



# A Short History Mah Jongg

麻將



# Meet the Presenter Susan Coombes

MSU Graduate Art History/Communications

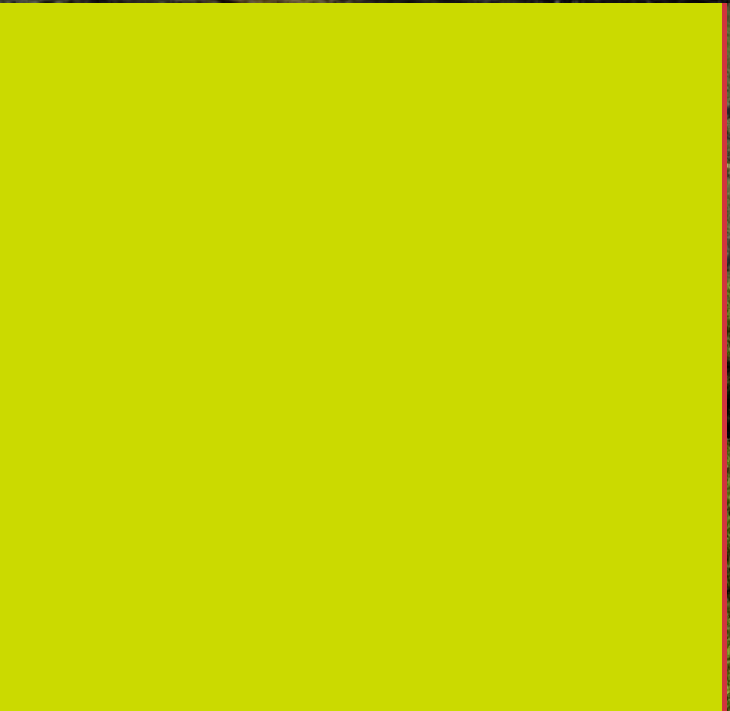
Lived and worked in Europe, Africa and Asia

14 Years in Asia (Singapore & Hong Kong)

Chinese name Zhong Xiao Hua

Small business owner in downtown GR

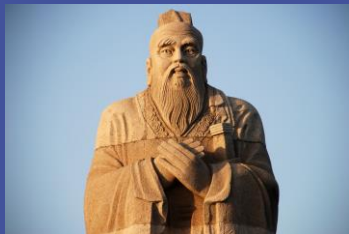




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# Mah Jongg Origin Stories

Confucius  
invented it in  
500bc



Chinese  
Noblewomen  
in the court of  
King of Wu  
(900ad)invented  
it to stave off  
boredom



It was played on  
Noah's Ark



An army officer  
invented it to  
entertain the  
troops during  
the Taiping  
Rebellion



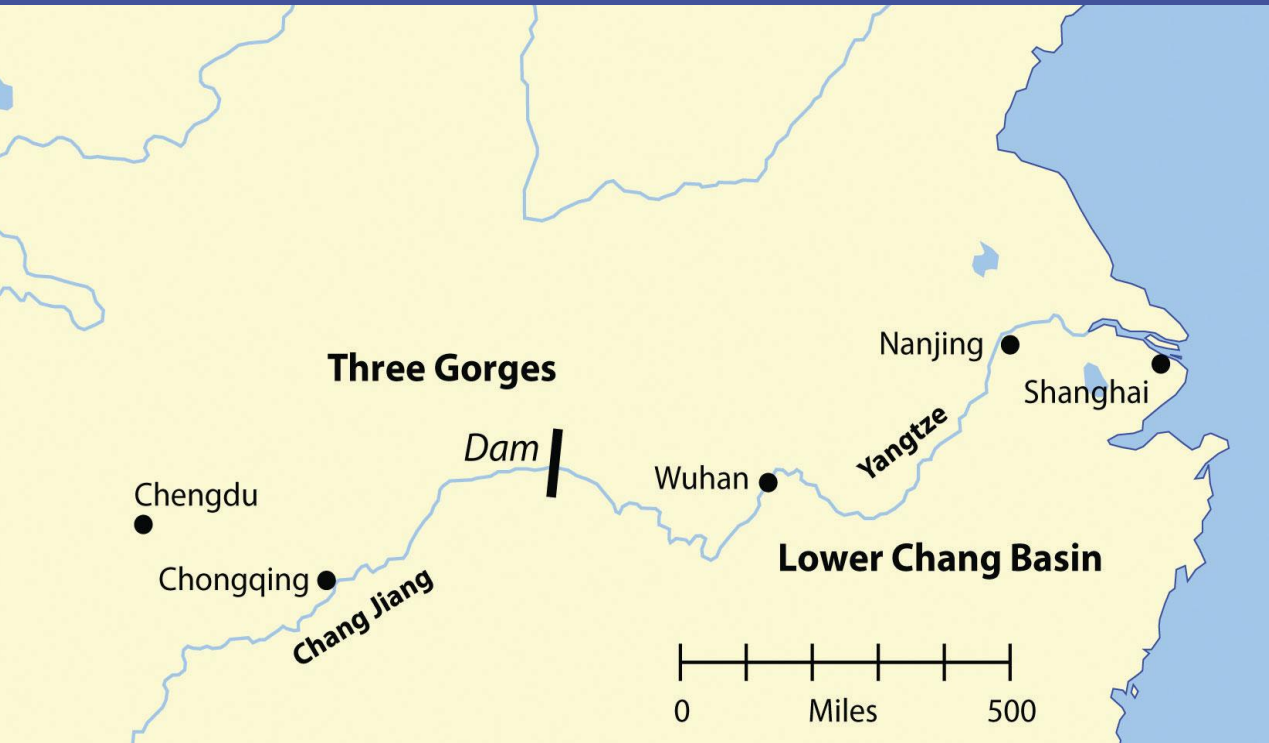


Two brothers  
in Ningbo  
invented it

A Shanghai  
nobleman  
invented it

## More Mah Jongg Origin Stories

Chinese researchers believe it was created in the provinces of Kiangsu, Anhwei and Chekiang near Shanghai. The game was most likely based on Mah-Taie a card game similar to gin rummy.



# Yangtze River Basin

Mah Jongg has many and varies origin stories but most agree that it was “invented” in the Yang Zi Delta, near Ningbo and Shanghai

# China 1850-1949

## Highlights

1850 -1864 Taiping Rebellion

1861 – Empress Cixi gains power

1850? Mah Joong invented

1895 – Foreign concessions established

1900 – Boxer Rebellion

1912 – Qing Dynastly falls

1912 – Republic established headed by Sun Yat-Sen

1916-1927 – Warlord Era

1927-1937 – Kuo Ming Tang era , prosperity

1937-1945 2<sup>nd</sup> Sino Japanese War

1945-1949 – Civil War

1949 – Communists rule, Mao Tse-tung

1949 - Mao bans Mah Jongg and other gambling games





# Mah Jongg 1850 - 1875

Approximate date of it first being played in China - as  
a game using tiles





1890

Sir William H Wilkinson, British Sinologist, Consul General in Suzhou mentions mahjongg in official correspondence



1895

Stewart Cullen, American Anthropologist mentions Mah Jongg in an academic paper



## Before 1905

Played only in the Shanghai area, but began to spread through out the Chinese communities



## 1917

JP Babcock discovers Chinese sailors playing the game while “beached” on a boat in the Yangtze River



# “Traditional” Mah Jongg Players



# The Tiles



# The Tiles



Bamboos  
Characters  
Circles  
Dragons  
Flowers  
Winds

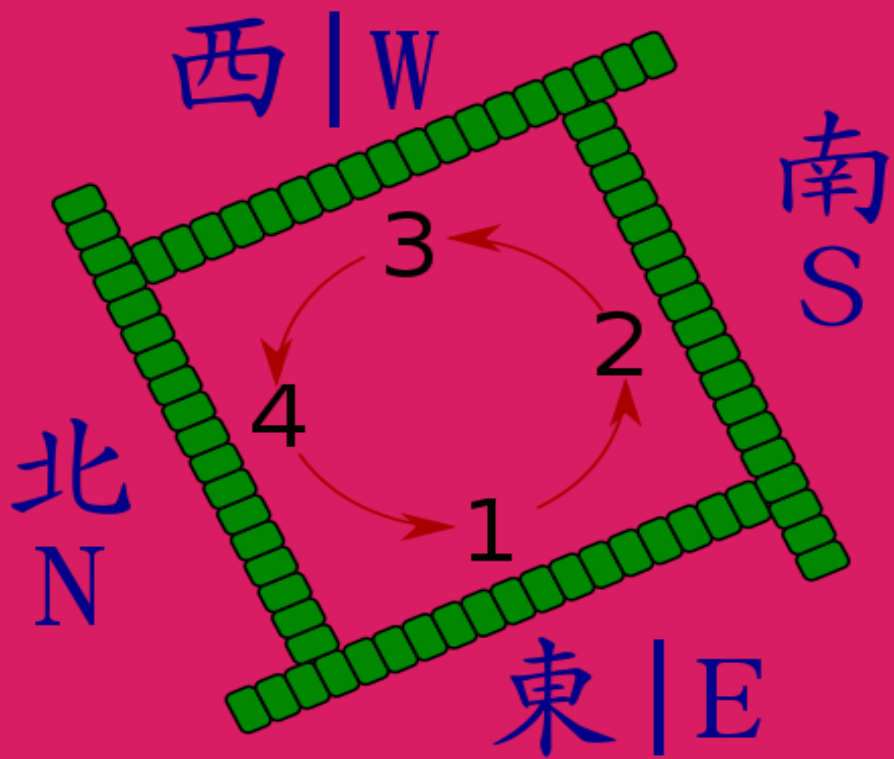


## Which Wind Are You?

Three layer ivory spinner to determine who is which wind

1.25 inches in diameter

Dragon Chasing the Flaming Pearl



## The Winds





# The Winds

East

Dong Feng – Spring + renewal

South

Nau Feng – Summer + Warmth

West

Xi Feng – Autumn – Destroy + Preserve

North

Bei Feng – Winter – Cold + Harsh







# Green Dragon

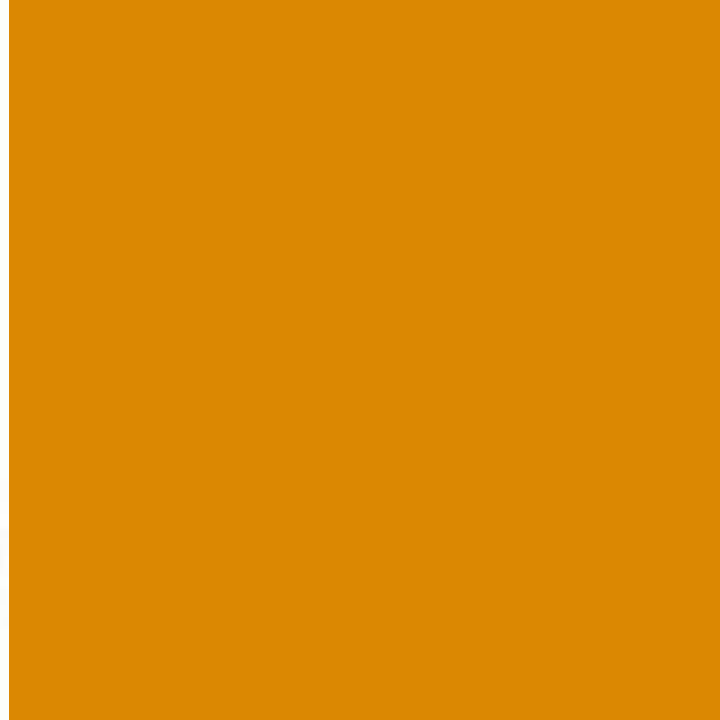
Green Dragon

Symbolizes approaching spring

New life

Plant growth





# Red Dragon

Red Dragon – powerful

Symbolizes

Good Luck

Prosperity



# White Dragon

Symbolizes  
Purity  
Virtue





# Flower Tiles

## Traditional Flowers

Plum – Winter- Resilience - North

Orchid – Spring – Modesty - East

Bamboo – Summer – Strength – South

Chrysanthemum – Autumn – Beauty – West



## “Flower Tiles”

Auspicious animals in the Chinese Zodiac + Feng Shui

Koi	Dragon
Dragonfly	Phoenix
Crab	Turtle
Crawfish	Qilin

# “Flower Tiles” Transportation



# Joseph P Babcock

- Standard Oil executive stationed in China from 1917 onward
- Credited with bringing Mah Jongg to America in 1920's
- Partner in the Mah Jongg Company of China





## **Babcocks, Lethins Shipboard Meeting**

Became partners in the Mah Jongg  
Company of China



Dec. 11, 1923.

1,477,056

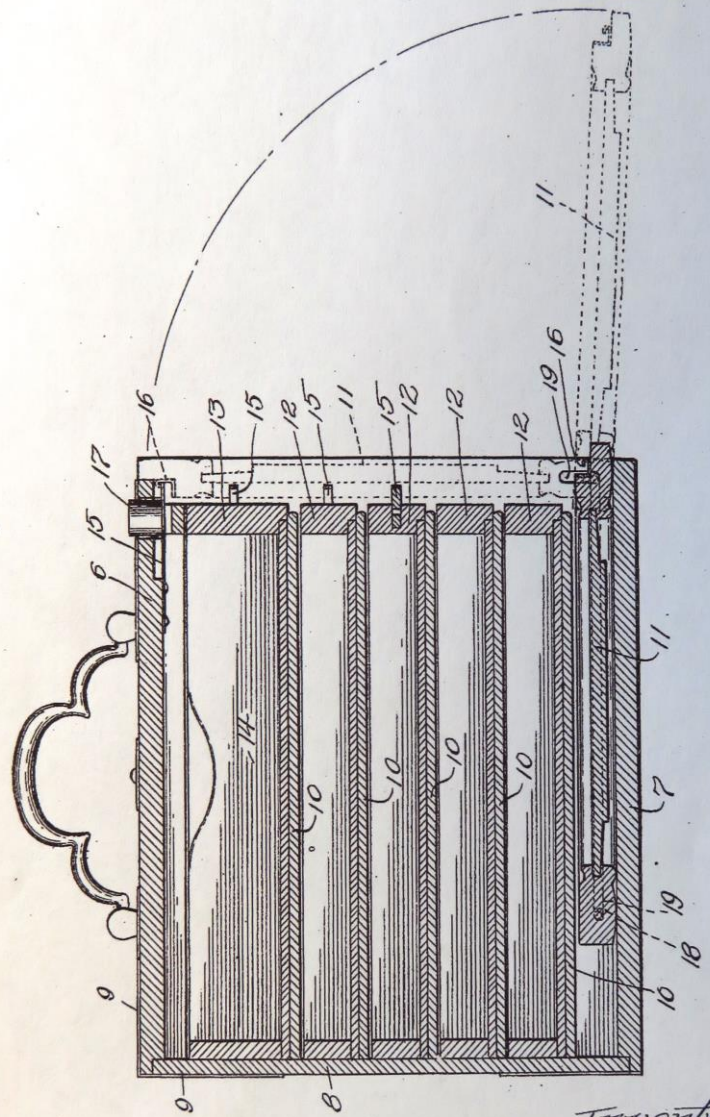
A. R. HAGER

CABINET FOR HOLDING GAMES

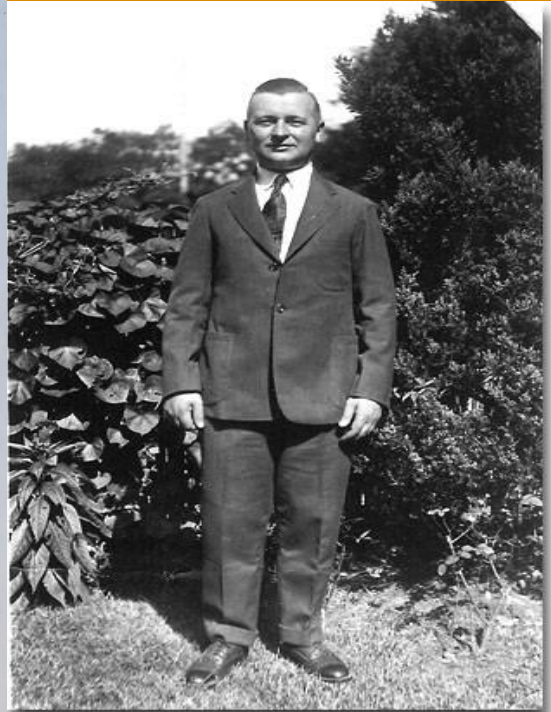
Filed May 25, 1922

2 Sheets-Sheet 2

FIG. 1.



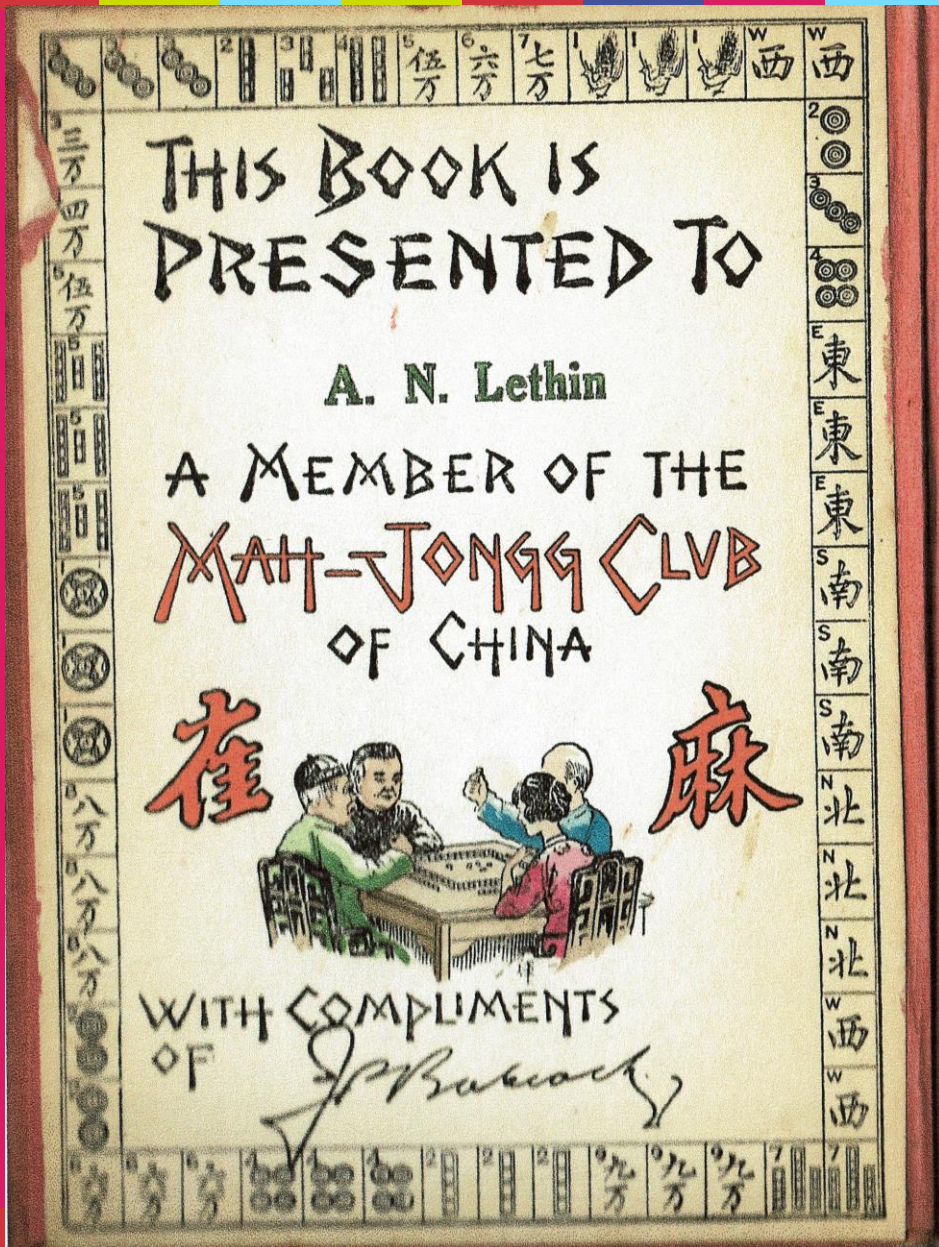
Inventor:  
 Albert R. Hager,  
 By *Dunsmuir, Cox, Clinton & Wiles,*  
*Attys.*



# Albert Hager Anton Lethin

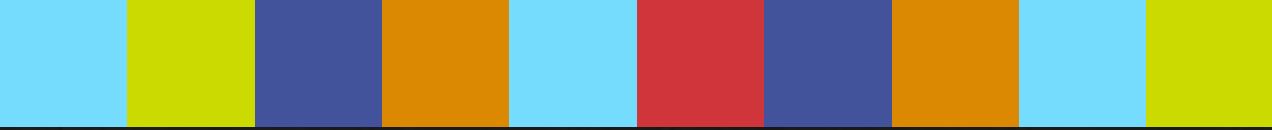
Worked together  
 Hager was major investor in the  
 Mah Jongg Company of China





# Babcock's Rule Book

Presented to Albert Hager, partner in the Mah Jongg Company of China



MEMBERS OF FACTORY STAFF

# Mah Jongg Factory Shanghai 1920's

# Players & Workers



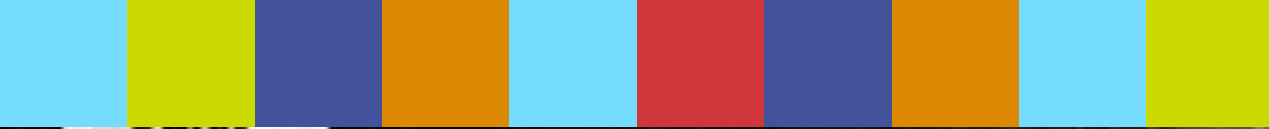
# America 1920's Highlights

19<sup>th</sup> Amendment  
Volstead Act (Prohibition)  
Tulsa Race Massacre  
Lincoln Memorial Dedicated  
Teapot Dome Scandal  
Yankee Stadium Opens  
Indian Citizenship Act  
Amelia Earhart flies across the Atlantic Ocean

The Great Gatsby Published  
Scopes Trial  
NBC Founded 1<sup>st</sup> major broadcast network  
1<sup>st</sup> "Talkie" The Jazz Singer in cinemas  
15,000,000<sup>th</sup> Model T produced  
Land purchased for Empire State Building  
Wall Street Crash

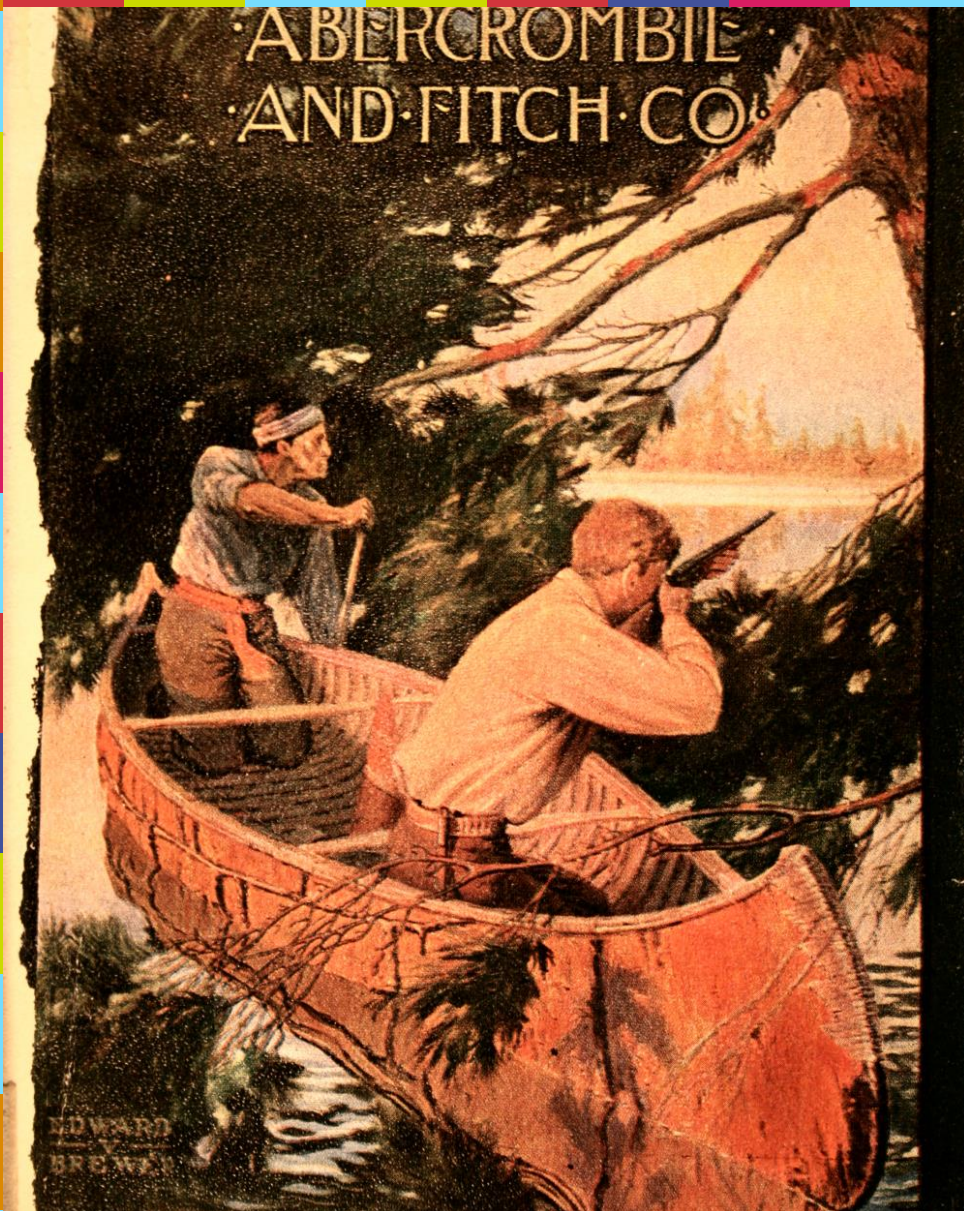
## Grand Rapids 1920s

KKK Marches through the westside  
1<sup>st</sup> Radio Broadcast in the city  
79% of households own cars  
134 Churches  
2 Synagogues  
Population 169,000<sup>29</sup>



## 1920's Fashions

Mah Jongg players? Most ;likely as all the “fashionable” people played the game of the moment.



# Abercrombie & Fitch

First store in America to sell Mah Jongg sets

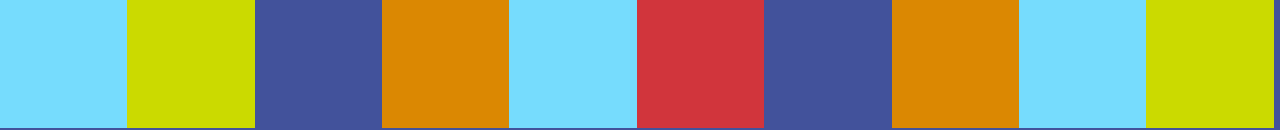
Outfitters for elite sportsmen & women



# Learning Mah Jongg

Through a radio broadcast – the modern thing to do!





**Mah Jongg  
at the beach**

# MAH-JONGG IN 1920s POPULAR CULTURE

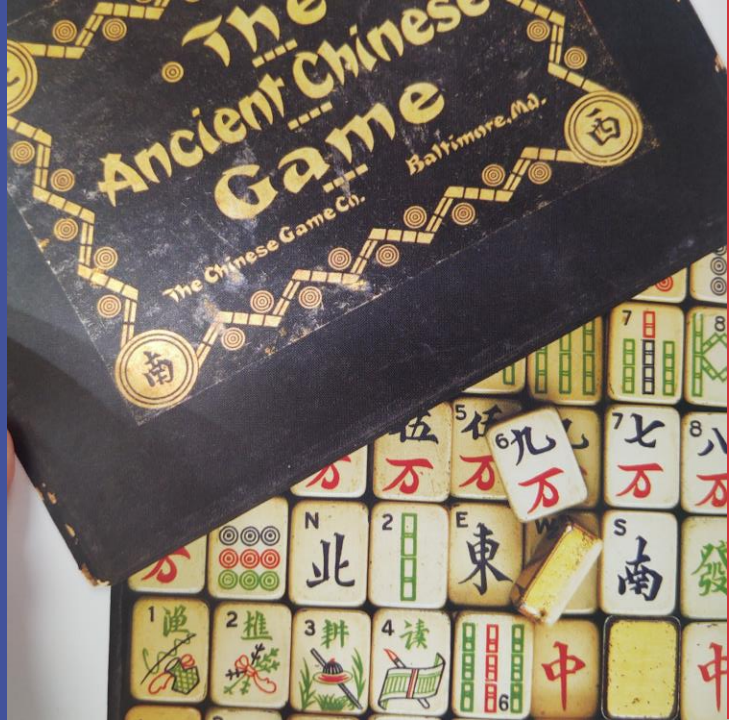
ILLUSTRATED SETS AND RULES OF PLAY



## Book Cover Mah Jongg Game Chests

Elaborate boxes, painted or inlaid that held tiles and trays

# Mah Jongg Tiles



Game made in Baltimore  
Ancient Chinese !



Black One Bamboo from  
a set made in France



Fancy flower tiles including  
some “spooky” designs

# Accessories



Three Layered Ivory Disc  
Select the wind  
1.25 inches in diameter



German made leather  
Mah Jongg case





## Sheet Music

From "Kid Boots" A musical comedy about Palm Beach and Golf. Opened on Broadway in 1923 starring Eddie Cantor

Photo by Edward Steichen  
Vogue, January 1923



# THE SATURDAY EVENING POST

Four Pages of Fiction

JAN. 5, 1924

5c. THE COPY  
10c. In Canada



AN INTERVIEW WITH  
THE SECRETARY OF THE TREASURY—By David Lawrence

## Cover Saturday Evening Post

January 5, 1924



# Apollo Chocolates

Mah Jongg Chocolate box

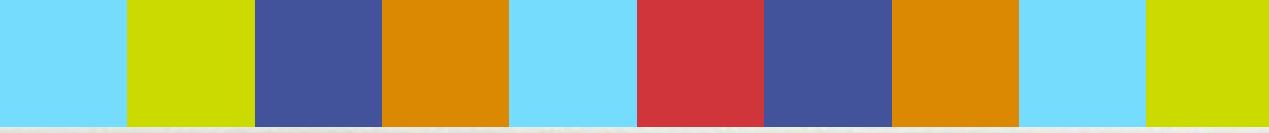




## The National Mah-Jongg League

In 1937, a number of Mah Jongg enthusiasts, 32 Jewish ladies, met in New York City to standardize the game so that all Mah Jongg players would play the same hands and rules-it was at this meeting that the National Mah Jongg League was founded. Each year the League changes the hands and rules to add more excitement to the game.

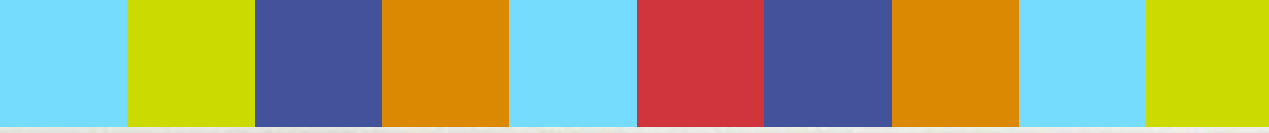
For more than 86 years, the National Mah Jongg League has been the arbitrator for everything that relates to American Mah Jongg. The League started with 32 members and today has over 350,000.



## Jewish Mah Jongg Players

Advent of more leisure time, women had the opportunity to organize leisure and entertainment activities

Weekly Mah Jongg games were popular with the growing middle class Jewish women (non-Jews played it also)



# Jewish Mah Jongg Players

1950's Catskills, New York

Thrived during WW2 – inexpensive communal entertainment

European Jews who fled to Shanghai brought it with them to US

Philanthropic associations – funding raising for charity

**MAHJONG**



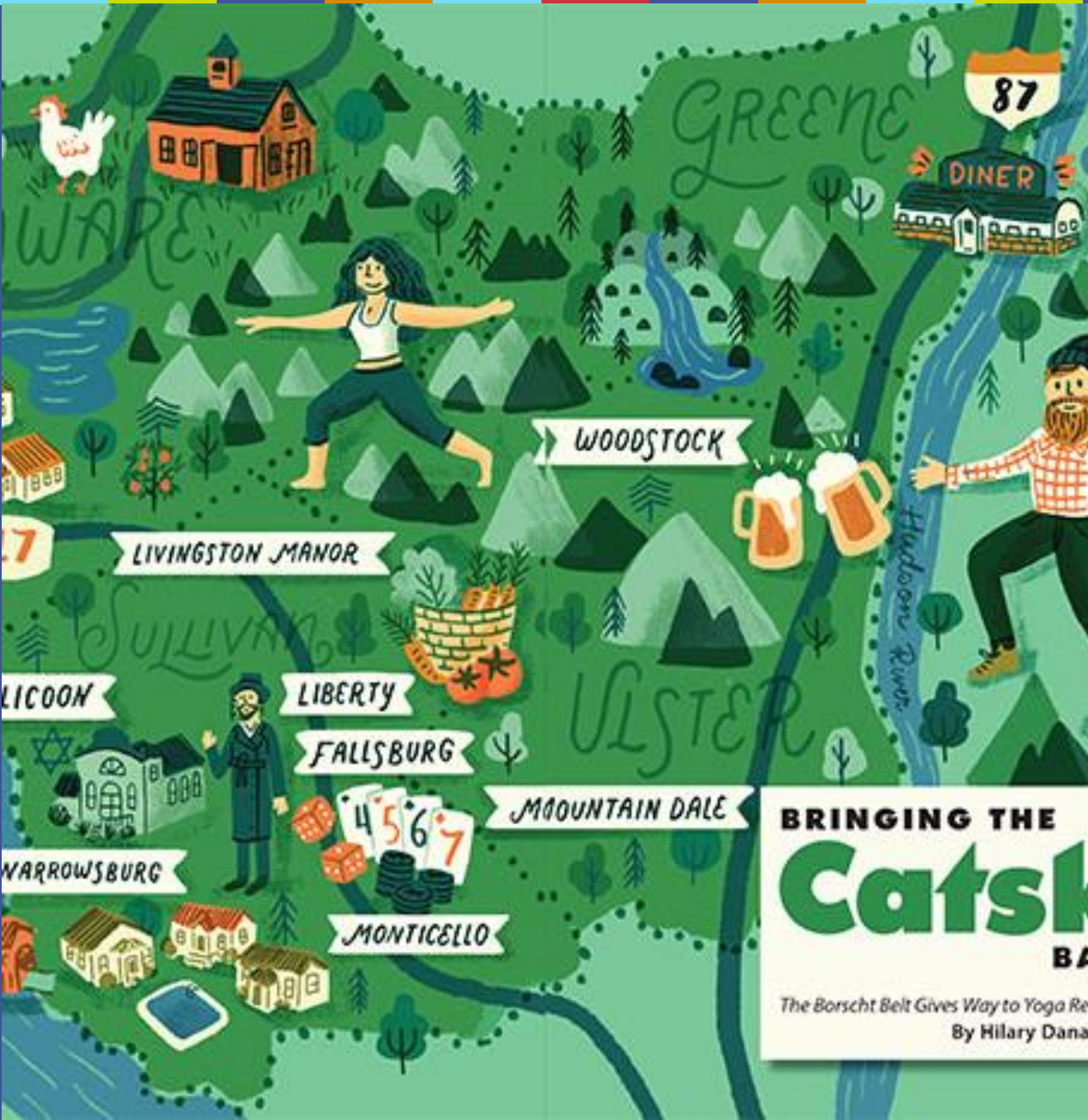
A CHINESE GAME AND  
THE MAKING OF MODERN  
AMERICAN CULTURE

**ANNELISE HEINZ**

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# **Annelise Heinz** **Author**

**Details the relationship of Jewish women  
to the game of Mah Jongg**



# The Catskills

1920s – 1970's holiday area for Jews from NYC and other urban areas

In the 1950-s – 1960s Women stayed all summer

Mah Jongg – great way to gather with friends to converse while playing

Game was passed from friend to friend, mother to daughter



# Wright-Patterson Mah-Jongg

W-P military spouses developed their own rules

W-P game taken around the world

Mah Jongg Mavens on bases and ports greeted new palyers



# Contemporary Mah Jongg Players



# And finally

- Mah Jongg is about 150 years old – it was NOT invented by Confucius
- In 1937, 32 Jewish women from New York formed the National Mah-Jongg League
- Shuffling the tiles is sometimes called “Twittering of the Sparrows”
- Joseph Babcock is credited with bringing Mah-Jongg to the US
- Mah-jongg rules vary by country – no right or wrong way to play
- Simply ENJOY the game!!!!!!!!!!





Thank you

