

History of the Game of Mahjong



The counters dice and wind discs have been portrayed as far back as the Han Dynasty (202BC-220AD). Records of the Chung Dynasty 960-1279AD show a similar game to Mahjong known as Ma Chuek which was played with 40 curved pieces similar to dominoes, as a gambling game. So the origin is partly based on a Chinese form of dominoes and a card game similar to rummy called '108 Brigands' popular since 17th century [There are 108 suit tiles in the game of Mahjong]

Mahjong as we know it is believed to have developed in the Ningpo region of China in the 1870s – it was further developed in China with each region having its own rules with special hands. Chinese children learned to play by watching, so there were no written instructions – no standardised rules.

Joseph P Babcock who was a rep for the Standard Oil Company in Suzhou collected and interpreted the many conflicting variations throughout China. Arabic numbers engraved on to the tiles were first intro by Mr Babcock in 1920 when he imported to the USA sets of tiles in sufficient quantity. He simplified the game and introduced a standard set of rules which could easily be understood giving us the game of Mahjong as we know it today.

In its present form Mahjong is most closely linked to rummy - Sets of 3 or 4 tiles to complete a set common in both games. It has its own terminology and suits - there are 108 suit tiles, 16 wind tiles, 12 dragon tiles, four flower tiles and 4 season tiles – total 144 [in some sets there are 4 white 'joker' tiles – if these are not available the 2 Bamboos are used as the joker tiles] If no one goes Mahjong a deciding game called a 'Goulash' is played. The game has evolved in China, Japan, NZ, US & Britain with differing national characteristics.

The Chinese game is a fast, noisy and stylised form of rummy played for high stakes, whereas the Western game appears to Eastern eyes as slow, unnecessarily complicated and of little interest as far as gambling is concerned.