

# A Brief History of Mah Jongg

Faye Sholiton





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### **The Rich History of Mah Jongg**

Mah Jongg was developed in the mid-to-late 1800s in the gambling houses of China. In the 1920's, a Standard Oil executive learned the game while working in China. He and his wife enjoyed it so much, he brought it to the United States. To help sell the game, he simplified the rules and attributed its origins with Confucius. The game was a national fad, associated with Hollywood celebrities and First Lady Harding. In the late 1930's a group of Jewish women simplified the game further, standardized the rules and created the National Mah-jongg League. The tradition of playing Mah Jongg in Jewish American homes continues today.

For more reading on this subject, consider these resources:

Heinze, Annelise. *Mahjong: A Chinese Game and the Making of Modern American Culture*. Oxford University Press. 2021

Click here for an American Historical Review Article:

Annelise Heinz, "Maid's Day Off": Leisured Domesticity in the Mid-Twentieth-Century United States, *The American Historical Review*, Volume 124, Issue 4, October 2019, Pages 1316–1331, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/rhz642>

A BRIEF HISTORY OF MAH JONGG

by

Faye Sholiton

*For my mother – and her friends.*

Cast

JANET: Age 75. Organized a Mah Jongg game in 1970 that marked the rhythms of her adult life. She kept a journal about the four friends who met every Monday for 20 years. A devoted wife and mother. Kept an immaculate house but couldn't (or wouldn't) boil water. Died in March 2012.

WINNIE: Also 75. Janet's lifelong friend. A bitter divorce left her scrambling to support her children. Through it all she never missed a Mahj game, a house payment, or a chance to eat dessert.

HELEN: At 78, she is a former beauty queen who can find a man without even trying. Her motto, not shared by her daughter, is, "Grab a man and keep him happy. If he's got a bank account, so much the better." She's fun to be with, hard to shop for. A good time as long as she's not your mother.

MARJ: 72 years old and the only player at the table who actually cares about the game. Does everything by the book and owns thousands of them. Cared for elderly parents for years, leaving her available only on Monday afternoons.

LISSA: Janet's daughter, now 45. An expert on all things environmental. Shortly after her mother's death, she has convened the Monday Girls for an explanation of what abruptly ended their game 22 years earlier.

YOUNG LISSA: Janet's daughter as she was at age 20. Passionate, angry, hypercritical. Can be performed by the stage directions' reader.

Place

The living room of a suburban Cleveland home.

Time

April 2012.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF MAH JONGG

*Setting: A stage cluttered with moving boxes and packing material. At Center is a card table with four chairs. The table is set for a Mah Jongg game. Under the table is a thin suitcase.*

*At Rise: JANET enters and looks around. Noticing a bound journal, she picks it up.*

JANET: (*reading*) "A Brief History of Mah Jongg. (*And then from memory.*) April 6, 1970. It is said that the game of Mah Jongg is some twenty-six hundred years old, arriving in China around the time of Confucius, inexplicably, centuries before the invention of carryout containers. [...]"

But American Mah Jongg came much later, specifically the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when our *bubbes* on the East Coast discovered that something was missing from their lives. Carryout food, for one. And while they were at it, they decorated the living room...which until now had stood empty as a desert...with Chinoiserie. I love that word. It sounds like *chazzeraï* and connotes 'something you could live without, by why should you?

Around the same time, our foremothers also began collecting thin little suitcases that held little ivory tiles. They set aside three or four hours every week, same time always, and declared it Mahj Day or Mahj Night. Always with the same people. Other women who spoke the language of "one crack, two dot, three bam." "Soap" had a whole new meaning.

These women passed their sets to their girls. And God forbid they had more than one daughter. I mean, with sons, you could divide up the football tickets, fifty-fifty, or the proceeds from the house. But with daughters...how do you split a Mahj set? It was a riddle for King Solomon.

The men learned to tolerate the whole package, ignoring the oversize furniture and *chotchkes* that turned the living room into a Hong Kong bazaar. They even got a taste for egg foo yung, which with a little imagination and a bagel, could have been served at Sunday brunch. ...

We've picked Monday. Monday afternoon. It's going to be just the four of us: Helen, Winnie, Marjie and me. No substitutes. We plan to collect a few quarters every week to put toward a vacation somewhere.

In the meantime, Mondays will be our little gift to ourselves. Winnie calls it our reward for getting to a new week. I, of course, have no room to talk since I haven't changed my first diaper yet. But that will change in June. God willing. I hope it's a girl. I've already picked her name. Lissa. For my mother who left me her Mahj set.

The game is here today. I brought in egg rolls and egg foo yung. We'll eat under the needlepoint that Don had made for me. It says, Janet's kitchen. Never Open. He won't say so, but tonight, I think he's actually looking forward to the leftovers."

*(Off stage, chatter increases. HELEN, WINNIE and MARJ enter, engaged in conversation. They will not notice JANET at any time. But when they see the table, already set with racks and tiles, they stop in their tracks.)*

WINNIE: *(looking skyward)* Oh, Janet.

JANET: Winnie. Dear Winnie.

HELEN: Glad she's not around to see *this*.

WINNIE: Are you kidding?

HELEN: I was referring to the mess!

WINNIE: She'd be thrilled to see us again!

HELEN: She can see us.

WINNIE: You think? You think she's also a little sad, then?

MARJ: She's dead, Winnie.

WINNIE: I know that.

MARJ: As such, she doesn't feel much of anything.

JANET: *(She points an index finger at MARJ.)* Zzzzt!

*(MARJ slaps her neck, baffled.)*

WINNIE: Still, it's a shame.

HELEN: She loved this place.

MARJ: Not the kitchen. The woman couldn't boil an egg.

JANET: (*pointing*) Zzzt!

(*MARJ slaps her neck, as before.*)

WINNIE: What I meant... it's a shame she's not here for ...*us*.

MARJ: Since when do we get mosquitoes in Cleveland this time of year?

WINNIE: Ask Lissa. She'll quote you chapter and verse on climate change. Anyway, it was nice of her to invite us back.

MARJ: Was it?

WINNIE: Yes!

HELEN: She must've had a reason.

MARJ: Safe to say, it wasn't about the game.

WINNIE: Could we give her the benefit of the doubt? She served a beautiful lunch. Catered.

MARJ: You can doll it up all you want. Tuna salad is tuna salad.

WINNIE: And the éclairs were sinful.

MARJ: Winnie, your bundt cake was sinful.

WINNIE: Served on Janet's china, for heaven's sake!

HELEN: First time I've ever seen it.

MARJ: But we were still relegated to the kitchen.



HELEN: Her mother's daughter.

WINNIE: "Don't mahj where you eat." *That* should have been on the needlepoint.

MARJ: I felt like we were the last ants at a picnic.

JANET: (*pointing*) Zzzzt!  
(*MARJ slaps her neck again, more baffled than ever.*)

WINNIE: It was delicious. And I didn't see one scrap of food left on either of your plates. Here she comes. (*LISSA, 45, enters, drying her hands. JANET looks on.*) Lunch was delicious, honey. Mom would have been proud.

LISSA: Mom would've asked me why I used the china. Can I get anybody anything else?

WINNIE: We're fine.

## END OF FREEVIEW

*You'll want to read and perform this show!*