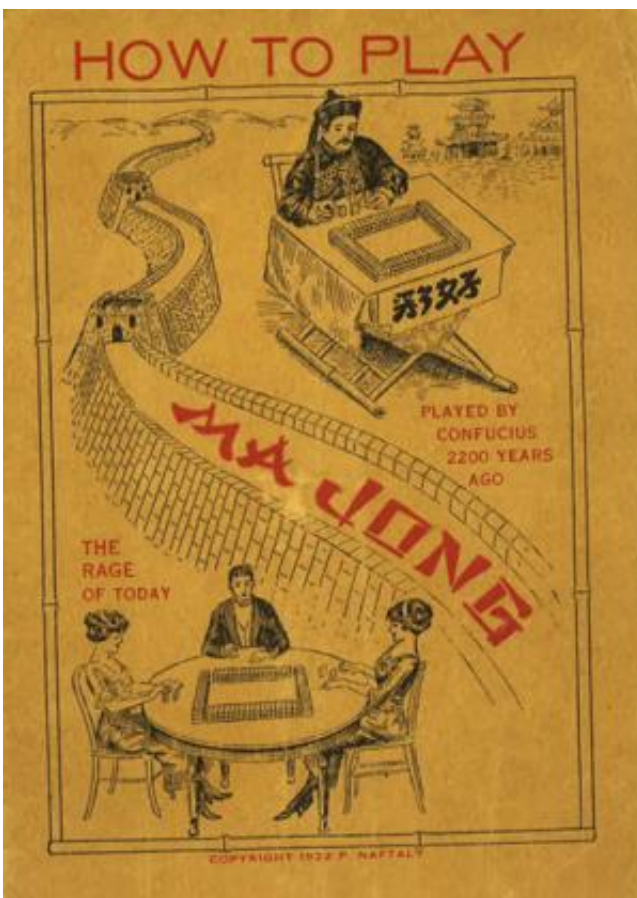


From China to US, the game of mahjong shaped modern America, says Stanford scholar

July 16 2013, by Ashley Walters



Game manuals often depicted imaginary Chinese histories. This manual, 'How to Play Ma Jong,' published by Philip Naftaly in 1922, is subtitled 'Played by Confucius 2200 Years Ago, The Rage of Today.'

For many Americans, the Chinese game of mahjong evokes images of mustachioed ancient mandarins, elderly women sitting around a card table or a solitary computer game.

However, as one Stanford scholar has discovered, there are significant discrepancies between the mahjong of the American popular imagination and the tile [game](#) that has played an important role in developing American culture.

Through research that spans continents and centuries, Annelise Heinz, a [doctoral candidate](#) in Stanford's Department of History, has found that both Jewish American and Chinese American communities were built around mahjong during the 20th century.

A game of skill played by four people with domino-like tiles, mahjong is still very much a Chinese game, Heinz said, though it has transcended boundaries and evolved "to also become truly American."

Heinz called mahjong a "remarkable game that has retained its core interest and beauty across time and distance," adding that it offers "a rich and compelling topic of historical inquiry."

Unlike other leisure games in which "high-stakes partner relationships" pit players against one another, Heinz said that mahjong requires cooperation and strategy between players, which creates an "ideal forum for interaction between people."

Though diverse groups of Americans played mahjong in the 1920s, Heinz believes that the [social aspects](#) of the game help to account for its importance and longevity among minority ethnic communities.

Whether the game was played among friends in a Chinatown [apartment building](#) in 1930s San Francisco or in a Jewish Brooklyn home in the

1950s, Heinz said it provided the basis for essential social interactions.

"You'll hear people talking about playing with their mahjong group for over 40 years," Heinz said, "and they have seen each other through births, deaths and divorces."

A historical 'treasure hunt'

Heinz first learned to play mahjong from a friend while living in Southwest China, where she taught English to graduate students at Yunnan University. Heinz became interested in exploring how mahjong "spoke to this theme of cultural exchange and interaction between the U.S. and China in the 20th century."

As a graduate student, Heinz began a transnational study of the game, investigating issues of race and gender along with economic, social and cultural histories.

Because mahjong crossed the Pacific in the early 1920s and took on a life of its own in the United States, Heinz said, the history of the game reveals the ways in which "Americans interacted with objects, ideas and one another in a globalizing world."

Although the history of mahjong is contested, game experts generally agree that it evolved near Shanghai in the mid- or late-1800s. It quickly became popular in Shanghai and Beijing, and eventually among American expatriates. Entrepreneurs and American tourists brought the game to the United States, where it spread like wildfire in the early 1920s.

Heinz found an "incredible amount of cultural production" about mahjong, such as plays, films, music, photographs, rulebooks and even a ballet starring a Vanderbilt daughter.

However, a dearth of source materials relating to the game's early history meant that Heinz had to conduct a significant amount of field research, which she likened to a treasure hunt.

The game manufacturer Parker Brothers (now a subsidiary of Hasbro) helped to popularize mahjong in 1920's American retail outlets, so Heinz delved into the company's archives in Western Massachusetts. She found original mahjong sets from the early 1920s, as well as two extensive scrapbooks containing hundreds of newspaper clippings and a run of photographs of the Mah-Jongg Sales Company factory in Shanghai.

She also conducted over 40 oral histories with mahjong players whose memories span its initial popularity in the 1920s to its heyday in postwar Jewish communities.

Heinz recounted one "wonderful, serendipitous" interview with a Jewish woman in White Plains, N.Y.

"I knew I was going to interview her, but she expanded the interview to her neighbors and friends" in the apartment complex, Heinz said. It became a "rotating door of people whom she played mahjong with and knew."

At one point, the woman remembered that her neighbor had once made mahjong sets. She invited him to join the interview, and he explained how he and his wife "ran a tiny mahjong factory right after World War II in Manhattan, in the lofts."

This sort of "microeconomic microhistory" is entirely invisible from many historical sources, Heinz said.

A community-building game

Heinz's focus on the social elements of the game led her to consider the similarities and differences between the American Jewish and American Chinese communities.

Culturally, mahjong was important in Chinatown in the 1920s and '30s, as it gave Chinese Americans a cultural bond at a time when other many other Americans saw them as "perpetual foreigners."

In many cases, mahjong also became an important way of navigating the internal, gendered and generational divides within Chinatown. Mahjong, Heinz asserts, offered the opportunity for people of different backgrounds to sit down and play together, creating a shared heritage.

In the decades during and after World War II, Heinz found, mahjong became the basis of important community building among American Jewish women. As families moved away from crowded urban centers in the postwar years, they encountered feelings of isolation in new suburban areas. Young Jewish mothers often "turned to mahjong as a way of building new social networks," Heinz said.

Heinz said that part of the reason mahjong was associated with Jewish women was because they held powerful positions as "leaders, entrepreneurs and game-smiths who created and nurtured American mahjong," especially through the development of the National Mah Jongg League in New York.

By the 1960s, mahjong became stereotyped – often negatively – as a game played by American Jewish mothers.

"Mahjong became a symbol of women who had nothing better to do," Heinz said, even though "poker hasn't become a game for men who have nothing better to do."

"Women face harsher scrutiny for seemingly self-centered entertainment," she argues.

Mahjong renaissance

Mahjong isn't as popular as it once was, but Heinz believes that the aesthetic appeal of the game and its enjoyable intellectual challenge, combined with its deep cultural heritage, has contributed to a renewed attraction of younger generations.

"Many of the Jewish daughters who once rejected mahjong are now returning to the game as a way to connect with their Jewish identities and rekindle memories of their mothers," Heinz said.

She described a small renaissance occurring in the United States as younger and middle-aged women and men, often Jewish or Chinese, become interested in the game their parents and grandparents played.

Also, many retirees, who now have the free time to learn the game, are using mahjong as a way to build new friendships in retirement communities.

Heinz noted that American mahjong is becoming increasingly diverse. Many veteran players are crossing ethnic and generational boundaries to learn other styles of play.

Walking through the alleys of San Francisco's Chinatown, Heinz said, "You can hear the clicking of tiles through windows almost any time of day."

Ashley Walters is a doctoral student in Jewish history at Stanford. For more news about the humanities at Stanford, visit the [Human Experience](#).

Provided by Stanford University

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