

A 2.5 metre by 2.5 metre table, four chairs and 144 tiles - this is all you need for a game of mahjong. It can keep the rich and poor, the old and young, entertained for hours, even days. The clacking sound of mahjong tiles can be heard all around us, at wedding banquets, family gatherings, in housing estates and in the villages of the New Territories. There are even songs sung about it and movies made about it.

Chinese people are so enamoured of the game that scholars and intellectuals have taken an interest in the phenomenon. In 2008, the Chinese Cultural Exchange Association tried to apply for World Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection for mahjong, albeit unsuccessfully.

What is it about the game that so reflects social bonding in Chinese cultures?

Every Sunday morning, four friends meet at a newly refurbished clubhouse on a private housing development in Hong Kong. Rain or shine, like clockwork, the mahjong table is always carefully set up by 11 a.m. One of the friends, Kenneth Tse, fiddles with a tile as he decides what his first move should be. He pauses and eyes everyone at the table. Finally, he places the tile he was holding in the middle of the table.

“*Sik Wu!*” Chan shouts as he tips his tiles over. It was just the tile he needed to win and he giggles with excitement. His friend Wong smiles an envious smile and says to another player, Kwai, “I knew you wanted this (tile) so I kept it.”

The game lasts the whole day, and the atmosphere and the way the players play changes with every round. One round may be played just for fun, while another is all about winning, by the next round people may not be concentrating as much because they have something more important on their minds.

Mahjong is seen as a reflection of daily life. People see similarities between

# Life on the Mahjong table

by Chan Ka-yan



life in the “four-walled city” with life at the office and in the economic, political and the cultural arenas. And the game is seen as a mirror of a person’s true

character. Players may seem friendly enough, but there maybe more to them than meets the eye. They could be weighing up their options, mentally listing pros and cons.

So, the next time you want to see what type of person a friend is, you can try to play a game of mahjong with them.

Kenneth Tse says that once players sit down at the mahjong table, their personalities become more apparent by the way they play. Chinese describe this as *paai bun*, or ethics of mahjong. With 20 years of playing experience,

Tse has witnessed different *paai bun*. “Some (people) are emotional, nervous, mean and dishonest whereas some are tolerant, decent and generous,” he says.

Tse explains that people can involuntarily display traits which indicate whether they have a good or a bad hand. For example, somebody with a good hand might giggle or smile, or they may rub the jade ring on their pinkie finger like one of the characters in the film *God of Gamblers*. However if they have a bad hand they might mutter something under their breath or just sigh out loud. There has been at least one documented case of a player getting so excited during a game of mahjong that he died of a heart attack.

Tse goes on to cite a Chinese tradition of mothers inviting prospective sons-in-law to play mahjong so they can discover their personality and see what they are really like. The suitor is strongly advised to let the prospective mother-in-law win, every time.

Mahjong is more than a fun game that reveals an individual's personality. It can also reflect how Chinese societies have changed over time. Horace Chin Wan-kan, an assistant professor at the Department of Chinese at Lingnan University, is an expert on Chinese leisure culture. Over coffee at a western café, he tells *Varsity* about how Chinese leisure activities have changed over two centuries.

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There are different theories about the origins of mahjong, but Chin says the game was popular in the southern Yangtze region during the Qing dynasty. During this period, soldiers, government officials and businessmen treated it as a socialising tool. The commercial nature of the tiles are obvious from the different



Kenneth Tse plays mahjong with his friends every week.

suits in the game, *tongzi* are derived from copper coins, the bamboo suit evolved from the rope used to string the coins together, and the *wan* of the characters suit represent hundreds of strings of copper coins.

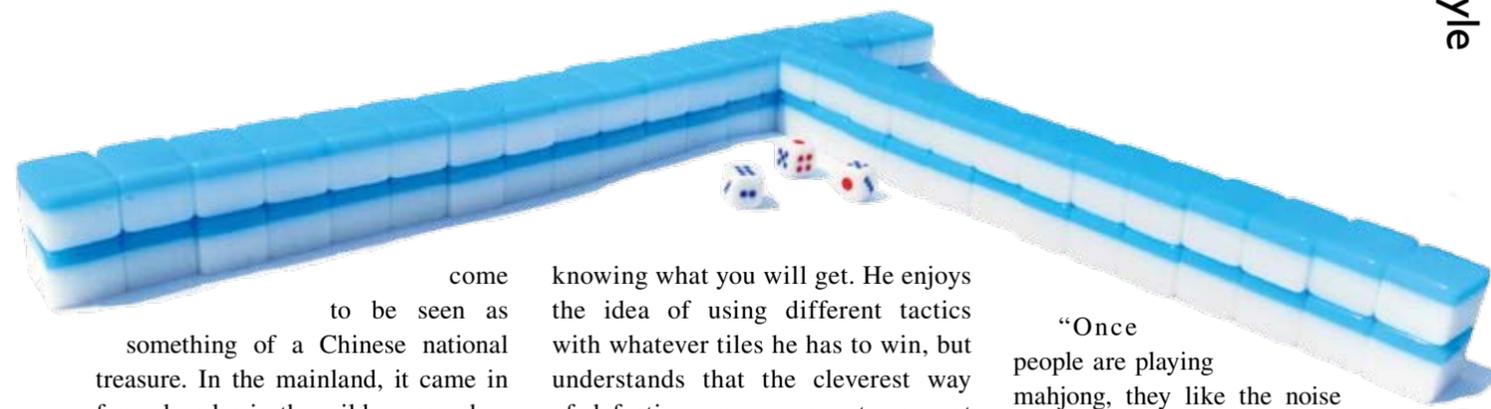
If you travelled back in time to the Qing dynasty, you would find members of the educated class, or literati, would not want to play mahjong with you. At that time, it was regarded as an activity for the lower classes and a form of gambling. The upper class literati preferred to play Chinese chess, which was regarded as a more intelligent form

of entertainment since they could admire their opponent's tactics and appreciate their strategy.

In the 1960s and 1970s, western activities were regarded as prestigious in colonial Hong Kong, particularly among educated people. They played bridge in order to show they were different to people from other classes and social positions. Mahjong, during that period, was popular among the working classes of Hong Kong. Chan remembers that when he was at university, he “was not allowed to play by my family because people looked down on this activity.”

Since then, things have changed.

Mahjong has



come to be seen as something of a Chinese national treasure. In the mainland, it came in from decades in the wilderness, when the government lifted the ban on the game (although gambling is still prohibited) in 1985.

**“Once people are playing mahjong, they like the noise and the interaction.”**

In Hong Kong, the social structure has changed since manufacturing headed north to the mainland. There are now few of the industrial workers who once made up a big part of the mahjong-playing population and the game has become a much more acceptable leisure activity, popular with both the middle-class and the working class. Researchers also found that playing mahjong could help to alleviate the symptoms of dementia and improve cognitive functioning in the elderly. There has even been the development of mahjong therapy.

Everyone wants to *Sik Wu* in mahjong. But even a skilful player can lose with the wrong tile, and a poor player can win with a good tile. For Kenneth Tse, the most exciting part of mahjong is the idea of not

knowing what you will get. He enjoys the idea of using different tactics with whatever tiles he has to win, but understands that the cleverest way of defeating your opponent may not always let you win. Mahjong, he says, is “Half talent, half luck.”

Some people try to make their own luck. Mahjong superstitions abound: some players like to change their seating position at the table, some may wear red underwear.

But it is not just the *fung shui* and other superstitious elements that differentiates mahjong from other games. You always know when a game of mahjong is being played by the noise. This is what is particularly appealing to John France, a British student who is now taking the advanced level mahjong course at the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA).

“Once people are playing mahjong, they like the noise and the interaction,” he says. Unlike the Chinese folk who chat, laugh and even shout at the mahjong table, France doesn't really participate in the socialising. He is too busy figuring out his hand and trying to translate what each tile means.

For most Hong Kongers, there is nothing strange about the phenomenon. Every lunar New Year, when visiting friends and family, you will be greeted with the clack, clack, clack of mahjong tiles and cries of “*Sik Wu!*” and the “*Yeeee*”, the moment you step out of the lift and into the corridor outside the flat.

Gao Yutian, a scholar at the Chinese Academy of Social Science, the most prestigious mainland research institute for philosophy and social science, explains this phenomenon in his “Mahjong Poem”. He says for mahjong, the four players and people around them can talk, joke and entertain each other along with sounds of the rattling tiles however long they play. It is the spirit of the game and the sounds of the players that bring people together like a family.

Just by participating in or observing a complex and fun game of mahjong, you can understand Chinese characters, social bonding and history. There is a saying in Chinese: Where there are Chinese, there is mahjong. 



Horace Chin Wan-kan talks about the transition of mahjong culture in China.