



# It's not just Meghan Markle playing mahjong – the game has become a global phenomenon

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Mahjong has been around for centuries – since the mid-1800s, towards the end of the Qing Dynasty.

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In the sixth episode of Netflix’s eight-part series *With Love, Meghan*, the Duchess of Sussex invites girlfriends over for game night – mahjong, to be exact. The “Maj Squad,” as they call themselves, learned to play the four-person, tile-based game together and now they’re shuffling tiles and uttering words such as bam and crack. “The game itself is really so fun, but what was so great was the idea of learning something new with you friends, together, and then recognizing that the mahjong becomes the background of the expansion of friendship. It’s the feeling of community,” says Meghan Markle. It may just be the most relatable part of the lifestyle series that’s been labelled “tone deaf” by critics.

Mahjong has been around for centuries – since the mid-1800s, towards the end of the Qing Dynasty. But the southern Chinese-developed game has become a global phenomenon. The World Mahjong Championship was recently hosted in Mississauga, Ont., its first time in North America. Hip hotels such as the Ace Hotel New York and Thompson Hotel Dallas organize

frequent mahjong-themed evenings. There are cruise ships offering onboard mahjong tournaments and private rooms for playing. Game enthusiasts are creating exclusive mahjong rooms in their homes. And for players with plenty of budget to spare, there's a sleek mahjong table with an automatic tile shuffler and acrylic card holder, that costs upward of \$4,500 and designer game sets from Hermès, Louis Vuitton and Ralph Lauren.

It's easy to see the appeal. There's something to be said about catching up with your crew over snacks and some friendly competition. My own weekly games consist of chips and cheese boards, tequila and Diet Coke, and equal parts trash-talking and encouragement; between rounds, while resetting tiles, we dish on work, travel plans, aging parents.

Playing mahjong makes us feel like we're working our brains; we joke about warding off perimenopausal brain fog. It turns out there has been a ton of research on the link between mahjong and cognitive functioning in older adults. Studies suggest that more mahjong-playing experience is associated with better psychological and functional abilities. Yet another reason to love the game.

Community is at the heart of mahjong. That's what Connor Wan, 29, was searching for when he moved to Toronto from London, England in early 2024. The second-generation British-Chinese artist learned to play mahjong while visiting family in Hong Kong. He was instantly hooked. Back in London, he launched Four Winds Mahjong Club – a social club that hosts regular game nights – and eventually created Four Winds: Toronto Chapter once moving abroad.



Connor Wan (far right, standing), teaching Mahjong to some players at Four Winds Mahjong Club.

CONNOR WAN/SUPPLIED

“Moving countries, it’s quite difficult, especially to a place where you don’t know anyone,” recalls Wan. A friend connected him to fellow artist Hannia Cheng over Instagram and together they brought the Toronto club to life. “It got big very quickly. It’s not for competition or gambling but rather for community building and reclamation of [Asian] culture and heritage,” explains Wan. Years after COVID-19 lockdowns, people are still craving social connections – and mahjong is very conducive to conversation and group bonding. “Friendships and [romantic] relationships have formed out of these clubs. It’s a joke among us that we’re waiting on the first baby,” he says.

Robyn Feldberg, a philanthropist and former marketing executive in

Toronto, has seen many variations of family and friends – married couples, baby groups, mother-daughter duos – sign up for her four-week mahjong lessons. She has taught more than 250 people to play in less than two years, raising around \$50,000 for Save A Child’s Heart and other charities (she donates all lesson fees). Feldberg – who recently launched Snack Crack Bam, a website for tiles, sets, accessories and more – believes part of the reason for the current mahjong craze is the low-entry cost: “It’s not like pickleball lessons, for example, where you’re paying for a racquet, new shoes, court time. All you need is a game set.”

Feldberg has noticed the game is especially popular among young moms. “They have infants and toddlers. They’re working all day, they’re running around and dropping kids off at swimming lessons, then rushing over for lessons. They tell me, ‘We want something that’s just for us. We want to connect,’” she says. Plus, it’s addictive. Feldberg remembers dreaming about mahjong tiles: “I was seeing patterns in my sleep.”

Nicole Wong is a California-based writer and audio producer who started The Mahjong Project in 2019; it hosts pop-up nights and collects people’s personal stories about the game. This spring, Wong, 38, launched *Mahjong: House Rules from Across the Asian Diaspora*. Part instructional guide, part personal narrative, the book includes retro-style photography, as well as strategy tips, game etiquette, a snack guide for hosts and more.

She believes mahjong is an incredibly sensory experience that stays with you and stirs up emotions, like a family

recipe that has been passed down through the generations. “The sound of tiles – rather than taste – is so evocative,” says Wong, who was

introduced to the game by her grandparents when she was a teen. That sound is also in its name: Mahjong in translation means “sparrow” and it’s said the clattering of the tiles sounds like the clattering of the birds.

Author Nicole Wong believes the game is an incredibly sensory experience.

ANDRIA LO/SUPPLIED

While the game is having a major moment in the mainstream, Wong says it’s important for people of all backgrounds to recognize its origins. As she puts it, “Mahjong is more than just fun. It’s trendy and aesthetic but comes with a rich history and [elicits] memory. Some people feel deeply connected to the game.”

## **Mahjong tiles, sets, accessories and more**

**BOOK**

Mahjong by Nicole Wong

HARDIE GRANT/SUPPLIED

**Mahjong: House Rules from Across the Asian Diaspora** by Nicole Wong,

\$38

Wong's vibrant new book delves into the strategy, history and design of mahjong, with instructional diagrams and a playful roundup of slang and superstitions.

## **OUTDOOR TABLE**



AquaMahj Floating Game Table by The Mahjong Line

THE MAHJONG LINE/SUPPLIED

AquaMahj Floating Game Table, The Mahjong Line, \$445

What could be better on a hot summer's day than a floating game of mahjong in a pool? Built-in grooves function as tile racks, while cup holders keep you hydrated.

**ACCESSORY**

Mahjong is my cardio hat

1PMSUNDAY/SUPPLIED

Hat, 1PM Sunday, from \$40

This embroidered style lets the world know you play with intensity.

**TILES**

Snack Crack Bam tile set.

SUPPLIED

Game set, Snack Crack Bam, from \$400 (for tiles and racks)

A pretty palette of colours adorns Snack Crack Bam's new collection designed in Canada (full set or a la carte available).

**NOTECARDS**

Pray for Jokers' notecard set by Dear Annabelle

DEAR ANNABELLE/SUPPLIED

Pray for Jokers notecard set, Dear Annabelle, \$110

Dear Annabelle's limited-edition, heavyweight notecards celebrate mahjong and the most coveted tile of all – the Joker.

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