

LUCK TILES: FLOWERS AND SEASONS

The luck tiles are usually very different per mahjong set. Usually they represent all flowers, or four types of flowers and the four seasons. However, the luck tiles can also look very different. For example, they can be depicted as professions, such as fisherman, woodcutter, farmer and scholar, or as various forms of happiness.



The flowers represent the four plants of Confucius, a Chinese sage who lived from 551 to 479 BC. Confucius is the Latin variant of the original name, which is *Kǒng Fūzǐ* (孔夫子), or *Master K'ong*. The name *Kong* corresponds also to a series of four equal tiles, the kong. To promote the game in 1924 it was therefore suggested that the game was as old as Confucius. This was a sellers' fantasy of course: mahjong originated around 1850 or a little later.

The earliest known Chinese sets contain twelve flowers. Sets with large numbers of flowers were once popular in Northern China to play the game of 'Flower Mahjong' (花麻雀, *Huā máquè*). They usually had 20 or more flowers, according to some sources as many as 44 flowers. The numbers on the flower and season tiles represent the corresponding winds: 1 = east, 2 = south, 3 = west, and 4 = north.

Flowers

The flowers on modern sets usually have black Chinese characters and red Western numerals. On a recent Chinese set I own they look like this:

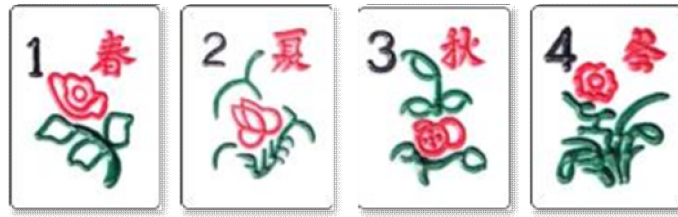


The tiles represent the following symbolism:

1. **plum** or **plum blossom** (梅, *méi*), symbolizing spring, innocence, inexperience and happiness. So whoever pulls this tile has 'beginner's luck'.
2. **orchid** (兰, *lán* or 蘭, *lán*), symbolizing refinement and things that are rare and precious. This tile reflects the refined player, the one who knows how to make rare combinations.
3. **chrysanthemum** (菊, *jú*), a cheerful flower, characteristic of leisure and entertainment. This tile represents the carefree player.
4. **bamboo** (竹, *zhú*) from thin bamboo stalks you can make a pen to write Chinese letters; bamboo therefore symbolizes writing, learning and scholarship. This tile reflects the intelligent player.

Seasons

The seasons usually have red Chinese characters and black Western numerals.



Today seasons are usually depicted as a flower and they symbolize a profession with the following qualities:

1. **spring** (春, *haru*), represents a fisherman, which is a symbol of common sense and patience.
2. **summer** (夏, *natsu*), represents a lumberjack, which symbolizes success through an activity.
3. **autumn** (秋, *aki*), represents a farmer, which symbolizes physical, hard labor and rich rewards.
4. **winter** (冬, *fuyu*), represents a scholar or sage (according to some Confucius), symbolizing a developed mind and prudence.

Professions

In some old Mahjong sets, the seasons are depicted not as flowers, but as real professions, such as the tiles below:



1. **fisherman** with the Chinese character 渔 *yú*, fish, derived from 渔民 *yúmín*, fisherman.
2. **lumberjack** with the character 樵 *qiao*, which means gather wood or firewood.
3. **farmer** with the sign 耕 *gēng*, meaning tillage or ploughing.
4. **sage**, with the character 读 *dú*, meaning to read or study.

Arts and prosperity

I own an East German set from the 1960s, and the flowers are depicted as arts. They have red numbers and red Chinese characters, which correspond to the four civilized arts of traditional Chinese culture.



These arts are: (1) 棋 *qí*, the board game Go, (2) 琴 *qín*, the qin or qugin, an ancient Chinese string instrument similar to a zither, (3) 書 *shū*, calligraphy, and (4) 画 *huà*, painting.

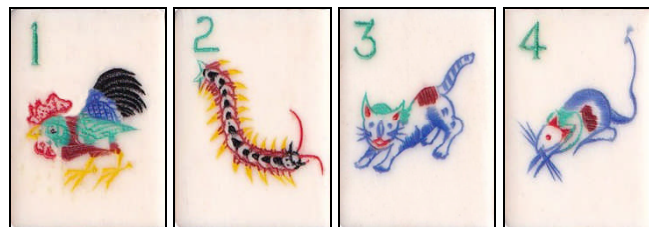


The seasons can be recognized by the green numbers and green Chinese characters. They correspond to all kinds of prosperity. These are: (1) 福 *fú*, happiness, (2) 祿 *lù*, prosperity, (3) 壽 *shòu*, longevity, and (4) 喜 *xǐ*, joy.

Note that *Fú*, *lù* and *shòu* also refer to three Chinese deities and their associated properties.

Pets with prey and Chinese ladies

The tiles below are from a set of bone and bamboo I own and date back to the 1920s or 1930s. The flowers are indicated as pets with their prey and represent: a rooster (1) with a centipede (2, representing a 'worm') as prey, and a cat (3) with a mouse (4) as prey.



The seasons are depicted as Chinese ladies and successively represent:

(1) 春 *Haru*, spring, (2) 夏 *natsu*, summer, (3) 秋 *aki*, autumn and (4) 冬 *fuyu*, winter.



Chinese Mythological figures

The tiles below comes from a set of bone and bamboo I have, and date from somewhere between 1950 and 1970. There are no numbers or symbols on these luck tiles, but figures. Many of these figures are Taoist deities from Chinese mythology, including the so-called 'Eight Immortals'.



Sun Wukong, the monkey king. A well-known mythical figure in China, usually depicted running on a cloud. Born from a tile as a monkey, he possesses supernatural powers through the practice of Tao.



Zhao Gongming , a Taoist god of wealth. In one hand he holds a gold bar, in the other a magical iron whip. Often depicted seated; the yellow border on the right is probably a chair.



Li Tieguai (Li T'ieh-kuai), one of the Eight Immortals . Bad-tempered, but benevolent to the poor and sick. Often depicted as an old man with a tousled beard. He walks with an iron crutch and often has a gourd slung over his shoulder.



Lu Dongbin , one of the Eight Immortals . A scholar who likes to help people to gain wisdom and learn the Tao . In his hand he has a fly swatter, a symbol for someone who can fly.



Guan Yin (Kwan Yin), the Chinese Buddhist goddess of mercy. She is depicted with a water jar in her left hand, a green willow branch in her right hand and a Buddha crown.



Zhang Guo (Chang Kuo-lao), one of the Eight Immortals . He usually rides backwards on his magic mule that could run 1,000 miles a day. He carries a so-called ' fish-drum ' (*Yugu*), a tubular bamboo drum with iron sticks.

Note to Tom: on your site, Zhang Guo it is suggested to be a rich man, riding on a horse, possibly the emperor. Here is the correct interpretation.



Han Hsiang-Tzu , one of the Eight Immortals . He represents the youth. He became immortal by eating one of the peaches of immortality. He carries a basket of fruit or flowers with him.



Zhongli Quan , one of the Eight Immortals in the Taoist pantheon. According to legend, he wields a large fan with which he can revive the dead and turn tiles into silver or gold.

Jokers

Some older sets for the European market also contain jokers. These tiles can be recognized by the word JOKER or by the Chinese characters 百搭, meaning *Bǎi dā* which is 'everything matches'. The words 'everything matches' of course, refers to the function of the joker (they can be substitute every kind of tile) and can also be read as 'joker' in Chinese.

Symbolically *Bǎi dā* can also be read as the '100 possibilities', referring to what a joker can replace in the game of mahjong. Note that the Chinese characters and the word 'Joker' are usually in red, which in China symbolizes the color of luck.



*Jokers in the mahjong game can vary considerably per set.
The two red Chinese characters mean Bǎi dā (everything matches)*