bow and the Confucian virtue of sincerity. The English tiles have the black letter F in the top corner, which indicates the character 發 *Fa*.

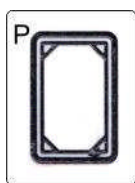
The Chinese character symbolizes '*shooting an arrow*', and represents an energetic action, for example producing, or taking off or acting. The Chinese sign bears little resemblance to shooting an arrow to us Westerners. However, at the bottom left the Chinese character for a bow 弓 *Gōng* can be seen. At the top is 𠂇 *Bō* which means '*to shoot*' and on the right is 𠂇 *Shū* which means '*lance*', '*peak*'.

The sign *Fa cái*, means both "prosperity" and "get rich." In fact, *Fa cái* can be written with two Chinese characters 發財, of which only the first character (*Fā*) appears on the tile. The green dragon symbolizes increasing prosperity, which can be seen as the recurring life energy caused by the cycle in nature. Green is also the color of nature, which sprouts in the form of new green plants every time after the fertile rains.

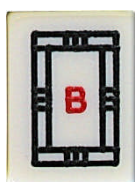


In the older mahjong sets, up to the 1920s, the green dragon had a different sign, *Fèng* (鳳), which means "phoenix" and symbolizes a bird. The bird sign symbolized 'empress' and 'prosperity'. Combined with the ancient sign for the red dragon, both ancient dragon tiles symbolized the eternal cycle of nature. The red dragon with the rains of the east wind makes the earth fertile. The phoenix represents the mythical bird that, according to legend, rises from its ashes every 100 years. In the game of mahjong, the phoenix refers to the ever-emerging new life, caused by the fertile rains of the east wind. The corresponding wind of the Green dragon in Asian 3-player mahjong is therefore the east wind.

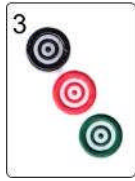
White dragon



The original blank tile of the white dragon represents in China 白板 which is pronounced as *Bái bǎn* and means 'white board' or 'blank'. *Bai ban* symbolizes freedom from corruption (*I am blanco*), a miss in archery or the Confucian virtue of filial piety. English language sets have the black letter B or P on the tile, which comes from the first letter of 白 (*Bái*). In the past, *Bái* was also written as *Pái*, hence the letter P. In the past, the white dragon tiles used to be completely white, which is why the Americans called the white dragon 'soap', referring to a white bar of soap. In modern sets, the white dragon usually has a blue or black border, to distinguish it from the all-white spare tiles. These tiles are nicknamed 'the carpet'.



The white dragon also symbolizes the balance in nature during the cycle of the seasons. Besides being the color of the west, white was also seen as the color of autumn. In that respect, the white dragon is the polar opposite of the red and green dragons, balancing their powerful dynamics. The corresponding wind of the White dragon in Asian 3 player mahjong is the west wind (or north if west is excluded).



DOTS

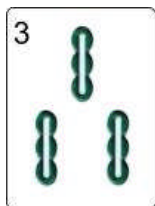
In Chinese the dots are called *Tǒngzi* 筒子 or 筒 *Tǒng*, both meaning 'coil'. They symbolize ancient Chinese copper coins, with a square hole in the middle. These coins became 筒 *Tǒng*, and this word can also be seen on old coins, see the image at right.



Dots are also known as circles, coins, wheels or tiles. The tile Dots-1 is usually depicted as a very large disc and is also known as the 'moon' or 'the cake'.



Chinese currency



BAMS - BAMBOOS

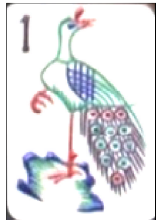
In Chinese the bamboos are called *Suǒ zi* 索子 (rope) and they are, like the dots, also derived from money. They actually represent rope strings (索 *Suǒ*) which bind 100 (吊 *diào*) or 1000 (貫 *guàn*) copper coins through the square holes in the middle.

The three bumps on the sticks represent the individual coins in the rope strings. The name of this suit, bamboos, originated from Joseph P. Babcock, an American who popularized Mahjong in the US around 1922's. He mistook the coins with a string for the knots on the trunks of bamboo plants.



Left: a rope string with Chinese coins. Right: a man from Sichuan with 13,500 coins in strings around his shoulders (1917, Republic of China).

Bamboo-1, the bird Pe-ling



Bamboo-1 is usually depicted as a bird and is often referred to the sparrow (麻雀- *má que*). In the Netherlands, bamboo-1 is known as *The Bird Pe-ling*. This name is derived from the Chinese word 百灵 *Bǎi líng*, meaning both lark and brown. The two characters mean 百 'hundred' and 灵 'ghosts' or 'intelligences'. According to Chinese symbolism, *Bǎi líng* 百灵 can therefore be read in three ways: as 'lark', as 'brown', or as '100 intelligences' or '100 ingenuities'. In short: the lark (and also the sparrow) is a brown bird, which indeed it is. The 100 intelligences refers to the many melodies that the lark can sing. *Bǎi líng* can therefore also be interpreted as 'singing beautifully' or as 'singer'.

Depending on the period in which the tiles were engraved, the images of bamboo-1 can differ considerably. On most tiles a bird is depicted, often a peacock. However, the oldest tiles (ca. 1910) show the true meaning of the bamboo tiles, namely a string with coins that is closed with a red knot. This form appears to have later 'evolved' into a bamboo shoot, which was morphed into a peacock's tail and finally into a peacock or in another bird.

Left, top to bottom: peacock, long-legged peacock, quail, and finally a modern tile with the 'Yao Ji' bird, which resembles a parakeet. Right, from top to bottom: string with coins and red knot, a bamboo shoot, a crane with a bamboo shoot for a tail, and a lark (or sparrow).



There are many varieties of Pe-ling bird

CRACKS - CHARACTERS



In Chinese the characters are called 萬子(*Wàn zǐ*). The big red Chinese character is the Chinese word 萬 *wàn*, means literally '10.000' or 'myriads' and 'uncountable', symbolizing "many" or "a great number." The black Chinese characters above the word *wàn* are the numbers 1 to 9, see the explanations below. Modern sets, from the 1970s and newer, have the complex *wàn* sign 萬, as shown at top left. Old mahjong sets, mainly from the 1920s and 1930s, have a different character for *wàn* in a simpler script, namely, 万, as shown at bottom left.



Just like the bamboos and the dots, the signs are derived from the money system in China. The red character can be interpreted as the number 10,000 and represents 100 series of 100 coins, tied together with a string (see the text under bamboo).

Meaning of the Chinese characters on the character tiles

一 **one** (1), *Yī*. This one stripe represents the original unity, the principle of numbering and the source of all being.

二 **two** (2), *Èr*. The two stripes represent the number of the earth, because it forms a pair with the sky. It also symbolizes the two principles of yin and yang.

三 **three** (3), *Sān*. The three stripes symbolize heaven, earth and humanity.

四 **four** (4), *Sì*. The Chinese character represents an 'even number', which can be easily divided into two halves. The sign represents the division into two halves.

伍 **five** (5), *Wǔ*. This character represents five 五(*Wú*) men forming a 人 unit (*Rén*, people, men) of five soldiers in ancient times. 伍(*Wǔ*) is a complex form of 五, which can be interpreted as the two principles of yin and yang (see the number two) that form the five elements between heaven and earth (a drawing with four sides and the middle).

六 **six** (6), *Liù*. Six is the even number that comes after four and, like two and four, is easily divisible. The character is derived from 四 (*Sì*, four), with the bottom border and two side borders removed and a dotted stripe added at the top.

七 **Seven** (7), *Qī*. A transverse line crosses at the seven 一 by a curved line, suggesting the imperfection of this number, which is less than 十 ten (*Shí*).

八 **Eight** (8), *Bā*. Eight consists of two separated slashes representing division (an eight consists of two parts).

九 **Nine** (9), *Jiǔ*. A drawing with a curved object suggesting a limit as the approach to the number ten (十, *Shí*).

FLOWERS TILES

Flowers tiles, or Flowers & Seasons (in the Netherlands known as the Luck tiles), are generally very different per mahjong set. Usually they represent all flowers, or four types of flowers and the four seasons. However, flower can also be depicted as professions, political Chinese events, Chinese beauties, or Chinese deities from the Taoist pantheon.



Flower tiles from a bamboo set of the 60s or 70s, owned by the Ferwerda family (NL)

The flowers represent the four plants of Confucius, a Chinese sage who lived from 551 to 479 BC. Confucius is the Latin variant of the original Chinese name, which is *Kǒng Fūzǐ* (孔夫子), or *Master K'ong*. The name *Kong* corresponds also to a series of four equal tiles, the kong. To promote the game in 1924 it was therefore suggested that the game was as old as Confucius. This was a sellers' fantasy of course: mahjong originated around 1850 or a little later.

The earliest known Chinese sets contain twelve flowers. Sets with large numbers of flowers were once popular in Northern China to play the game of 'Flower Mahjong' (花麻雀, *Huā máquè*). They usually had 20 or more flowers, according to some sources as many as 44 flowers. The numbers on the flower and season tiles represent the corresponding winds: 1 = east, 2 = south, 3 = west, and 4 = north.

Flowers

The flowers on modern sets usually have black Chinese characters and red Western numerals. On a recent Chinese set I own they look like this:

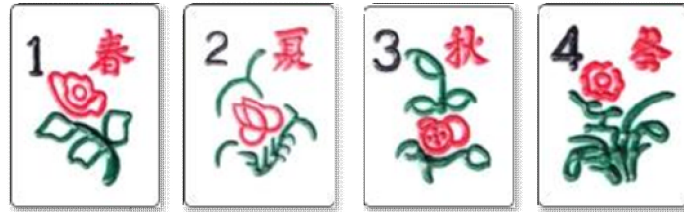


The tiles represent the following symbolism:

1. **plum** or **plum blossom** (梅, *méi*), symbolizing spring, innocence, inexperience and happiness. So whoever pulls this tile has 'beginner's luck'.
2. **orchid** (兰, *lán* or 蘭, *lán*), symbolizing refinement and things that are rare and precious. This tile reflects the refined player, the one who knows how to make rare combinations.
3. **chrysanthemum** (菊, *jú*), a cheerful flower, characteristic of leisure and entertainment. This tile represents the carefree player.
4. **bamboo** (竹, *zhú*) from thin bamboo stalks you can make a pen to write Chinese letters; bamboo therefore symbolizes writing, learning and scholarship. This tile reflects the intelligent player.

Seasons

The seasons usually have red Chinese characters and black Western numerals.



On modern tile sets, the seasons are usually depicted as flowers and they symbolize a profession with the following qualities:

1. **spring** (春, *haru*), represents a fisherman, which is a symbol of common sense and patience.
2. **summer** (夏, *natsu*), represents a lumberjack, which symbolizes success through an activity.
3. **autumn** (秋, *aki*), represents a farmer, which symbolizes physical, hard labor and rich rewards.
4. **winter** (冬, *fuyu*), represents a scholar or sage (according to some Confucius), symbolizing a developed mind and prudence.

Professions

In some old Mahjong sets, the seasons are depicted as real professions, such as these tiles below:



1. **fisherman** with the Chinese character 漁 *yú*, fish, derived from 漁民 *yúmín*, fisherman.
2. **lumberjack** with the character 樵 *qiao*, which means gather wood or firewood.
3. **farmer** with the character 耕 *gēng*, meaning tillage or ploughing.
4. **sage**, with the character 讀 *dú*, meaning to read or study.

Arts

I own an German plastic set from the 1960s, manufactured in Heidelberg, West-Germany. On this elegant set, the flowers are depicted as arts. They have red numbers and red Chinese characters, which correspond to the four civilized arts of traditional Chinese culture.



The arts are: (1) 棋 *qí*, the board game Go, (2) 琴 *qín*, the qin or qugin, an ancient Chinese string instrument similar to a zither, (3) 書 *shū*, calligraphy, and (4) 畫 *huà*, painting.

Prosperity

On the 1960's Heidelberg, set the seasons correspond to all kinds of prosperity. They have green numbers and green Chinese characters.



The numbers and Chinese characters on these tiles means: (1) 福 *fú*, happiness, (2) 祿 *lù*, prosperity, (3) 壽 *shòu*, longevity, and (4) 喜 *xǐ*, joy. Note that *Fú*, *lù* and *shòu* also refer to three Chinese deities and their associated properties.

Pets with prey and Chinese beauties

The tiles below are from a set of bone and bamboo I own and date back to the 1920s or 1930s. The flowers are indicated as pets with their prey and represent: a rooster (1) with a centipede (2), representing a 'worm') as prey, and a cat (3) with a mouse (4) as prey.



The seasons are depicted as Chinese ladies and successively represent: (1) 春 *Haru*, spring, (2) 夏 *natsu*, summer, (3) 秋 *aki*, autumn and (4) 冬 *fuyu*, winter.



Chinese Mythological figures

The flowertiles below comes from a set of bone and bamboo I have, and date from somewhere between 1950 and 1970. There are no numbers or symbols on these tiles, but mythological figures. Many of these figures are Taoist deities from Chinese mythology, including the so-called 'Eight Immortals'.



Sun Wukong, the monkey king. A well-known mythical figure in China, usually depicted running on a cloud. Born from a tile as a monkey, he possesses supernatural powers through the practice of Tao.



Zhao Gongming , a Taoist god of wealth. In one hand he holds a gold bar, in the other a magical iron whip. Often depicted seated; the yellow border on the right is probably a chair.



Li Tieguai (Li T'ieh-kuai) , one of the Eight Immortals . Bad-tempered, but benevolent to the poor and sick. Often depicted as an old man with a tousled beard. He walks with an iron crutch and often has a gourd slung over his shoulder.



Lu Dongbin , one of the Eight Immortals . A scholar who likes to help people to gain wisdom and learn the Tao . In his hand he has a fly swatter, a symbol for someone who can fly.



Guan Yin (Kwan Yin), the Chinese Buddhist goddess of mercy. She is depicted with a water jar in her left hand, a green willow branch in her right hand and a Buddha crown.



Zhang Guo (Chang Kuo-lao), one of the Eight Immortals . He usually rides backwards on his magic mule that could run 1,000 miles a day. He carries a so-called ' fish-drum ' (Yugu), a tubular bamboo drum with iron sticks. On Sloperama, Tom Sloper's site, Zhang Guo it is suggested to be a rich man, riding on a horse, possibly the emperor. This is a common interpretation of this tile, but not very accurate if *all* the tiles represents Chinese mythological figures, like this set.



Han Hsiang-Tzu , one of the Eight Immortals . He represents the youth. He became immortal by eating one of the peaches of immortality. He carries a basket of fruit or flowers with him.



Zhongli Quan , one of the Eight Immortals in the Taoist pantheon. According to legend, he wields a large fan with which he can revive the dead and turn tiles into silver or gold.

Jokers

In America Jokers are a standard part of the Mah-Jongg game, but in Europe they can be found only in the older sets which were produced for the European market. The newer European sets, generally don't contain any jokers.

Joker tiles can be recognized by the word JOKER or by the Chinese characters 百搭, meaning *Bǎi dā* which means 'everything matches'. The words 'everything matches', of course, refers to the function of the joker, since a joker can substitute every kind of tile in the game. In Chinese, *Bǎi dā* can also be read as 'joker'.

Symbolically *Bǎi dā* can be read as the '100 possibilities', which is the general purpose of the joker in the game. Note that the Chinese characters and the word 'Joker' are usually in red, which in China symbolizes the color of luck.



*Jokers in the mahjong game can vary considerably per set.
The two red Chinese characters mean Bǎi dā (everything matches)*

NICKNAMES

Players in Europe, America and Australia have come up with nicknames for many mahjong tiles. If during the evening the fun and atmosphere during the game increases, the nickname for a tile is often used when it is put away on the table. Below is an overview of the most common nicknames.

Nicknames for Bamboos (Bambs)



birdy, the bird Pe-ling , chirp, duck, parakeet, peacock, sparrow, lark



chopsticks, yoke, snail, stretcher, pole stick, carrying pole



Tripod, tricycle



Box
In Dutch: '*stier fokken*', which means 'bull breeding' and is the reverse of the Dutch '*vier stokken*'



5 fingers



tank, dollhouse



fence, gate, Kings college chapel, River Kwai (the bridge that crosses here, German: weltmeister (W+M), which means World Champion.



bamboo forest, electric railway

Nicknames for Dots



The moon, cake, pizza, lid, euro, Big Ben, asshole



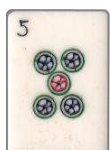
glasses , bicycle , mr. Magoo, small stove, college cooker



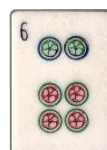
traffic light, tricycle



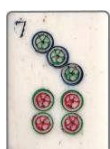
Large stove, cooker, taxi



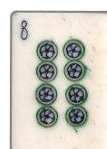
plum blossom



jeep



crane



coffin, trolley bus



ball tent, carpetland

Nicknames for Characters (Cracks)



flatliner



Teeth



James Bond (no. 7, the sign also looks a bit like a gun)



Pi



lasagna



Speedy Gonzalez , Running Man
(the character resembles a running man)



tent, wigwam

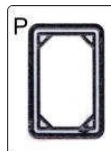
Nicknames for Winds and Dragons



roast duck, Eddy, Elly or Ella
(because of the E)



Normy or Norma (because of the N)



carpet, Po or Pete (because of the P), Bo or Bob (if there is a B on the tile).



blood, dagger, broiler, cancer stick,
Charles (because of the C)



helicopter , Wally or Wanda
(because of the W)



Sammy or Sally (because of the S)



soap (white dragon)



green beans, the Jade Monkey, Fa,
Fat or Fred (because of the F). In
Dutch: Foene Draak (Freen Dragon)

THE NAME OF THE GAME

The very first descriptions of mahjong are relatively recent and date back to the 1890s, when the game was known in China under various names, including *chung fa* , *que ma que* or *má que* (in Cantonese : *mah cheuk*). In any case, the Chinese did **not** call it "mah-jong" at that time, that name was not used until the beginning of the 20th century.

The American Joseph Babcock introduced the game to the United States in 1920. Commercially, he probably thought the name "mahjong" sounded better than *mah que* , and he decided to introduce the game as ' Mah-Jongg ' , with a hyphen and two 'g's. Babcock patented the rules of the game and trademarked the name Mah-Jongg . The result was that the original Chinese name 麻雀 *Ma Que* was lost.



Actor and celebrity Fred Astaire (right) and his sister Adele play Mah-Jongg (1926).

Mah que now means Mahjong in Chinese, but consists of the words 麻 *Mah* (*hemp, flax*) and 雀 *que* (*bird, sparrow*) . In short, *Mah què* can also be translated as 'sparrow', 'flax sparrow' and even 'hemp bird'. Flax and hemp represent the colors brown, gray, black and white. Hemp birds are therefore brown birds with gray, black and white, which correspond to sparrows. *Máh què* the original word for the game, actually means 'Sparrows' - so it is the 'game of sparrows'. The word 'Sparrows' seems far-fetched, but when the tiles are mixed on the table, they actually make the sound of a group of chattering sparrows. This 'sparrow sound' is most obvious when the tiles are made of bone and bamboo, especially when heard from a distance.

Babcock 's efforts made the game immensely popular in the early 1920s, both in the United States and in Europe. Other entrepreneurs, rulebook-authors and companies began to publish their own books and sets of tiles, but because of Babcock's trademark they were not allowed to use the name ' Mah-jongg ' . So they came up with other names, including Ma Chong , Ma Chiang , Ma Cheuck , Pung Chow , Pe-Ling and 'The Game of 1000 Wonders'. In the Netherlands the game eventually became known under the name 'mahjong'. In the United States and Canada, the game largely retains Babcock's spelling and is still called Mah-Jongg.

Due to the Western appropriation of the name mahjong, the Chinese have decided to stop naming their own game 麻雀 *mah què* (sparrows). The official name of mahjong in China is today 麻將, *Má-jiang* . This word can be translated as 'hemp leader', 'jute general' or 'flax commander' .

MAHJONG: THE GAME OF MANY NAMES...

Because the name mahjong was originally patented as mah-jongg, numerous other names for the game have emerged over time. This has not led to a clear understanding of the correct name, but it is interesting to list all the used names for just one game ...

Lung Chan
Lung-Chang
Ma Chang
Ma Chueh
Mom Cheuk
Ma Chongg
Mon Chiong
Ma Jiang
Ma Qiao
Mon Que
Mon Search
Maajann
Mahjong
Mah Cheek
Mah Choh
Mah Deuck
Mah diao

Mah Jang
Mah Young
Mah Young
Mah juck
Mah Jung
Mah Boy
Mayan
Mark Chuk
Mark Juck
Ma- Ch'iau
Mon- Jung
Mah-Cheuck
Man-Chu
Mah-Jhong
Mah-Jong
Mah-Jongg
Mah-Johng

Moy Gam
Muh Juhng
Pe Ling
Pung Chow
Pung -Chow
Pung Wed
Pung Woo

The Game of Sparrow

Ancient Game of the Mandarins

The Ancient Game of China

The Chinese Game of Four Winds

The Game of 1000 wonders

The correct name is Mahjong, Mah-Jongg or Mah Jongg (all these names are OK)

