

Production Guide

The Men of Mah Jongg

by Richard Atkins

Compiled by Kimberly Wadsworth



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Introduction

Teachers: Please feel free to use the following worksheets and essays at your discretion to prepare your students for seeing and responding to the play. They have been designed by the education committee to help deepen your students' experience and knowledge about theater and are aligned with the Pennsylvania State Standards for the Arts and Humanities.

This study guide has been created for educators, by educators, to allow teachers to help students gain a meaningful experience from attending the play. It can be used to set expectations, to educate students on becoming an active audience, and to generate useful discussion after the play has been seen. Reference to the Pennsylvania State Standards and the National Standards should allow teachers, administrators, parents, and students to see the importance of live, professional theater. We at TNT know the importance of bringing theater to the community, a community which places its future in the hands of its youth.

Students are inspired by theater—inspired to think, to analyze, and to examine the world around them. Lively discussion of drama allows students to express their ideas and to gain insight into themselves and their world.

The *PA Arts and Humanities Standards 9.2*, Historical and Cultural Contexts, give the following definitions:

- A. Explain the historical, cultural and social context of an individual work in the arts.
- B. Relate works in the arts chronologically to historical events (e.g., 10,000 B.C. to present).
- C. Relate works in the arts to varying styles and genre and to the periods in which they were created (e.g., Bronze Age, Ming Dynasty, Renaissance, Classical, Modern, Post-Modern, Contemporary, Futuristic, others).
- D. Analyze a work of art from its historical and cultural perspective.
- E. Analyze how historical events and culture impact forms, techniques and purposes of works in the arts (e.g., Gilbert and Sullivan operettas).
- F. Know and apply appropriate vocabulary used between social studies and the arts and humanities.
- G. Relate works in the arts to geographic regions: Africa, Asia, Australia, Central America, Europe, North America, South America.
- H. Identify, describe and analyze the work of Pennsylvania Artists in dance, music, theatre and visual arts.
- I. Identify, explain and analyze philosophical beliefs as they relate to works in the arts (e.g., classical architecture, rock music, Native American dance, contemporary American musical theatre).
- J. Identify, explain and analyze historical and cultural differences as they relate to works in the arts (e.g., plays by Shakespeare, works by Michelangelo, ethnic dance and music).
- K. Identify, explain and analyze traditions as they relate to works in the arts (e.g., story telling—plays, oral histories, poetry, work songs, blue grass).
- L. Identify, explain and analyze common themes, forms and techniques from works in the arts (e.g., Copland and Graham's *Appalachian Spring* and Millet's *The Gleaners*).

Standards for The Men of Mah Jongg

Growing Old

PA Arts and Humanities Standards

9.2. *Historical Context*

A. Explain the historical, cultural and social context of an individual work in the arts.

9.4 *Aesthetic Response*

D. Describe to what purpose philosophical ideas generated by artists can be conveyed through works in the arts and humanities

A Short History of Mah Jongg

History: 8.1

A. Historical Research

Arts and Humanities

9.2. *Historical and Cultural Contexts*

B. Explain the historical, cultural and social context of an individual work in the arts.

Made in China

History: 8.1

B. Historical Research

9.2. *Historical and Cultural Contexts*

Arts and Humanities 9.2.

A. Explain the historical, cultural and social context of an individual work in the arts.

E. Analyze how historical events and culture impact forms, techniques and purposes of works in the arts.

So How DO You Play Mah Jongg?

History: 8.1

C. Historical Research

9.2. *Historical and Cultural Contexts*

Arts and Humanities 9.2.

A. Explain the historical, cultural and social context of an individual work in the arts.

E. Analyze how historical events and culture impact forms, techniques and purposes of works in the arts.

Growing Old

Oldness has come, old age has descended. Feebleness has arrived . . . the heart sleeps wearily every day. The eyes are weak, the ears are deaf, the strength is disappearing . . . the heart is forgetful and cannot recall yesterday. The bone suffers old age. All taste is gone. What old age does to men is evil in every respect.

This lament by an Egyptian scribe writing in 2450 B.C. sounds not unlike many of *The Men of Mah Jongg's* own complaints and captures the ambivalence mankind has always felt about aging. We all know we will grow old and that this transition brings some kind of physical deterioration. Even though the only way to escape aging is to die young, some still prefer that to aging. As the Baby Boomer generation reaches retirement—the largest generation ever to do so—there is a greater and greater demand for medications to revive slowing hearts, fading eyesight, and failing strength; better operations to replace deteriorating joints; and complicated cosmetic procedures to rejuvenate wrinkling skin and graying hair—all of them attempts to ward off the effects of old age and preserve “youth” as long as possible. But none of these developments will work forever, and we all must eventually come to terms with the fact that we are growing older.

In early human society, growing old was a welcome fate. Reaching an advanced age earned a person respect, largely because so few people did so rather than succumbing to disease, starvation, or injury. Others considered older persons to be especially favored by the gods and treated them with veneration. Older people also had lifetimes of experience behind them and were accordingly sought for their wisdom. In the Middle East in Biblical times, national or religious leaders would assemble a panel of “elders,” older men who, by dint of their age, were considered best able to offer advice on problems of the day. In many cultures, the elderly are still treated with respect. In China, in particular, the family takes great care of its oldest members, a holdover from the

Confucian tradition of respect for a family's elders and for veneration of one's ancestors.

In the West, however, things took a different turn—the young were celebrated, and the old were emblems of an era whose time had past. If we look closely at some of the ancient Greek myths, we see several instances of an older generation of gods or an older order of kings being overturned by a younger hero—Zeus overthrowing his father Kronos the Titan is just one example. Old age was itself often seen as a curse instead of a blessing—“old age” was one of the ills Pandora unleashed when she opened her box. In Greek dramas, older men and women were often included for comic relief—older characters were silly, boring, lecherous, and easily confused. The ancient Romans perpetuated the stereotype, with far sillier portrayals of the old. Older characters in tragedies were often heroes “past their prime” who would lament the end of their days of glory.

In both societies, this reflected a double standard about the elderly that exists today. Even though Greeks and Romans laughed at the elderly at the theater, they had great respect for the older members of the government—the elderly Roman senators and the older Greek philosophers. Now, simply achieving old age wasn't enough—to earn respect from society, an older person also had to contribute something to society.

Fortunately, the elderly still commanded respect in their own families. During the Middle Ages, many families who were able often took in older relatives—aging parents or aunts or uncles—caring for them until their deaths. In return, grandparents did simpler chores about the house or would keep an eye on grandchildren. Still, just as is the case today, some families considered this an imperfect solution—some families were too poor to take in another mouth to feed, or long-standing family tension caused some to have second thoughts. Older men also wished to keep hold of some of their independence.

Well-off men and women in the Middle Ages soon sought other solutions: Many joined

monasteries or convents in their later years, motivated more by the care they would receive than by religious feeling. They would make financial arrangements to further ensure a particular standard of care, giving the monastery hefty sums to cover costs. (One elderly man in France demanded that the monastery he joined give him a pint of beer and two bottles of wine every day, as well as an annual stipend for new clothes.) Another type of “retirement home” was created expressly for former knights—special garrisons run by the Knights Templars were set aside expressly for the care of older knights and soldiers who had become too ill or weak to continue service to their kings. During the Renaissance, merchants and artists began pledging money to hospitals in exchange for assured care when they grew old, and a handful of hospitals were created expressly for care of the elderly.

But this care for the elderly came with a condition: The older man or woman was expected to follow a particular standard of behavior. In her 1405 book, *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*, medieval noblewoman Christine de Pisan had a good deal of advice for the older woman when it came to proper conduct:

Nothing is more ridiculous than old people who lack good judgment or who are foolish or commit the follies that youth prompts in the young. . . . The elderly woman ought to see to it that she does nothing that looks foolish. It is not seemly for her to dance, frolic about or to laugh uproariously. . . . She ought always to see that she takes her pleasure sedately, in a more dignified way. She should say her words calmly and indulge in her amusements with decorum and without any rowdiness. . . . The elderly woman ought to be dressed in respectable garments, for there is a true saying: an overdressed old woman makes a laughing-stock of herself.

Very little changed in the lives of the elderly over the next several hundred years. The fortunate few were looked after by their families or by an institution, while those unfortunate

enough to lack money and families were reduced to begging or living in almshouses. In both cases, it was considered improper for an older person to behave in a way more suited to the young, and the elderly were even encouraged to step out of society to a degree. As recently as the twentieth century, sociologists and psychologists considered this “disengagement” to be a healthy step in the aging process—accepting that one no longer fit into a society that was moving too fast for them. Older people were encouraged to slow down, withdraw, and let the rest of the world go by—regardless of whether they actually had the physical or mental energy to keep up.

In the Industrial Age, businesses often dealt with their older workers by encouraging them to retire once they had reached a certain age, so they could hire younger—and presumably faster—new workers. Especially skilled business managers kept advisory roles, but most workers were persuaded or compelled simply to leave.

Finally, in 1969, activist Maggie Kuhn spoke out against this and other attitudes toward the elderly. Born in 1905, Kuhn had supported progressive causes her whole life—during the 1930s and 1940s, she gave classes on unionizing and contraception at her local YMCA, and she spoke out against segregation and the arms race in the 1950s. In the 1960s she found work with the Presbyterian church, hoping to foster social outreach programs. Through her work with the church she visited several Presbyterian-run retirement homes and grew uneasy at the way residents were treated like children with little autonomy or choice about how they spent their days. One resident told her he felt like the home he was in was like “a glorified playpen.” Her concerns reached a turning point when she was affected herself: On her 65th birthday, the Presbyterian church forced her to retire, even though she was still able—and eager—to continue her work.

Kuhn rounded up other similarly reluctant retirees and founded the Gray Panthers, an activist group calling for a reform of the forced retirement policies and an overhaul of nursing home facilities. The Gray Panthers also spoke out against belittling depictions of the elderly in media, arguing that “old people are America’s



Forced to retire at age 65, activist Maggie Kuhn founded The Gray Panthers to combat harmful stereotypes about the elderly.

biggest untapped and undervalued human energy source.” They also addressed the often shaky financial condition of many elderly people, pressuring banks to make loans more accessible to the elderly and pressuring Washington to expand Social Security benefits. They also encouraged research into the particular health problems of the elderly, advocating both a greater access to care and more research into finding cures for “incurable” diseases such as Alzheimer’s.

The Gray Panthers had specially harsh criticism for the nursing home system and the “disengagement” idea of aging, arguing that such an attitude created the notion that the elderly were a problem society had to deal with. Kuhn criticized sociologists and doctors for perpetuating the notion that all older people were equally incapacitated and advocated greater individual choice for the elderly in

deciding how to live. She fought for individuals’ right to choose when to retire and where to live out their last days. Kuhn also encouraged the creation of alternative housing plans for the elderly—one alternative plan she suggested was her own. When she began having difficulty living alone in her Philadelphia home, she took in younger adults as roommates, giving them a discount on their rent in exchange for their assistance with some of the household chores.

Today, while some businesses still have mandatory retirement policies, most did away with the practice, allowing individuals to choose when to retire. Still, many retire at age 65 anyway—for many, the idea of ending their work can’t come soon enough, and some even retire early, anticipating the extra freedom. But many find that retirement is a greater adjustment than they thought. Even though work was a burden, many retirees miss the sense of identity that their work gave them, while others miss the structure of a daily routine. Some keep working well after the point when most others stop, simply because they don’t want to do anything else. Mike Wallace, noted television broadcaster on the show *60 Minutes*, continued working until the age of 88; when a reporter asked him why he didn’t retire, he said, “I wouldn’t know what else to do.”

Some retired people later return to work elsewhere—partly for the extra money but partly for the sense that they are active in society. “My wife got tired of me moping around the house with nothing to do,” said a retired factory worker, who went to work at a Wal-Mart. “How often can you mow the lawn or fix the damn stopped drain? . . . I don’t love this job, but at least I’m back out in the world, and that’s a lot better than sitting around the house drinking beer and wondering what I’m going to do today.”

Other issues Kuhn fought against continue to plague older adults. A recent article in the *New York Times* discussed the unconsciously belittling way many people address older adults. Such “elderspeak” can be as simple as a store clerk assuming that an older man wouldn’t know how to use a computer and “dumbing down” his sales pitch or a waitress in a restaurant asking other diners at a table “and what will Grandma



Broadcast Journalist Mike Wallace began his career in 1939 and first appeared on the CBS show 60 Minutes in 1968, staying with the program for nearly 30 years before retiring at 88. He still makes occasional appearances as a guest correspondent.

have?” rather than asking an older woman for her order directly. Health care workers receive the most complaints in this regard, habitually addressing their older patients as “dear” or “sweetie” rather than by their names, or discussing older patients’ health problems with the patients’ grown children rather than the patients themselves.

Sometimes this belittling treatment can cause other problems. Sarah Plummer, a woman of 61 who took a prescription to treat a form of cancer, had a setback when her pharmacist changed her prescription bottle from an easily-opened vial to a bottle with a complicated lid that she found difficult to open. When she complained, the pharmacy was at first reluctant to give her the old bottle, telling her that the new bottle design would “help her remember her daily dose.” “Who says I don’t already take my medicine as prescribed?” Ms. Plummer snapped. “I am *alive* right now because I take these pills! What am I supposed to do, hold the bottle in vice grips and open it with a hacksaw?”

Dr. Becca Levy, an associate professor at Yale, concluded in 2002 that these indignities—

and others—may even have a harmful effect on the elderly. People with a positive attitude towards aging, Dr. Levy found, can add seven years to their lives—an increase even greater than one would gain from giving up smoking. Moreover, people who were regularly exposed to others’ opinions that older people are “feeble” or “forgetful” did noticeably worse on memory tests and reported higher levels of stress.

Another study, conducted by Dr. Kristine Williams at the University of Kansas, found that patients in nursing homes who were regularly addressed with belittling talk fared poorly. When nurses addressed patients as “sweetie” or said things like “good girl, let’s take our medicine,” and generally treated patients like children, patients would often be less cooperative or sometimes flat-out refuse to go along with their treatment. When treated as if they were incompetent, Dr. Williams concluded, many patients would react by giving up and *becoming* incompetent, and their health would decline more rapidly.

A more hopeful study of aging of the aging process began in 1986 and continues to yield surprising results. Dr. David Snowdon, an epidemiologist, began working with 678 retired members of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, an order of teaching nuns, in an ongoing study of Alzheimer’s disease. Dr. Snowdon preferred to work with members of religious orders in his studies, as all members usually had very similar diets, health care, and lifestyles. Those sisters participating in his Nun Study, as it was soon nicknamed, were examined every few years with simple tests for memory, concentration, language, physical strength, and spatial relations, charting how aging affected each sister’s results. Most important, the nuns also agreed to donate their brains for autopsy and examination after death. Dr. Snowdon was fortunate to have selected a particular order that kept very careful records of each of its sisters over the course of her entire life, and part of each file was a short autobiography each sister wrote when she first joined the convent.

Dr. Snowdon’s study yielded some interesting findings—not just about Alzheimer’s, but about aging itself. Before focusing on Alzheimer’s, he first explored how a nun’s level of education

would affect her mental and physical abilities later in life. As members of a teaching order, 85 percent of the sisters in his study had bachelor's-level college degrees, and 45 percent also had master's. For the most part, Snowdon found that the better-educated sisters lived longer.

He shifted the focus of the study to Alzheimer's after comparing the stories of two particular nuns, sisters Johanna and Deborah. Both were about the same age, had emigrated to the United States from Germany at about the same time, ended up in the same convent. Both had similar education before joining the convent—but after joining the convent, they had very different experiences. Both began teaching, but Sister Johanna suffered a series of health problems during her first few years of teaching, and even had a bout with depression; she dropped out of teaching to become a seamstress for the order before retiring at age 70. Sister Johanna developed Alzheimer's soon after and died at the age of 83. Sister Deborah, on the other hand, kept teaching, earned a Master's degree at age 44 and a Ph.D at 55, became a missionary at 66 and conducted an agricultural study in Kenya, took a year off at age 76 to learn computer programming, went back to Kenya after that, and didn't retire until she was 80. Sister Deborah lived well into her 90s—and did not develop Alzheimer's. Dr. Snowdon wondered if there were a connection between education and risk of Alzheimer's.

Of course, a living patient's symptoms only give part of the picture. The best confirmation of Alzheimer's disease can be found only after death, when an autopsy reveals any brain damage. It was in the autopsies of the participants' brains that Dr. Snowdon made his most startling findings—in some cases, a participant's brain showed clear physical evidence of Alzheimer's although the tests before death hadn't shown any indication of Alzheimer's at all. Some subjects, despite having damaged brains—some classified at the worst stage of the disease—had passed all the mental-skill tests with flying colors.

When Dr. Snowdon turned to the convent's files on each of the nuns who had “cheated” Alzheimer's in this way, he found one possible

link: The nuns who'd had particularly active brains throughout their lives, and especially those who had an unusually large vocabulary at an early age, had the lowest risk of developing Alzheimer's disease, regardless of what physical damage the disease did to the brain itself. Further studies indicated that a stroke would also increase the likelihood of developing symptoms, while a person who had Alzheimer's but never had a stroke may also sometimes fail to develop symptoms.

Even though Dr. Snowdon's work emphasized the importance of early brain development, he also found that increasing mental and physical activity at *any* age is beneficial. One 85-year-old nun who participated in the study attributed her good health and longevity to a regular exercise program—she walked a couple miles each day and frequently used the convent's gym. Dr. Snowdon asked when she started her program. “When I was 70,” she told him cheerfully.

As Dr. Levy recently found, Dr. Snowdon also confirmed the positive effects of a positive outlook; the happier nuns simply lived longer, and remained healthier. Key to that attitude, he noticed, was having a strong support network from a community. Snowdon was repeatedly moved at the dignified care all of the sisters received, and the degree to which they all supported each other. When he presented his first findings linking education and longevity to the sisters, instead of being pleased at his findings—after all, the 85 percent of them who had college degrees would all live long—some of the sisters scolded him for “scaring” the 15 percent who had only been to high school. Everyone was encouraged to be as active as she chose, but those whose bodies or minds were fading were still treated with respect, and other sisters would still include them in activities as far as they could manage or would seek to prolong their independence as much as possible.

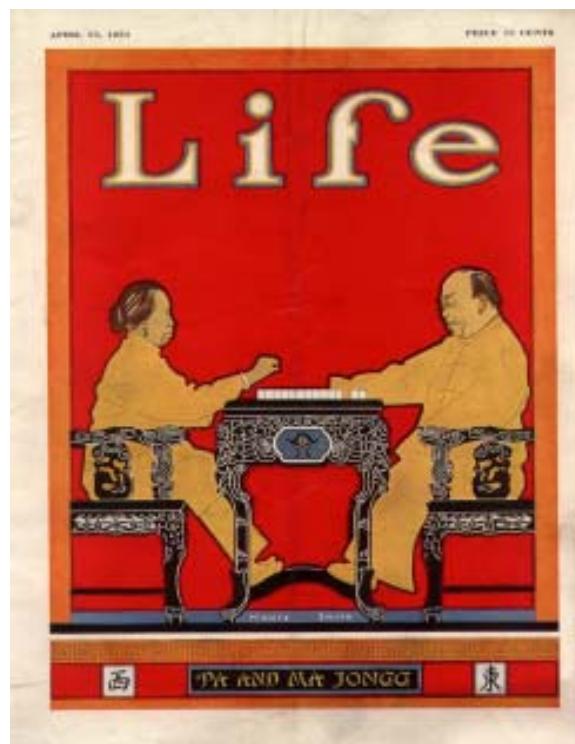
One of the greatest benefits these sisters had, Dr. Snowdon found, was that they were surrounded by the support of people who accepted them for who they were and respected them for that—a community much like the one Jerry, Marvin, Sidney, and Harry have made for themselves.

A Short History of Mah Jongg

Depending on whom one asks, mah jongg is either an ancient Chinese game of luck and skill invented by Confucius, a game created by Chinese eunuchs in the 1800s to kill time in the Emperor's palace, or a Western invention based on Chinese sources and marketed as an exotic game from the Orient. Whatever its origin, it has spread through both the Eastern and Western hemispheres in both living rooms and casinos.

Because there are no written mentions of the game earlier than the 1890s, most historians believe it was invented in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The game shares many traits with a much earlier Chinese card game, “Madiào,” from the early Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). The cards used in Madiào are very similar to the tiles in a standard mah jongg game, so many historians believe the game was invented when someone adapted the older cards. As to precisely who it was who did the adapting, different historians point to either a Shanghai nobleman in 1870, a group of soldiers looking to pass time during the Taiping Rebellion, or an enterprising pair of brothers in the seaport of Ningpo in 1850. In the earliest writings, it wasn't even known as “mah jongg” — most Chinese texts of the time refer to the game either as “chung fa,” “que ma que,” or “mah cheuk,” all of which are different dialects' versions of the word “sparrow” — to some ears, the shuffling of the bone tiles used in the game sounded like squabbling sparrows.

In 1893, Stewart Culin, an American anthropologist, was the first Westerner to encounter mah jongg and write about it in the West. The first Japanese mention of the game occurred in 1909, with other countries spreading the word soon after. But in 1919, when Joseph Babcock, an American living in Shanghai, tried to convince a friend back in the United States to collaborate with him on promoting the game in



In 1924, Life Magazine acknowledged the unlikely national craze with this whimsical portrait of “Ma and Pa Jongg” enjoying a game on its cover.

the West, his friend declined. Despite the myriad papers written about the game, nothing was yet written that clearly defined the rules for Western players. Rather than giving up his plan, Babcock simply corrected the problem by writing such a rulebook himself and began importing sets to the United States, with a copy of his “Rules of Mah Jongg” included in each box.

The first mah jongg sets appeared in the Abercrombie and Fitch department stores in New York in 1920. [Note that the Abercrombie and Fitch of that time specialized in leisure equipment (from outfitting safaris to chess games) and bore no resemblance to the hip



During its introduction to the United States, many means were used to explain the game to puzzled players. This photo is from an illustrated guide to each step in the game play.

clothing chain of today.] New York players took great interest in the game, and store owner Ezra Fitch soon wrote to Babcock urging him to buy up every mah jongg set he could find in China; Babcock and Fitch ultimately sold 12,000 of these imported sets.

Soon the nation was gripped in a mah jongg craze. Americans purchased their own sets to play at home or gathered to play in night clubs. Hosts holding mah jongg nights in their homes would turn the game into an entire theme party, decorating rooms in “Chinese style,” dressing in “Chinese dress,” and serving “authentic” Chinese foods. Several novelty songs referenced the fad—one of the most popular being “Since Ma Is Playing Mah Jongg,” popularized by Eddie Cantor:

*If you want to play the game I'll tell you
what to do,
Buy a silk kimona and begin to raise a
queue;
Get yourself a book of rules and study till
it's clear,
And you'll know the game when you've got
whiskers down to here.
After that you buy a set and oh how you get
stung,
Then you start in guessing which is Chow
and which is Pung;
And when you're exhausted and you're
shaky in the knees,
Then you know why people say 'Darn
clever, these Chinese!'*

At the height of the craze, in 1924, mah jongg sets were the sixth largest export from China, surpassed only by items like silk and tea. In April 1924, *Life Magazine* even featured a cartoon reference to mah jongg on its cover as a salute to the fad.

Other game companies soon got in on the act, manufacturing their own sets rather than importing sets from China. Mah jongg sets could be a simple box with the game pieces, or could have elaborate Chinoiserie-style boxes on stands that unfolded to produce a game table. Babcock had taken out a patent on the specific “mah jongg” name, though, forcing imitators to give their games sound-alike names like “Mah Zang” or “Mo Chong,” while others used Chinese-sounding names like “Pung Chow” or the mysterious-sounding “Game of the Thousand Intelligences.”

Some of these alternative games also made very slight changes to the rules, creating confusion among groups of players who'd all learned to play from different game sets.



Singer Eddie Cantor was one of a number of entertainers who performed novelty songs capitalizing on the mah jongg craze.

Serious aficionados of the game also looked down on those who played a “copycat” game. Between the confusion and the glut of sets on the market, the fad began dying out in the late 1920s. Diehard groups did continue to play, however, developing their own versions of rules in an effort to attract new players; the fad was revived briefly in the early 1930s, as Depression-weary families looking for fun but lacking money for an outing dusted off old sets they had in their attics. In 1937, the first National Mah Jongg League was formed in the United States, an organization devoted to promoting the game. The NMJL also attempted to standardize the varying rules of game play in the United States; their rule set for “American Mah Jongg” was strikingly different from Babcock’s original rules, but is still in use today. The NMJL continues to hold national mah jongg tournaments and organizes social outings, cruises, and conventions devoted to mah jongg to this day.

Mah jongg suffered a mid-century setback in China as well. In 1949, the Communist government of the People’s Republic of China banned mah jongg along with all other forms of gambling, for being “symbols of capitalist corruption.” People in other Asian nations nevertheless continued to play. Game play became particularly ingrained in everyday life in Hong Kong; many families today still play mah jongg on New Year’s Eve, restaurants keep sets on hand



After suppressing the game for years because of its gambling connections, the Chinese government now encourages mah jongg as a healthy pastime for the elderly, as a means of preserving brain activity.



Chin Siu Ho appears in 1982’s Mah Jongg Heroes, a Hong Kong film that touched off a genre of “mah jongg action films.”

for customers, and wedding reception halls often have side rooms set up with mah jongg tables for guests who might want a game. During China’s Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s, the Chinese government relented and revived mah jongg, and even promoted it as a mentally stimulating activity for the elderly.

The game’s association with gambling in Hong Kong and Japan seems to give credence to the Chinese government’s concerns. Casinos are technically illegal in Hong Kong, but many of the mah jongg “schools” permit gambling during games. The Hong Kong film industry also boasts a respectable following for “mah jongg films,” most of them action films about high-stakes gamblers for whom mah jongg is their game of choice. In one of the first, 1981’s *Mah Jongg Heroes*, a young man seeks out an older mah jongg pro to help him train for the mah jongg tournament he must face in order to win back control of his family’s chain of casinos. The film spawned two sequels, and its theme song was an early 1980’s pop hit for Cantonese singer Sam Hui.

The game is treated as a more serious gambling pastime in Japan. Rumor has it that a 1999 explosion in a Tokyo casino was set by a player who had lost a good deal of money at mah jongg earlier that day. There have also been Japanese works using mah jongg as a plot device; but where *Mah Jongg Heroes* was more about action, the Japanese work, a manga series named *Akagi*, was a bit grittier. Beginning as a graphic story featured in a Japanese mah jongg



Actress Joan Chen, right, in her starring role in the recent film Lust, Caution from director Ang Lee. In the film, set in China in the 1930s, Chen plays a spy sent to assassinate a Chinese government official; she first befriends him through playing regular mah jongg games with his family.

magazine, *Akagi* was soon turned into an anime series; the star of the tale, Akagi Shigeru, is a teen who stumbles into a gambling parlor while trying to flee from police; when police follow, he joins a table to try to blend in. But he soon proves himself a prodigy of the game, as well as a nearly fearless gambler, and over time his mah jongg expertise earns him the admiration of the Japanese underworld and the respect of the yakuza, the Japanese mafioso.

Perhaps in response to its gambling associations, Japan collaborated with China in establishing International Tournament Rules for the game. Alongside rules concerning scoring and game play, tournament rules also carry a number of statements concerning proper decorum during a tournament; players are

forbidden to eat or smoke during a game, and absolutely *no* one is permitted to gamble. Japan hosted the first international mah jongg competition in 2002, with Japanese player Mai Hatsune claiming first prize. Other tournaments have been held throughout Asia and Europe. But it is still common in China today to see a group of friends sitting in a park or on a streetcorner enjoying their weekly mah jongg game, just for fun.



Akagi, a Japanese anime series, told the tale of a teenage mah jongg prodigy who becomes a legend in Tokyo's underworld.

Made in China

It is difficult to say why anything becomes a fad, but it still seems strange that a Chinese game from the 1800s became such a craze in the West. But people in Europe and the Americas have been fascinated with China for hundreds of years and turned several other aspects of Chinese civilization into fads.

Fascination with the Chinese has its roots in the more general phenomenon of *Orientalism*, a preoccupation with the East that dates from the Middle Ages. At that time, “the Orient” referred to the Middle East—very little was known of any of the lands east of Central Asia, the farthest reach of the Roman Empire. What little anyone in Europe knew of the lands in the Middle East was largely through the Bible and through trade items brought from the Silk Road, an ancient series of trade routes connecting Asia and Europe. Although Medieval Europeans didn’t know much about China or India, they were certainly impressed by Chinese silks and Indian spices. Occasionally a missionary or European trader would follow the road back to the East and return with tales of his voyage—

Marco Polo is the best-known example—mesmerizing Europeans with their stories of what sounded like an exotic neverland.

The breakdown of the Mongol Empire in the 1400s led to a similar breakdown of the regular trade routes, encouraging Europeans to pave their own ways east; and as more Europeans explored Asia in search of trade goods, they brought even more stories of “the Orient” back to eager Europeans and increased the demand for even more treasures. Perhaps it was because the demand for Asian items was so great, and the supply so small, that enterprising Europeans began creating their own “Asian-style” items.

Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European merchants tried making their own Chinese-style ceramics first. There was an especial demand for blue-and-white porcelain items from the Jingdezhen region of China, and Jingdezhen merchants began producing items expressly for the European market in the late 1660s. The mania for Chinese blue and white porcelain inspired the Dutch town of Delft to



Left: Inspired by Chinese porcelains—and inspired by customer demand—manufacturers in Delft, Holland, began making their own blue-and-white patterned pieces, known today as Delftware.

Right: An English adaptation of Chinese blue-and-white porcelain. This “willow pattern” soon acquired many fanciful stories meant to “explain” the design in the context of Chinese legends—all, of course, completely fictional.



The Pagoda at the Royal Gardens in Kew in London. At 163 feet, it is one of the tallest pagodas in the world.

produce its own version, soon known as “Delftware.” Other regions soon followed, with Meissen, Germany, producing its “Blue Onion” porcelain in the 1700s, and a factory in Staffordshire developed its own “Blue Willow” pattern soon after. The Staffordshire factory even had stories to “explain” the design on the pattern, assigning “symbolic” meaning to the different design elements—the willow represented a Mandarin princess, for example, or a pair of



During the Chinoiserie craze, European nobility often decorated rooms in elaborate Chinese-inspired styles. These pieces are from one of the bedrooms at Badminton House, a home belonging to England’s Duke of Beaufort.



The “Drachenhaus” in Potsdam, Germany, was one of two Chinese-inspired guesthouses Friedrich II of Prussia built at the height of Europe’s “Chinoiserie” craze.

doves represented the souls of some martyred Shaolin monks. Such stories were made up, of course, to give the porcelain “exotic” appeal.

Such fanciful designs fit in well with the seventeenth-century rococo design craze. Rococo style was heavily ornate, cramming rooms full with decorative furniture, highly patterned fabrics, huge wall paintings, tapestries, plaster reliefs on ceilings and walls, and decorative sculptures and mirrors. Lovers of rococo who also were intrigued by China soon moved from simply featuring fanciful plates to doing entire rooms in a “Chinese style,” attempting to copy some of the design elements they had seen on their plates or in pictures. This “Chinoiserie” movement featured images from a fairytale version of China, with exotic flowers and animals, “typical” Chinese palaces and pagodas, and picturesque Chinese maidens and warriors in “strange” clothing.

Chinoiserie decorators also tried copying Chinese housewares and furniture items,

producing tables and cabinets with fake lacquer paneling or painting tinware or vases to resemble Ming Dynasty lacquered porcelains. At the height of the craze, European nobility decorated entire rooms in Chinoiserie or erected pagodas in corners of their estates—the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew in London features one of the tallest pagodas, at 163 feet. Fredrick II of Prussia built two “Chinese-inspired” guest houses on his estate, and Russian Tsarina Catherine the Great even commissioned an entire “Chinese village” for one of the Russian Imperial residences. The mania for Chinese-inspired décor has never entirely faded, but did wane considerably in the 1800s.

As European interest in Chinoiserie waned, a new Chinese trend was on the rise in the United States. Thousands of Chinese workers emigrated to the United States in the mid-1800s, seeking their fortunes in California during the Gold Rush or finding work building the railroads. Soon some enterprising newcomers opened simple restaurants in California cities with large emigrant populations, serving traditional Chinese cooking to their homesick brethren. Adventurous American workmen began visiting their restaurants, and these restaurateurs changed their traditional recipes to cater more to American palates. Chinese emigration to the United States was brought to a temporary halt in 1882, but by then these first Chinese restaurants were popular additions to the California landscape and were beginning to spread back east.

At first, Eastern and small-town Americans were intimidated by what was to them an unfamiliar cuisine. Restaurateurs changed their recipes to further reassure potential customers, or started serving more Western specialties (one restaurant in Boston in the 1880s offered french fries). Other restaurants wrote lengthy descriptions of the more unusual dishes in their menus. People gradually warmed to Chinese food through the early twentieth century, and a meal at a Chinese restaurant became a sophisticated way to spend an evening. Things Chinese enjoyed a particular vogue in the 1920s, and soon the mah jongg craze was joined by a Chinese food craze, as Chinese restaurants began doubling as dance halls with bands



The menu from Hong Far Low, one of Boston’s first Chinese restaurants from 1880, reassured timid customers that they also served french fries.

playing popular “Chinese-themed” novelty songs like “Who’ll Chop Your Suey While I’m Gone?”

In 1943, when the United States finally relaxed its Chinese immigration policy, the Chinese restaurant had become such a fixture in larger American cities that many of the new immigrants headed straight for smaller towns to open restaurants of their own. Through the 1950s and 1960s, the Chinese restaurant became a ubiquitous feature of suburbia, offering



In 1970, Chinese ping pong player Zhuang Zedong and U.S. player Glenn Cowan exchanged gifts during an international competition. Their simple act inspired both nations to renew friendly relations after nearly 20 years.

American families an inexpensive evening out and a chance to enjoy something different from the more routine meals they ate at home. Today, there are nearly 41,000 Chinese restaurants in the United States, more than the number of McDonald's, Wendy's and Burger King franchises combined.

Even though Americans embraced Chinese food in the 1950s and 1960s, they regarded the nation of China itself with unease. After the Second World War, Chinese leader Mao Zedong completely closed China off to the West for twenty years, concentrating on a series of drastic cultural and social reforms and establishing a Communist government. In the early years of the Cold War, Americans—even as they dined on takeout Chinese food—regarded Communist China as an enemy.

Then in 1971, China sent a team to compete in an International Table Tennis championship match for the first time in years. One morning, U.S. team member Glenn Cowan missed his own team's bus to the stadium and spontaneously decided to hitch a ride on the Chinese team's bus. Chinese team captain Zhuang Zedong struck up a conversation with him. The two ended up exchanging gifts—Zedong gave Cowan a silk-screened scarf, and Cowan gave Zedong a t-shirt with a peace symbol—and soon other members of both teams befriended each other.

Both Chinese and U.S. diplomats decided to seize the opportunity to improve relations. Mao Zedong invited the U.S. table tennis team to China for a tour and a series of “friendship

games,” and President Richard Nixon invited the Chinese team to tour the United States the following year. This “Ping Pong Diplomacy” paved the way for Richard Nixon's own visit to China in 1972, and it also touched off a brief upsurge in the popularity of Ping Pong itself.

The warming relations with China renewed American interest in Chinese culture, but much of China was still recovering from Mao's reforms. Hong Kong, then still technically under British control, had maintained more cultural freedom than the rest of China and had a particularly active film industry. Hong Kong filmmakers soon rushed to share their work with curious Americans.

The films that proved most popular with Americans—by far—were martial arts action films. Nicknamed “chopsocky” films by some, these films were thin in plot but featured plenty of acrobatic and fast-paced kung fu fight sequences. Other fans found the lackluster scripts and special effects to be charming in their own way. While many of the performers were athletes first and performers second, an American-born Hong Kong actor named Bruce Lee soon became a superstar in both countries, renowned for both his technical kung fu expertise and his stage presence. Lee's best-known film, *Enter the Dragon*, is regarded as a classic in the Hong Kong film genre.

Not to be outdone, the United States soon



Hong Kong actor Bruce Lee was the undisputed star of the Hong Kong action film craze. His debut film, Enter the Dragon, is still considered a classic of the genre.



David Carradine, appearing here in his starring role as Kwai Chang Caine in the 1973 television show, Kung Fu. Despite appearing in a number of westerns prior to his role as Caine, Carradine has since mostly played characters with some Asian background—even though he has no Asian ancestry himself.

made its own contributions to the kung fu fad. The best known today was the television show, *Kung Fu*, originally created as a Bruce Lee vehicle. American actor David Carradine starred instead, as Kwai Chang Caine, a Chinese-American drifter in the Old West who happened to be an expert in kung fu. The show featured frequent flashbacks to Caine's boyhood in China, where he received his martial arts training in a Shaolin monastery and went by the nickname "Grasshopper." For children too young to follow the story of Kwai Chang Caine, there was the cartoon series, *Hong Kong Phooey*, featuring a police dog with a secret identity as a kung fu superhero.

Sillier still was "Kung Fu Fighting," an early disco song by Carl Douglas that capitalized on the craze with lyrics like "Everybody was kung fu fighting, / Those cats were fast as lightning." Douglas, who never had another hit, later confessed that he was inspired to write the song after watching a kung fu movie while under the influence of some rather strong painkillers. The kung fu craze abated in the late 1970s, but



Hong Kong Phooey was a children's cartoon that capitalized on the 1970s kung fu craze. Thanks to a correspondence course in kung fu, mild-mannered police dog Penry Pooch was able to assume a secret identity as a superhero who used martial arts to fight crime.

recent Hong Kong action stars like Jackie Chan and Chow Yun Fat have renewed some interest.

A twenty-first-century example of Westerners borrowing from the Chinese came with the 2002 television show, *Firefly*. Set several hundred years in the future, the show featured a team of mercenaries and smugglers on a



Sean Maher in his role as Simon Tam in the television show, Firefly. This 2002 television show, set on a future spaceship, assumed there would be an eventual Chinese-American alliance, and so both spoken and written Mandarin was used in the show. The sign behind Maher reads "Danger: Electricity" in this scene set on board the characters' ship.

spaceship in a far-off solar system making their living in a “frontier” created by Earth’s colonization of other planets. Creator Joss Whedon, noting that China and the United States currently have the most active space programs, imagined that sometime before the era in which *Firefly* is set, there could have been some kind of Sino-American space alliance, and so the show routinely used elements of both cultures. Most notably, the characters occasionally spoke in Mandarin Chinese, and signs on the ship were written in Chinese ideograms. None of the Mandarin used was ever translated for viewers—partly because many expressions were obscenities based on Taiwanese slang and curses—but many Mandarin speakers were pleased to note that with very few exceptions, the Mandarin was accurate.

Accuracy is less common among those who use Chinese characters for tattoos. Many people seeking tattoos have been attracted by the visual appeal of Chinese characters and wanted to incorporate characters into their tattoos’ designs—either by using a meaningful phrase or word or finding a series of characters that “translate” to their preference. The problem that they face is that often neither they nor the tattoo artist doing their design speaks Chinese, and they have only consulted a “reference sheet” of “common characters” which may, or may not, be accurate. Many of these “reference sheets” are used by the same tattoo galleries, so a mistake on a single sheet



Sometimes, seeking a Chinese character for a tattoo simply because it looks attractive can have unexpected consequences. This character, believed by many to be the character for “courage,” actually reads “big mistake.”

often is spread far and wide—one frequently used sheet confuses the character for “courage” with the character for “big mistake”.

However Westerners may stumble in their efforts to understand something Chinese—whether they really believe their Willow plate tells a coded tale of Shaolin martyrs or that Confucius invented mah jongg as a meditation tool or that taking a Chinese cooking course possess some innate virtue—at least they are being driven by a sincere curiosity and appreciation for another culture and are seeking to learn something about another culture.

So How DO You Play Mah Jongg?

Joseph Babcock, the Westerner who introduced mah jongg to the United States, had to first overcome a daunting obstacle—simplifying the rules. To beginners, the rules can sound deeply confusing—keeping track of “winds” and “walls,” figuring out what to do with a “dragon tile,” and knowing what “pong” or “chow” mean. Before Babcock wrote his rulebook—and even after—several regional variations of the rules confused things further.

It may be helpful to think of mah jongg as a game similar to bridge or poker, with players trying to collect tiles instead of cards and create a winning hand of tiles in a particular pattern, with points awarded on the basis of the statistical odds of completing that pattern.

A standard mah jongg usually contains between 136 and 144 painted tiles (the number can vary depending on regional variations), plus some markers to track scoring. Tiles are split into three different categories: suits, honor tiles, and flowers. There are nine tiles each in three suits: dots, bamboo, and characters; the character suits bear the Chinese character for each given number. The “honor” tiles come in two types—“wind” and “dragon.” There are four “wind” tiles—one for each of the four winds, north, south, east, and west—and three kinds of “dragon” tiles, “red,” “green,” and “white.” The “flower” tiles also come in two groups—one group named after flowers (“plum,” “orchid,” “chrysanthemum,” and “bamboo”) and one after the four seasons.

To set up the board, the four players first choose an opening dealer by rolling dice or some other means. Selecting the dealer also establishes the game “winds,” which simply help players keep track of who is the dealer, and how many total hands they have played. When a player is dealing, his “wind” is always the “east wind,” with the player on his right at



A standard mah jongg set, with its full complement of tiles, dice, and score markers.

“south wind,” the next person at “west,” and the final person at “north wind”. There is also a “prevailing wind,” which starts at “east” at the very start of the game and shifts to “south” after each player has had a turn as dealer. The “prevailing wind” also moves clockwise around the board to help players keep track of the total length of the match. Beginning players sometimes find tracking the “winds” too confusing, and just agree to a length for the game.

Official game play uses an elaborate means of dealing out hands of tiles—developed to

curtail any possible cheating. This is another step which beginning players often skip. First, all the tiles are placed face down and shuffled, then all are dealt out, an equal number to each player. Each player makes a “wall” of tiles in front of him or her stacking the tiles two high. The dealer then rolls three dice, adds up the sum, and counts that same number of stacks of tiles in from the right of his row and sets them aside; these become the “dead wall.” The dealer then picks up any four of the remaining tiles from his wall to start his own hand. The player to the dealer’s right takes four more tiles from the dealer’s row, the following player another four, and so on, until all players have 12 tiles. Each player then takes one last tile from his wall, to make a complete hand of 13 tiles. If the dealer’s wall is exhausted before everyone has a complete hand, they start taking tiles from the wall of the player to the left. American mah jongg games sometimes use still *another* means of shuffling once they’re done with this step—the “Charleston,” in which each player first passes three tiles from his own hand to the player on the right, then three to the player across the table, and then three to the player on the left. Sometimes American-style players repeat the “Charleston” to further shuffle everyone’s hands.

During game play, players try to assemble various “winning hands,” or collections of tiles, much like the different winning hands in Poker. Players can collect triples (“Pong”), quadruples (“Kong”), or sequences of three in the same suit (“Chow”). A winning or “mah jongg” hand contains any four of the above combinations and a matching pair. On each player’s turn, he draws a tile from the “draw pile” (either from the dealer’s wall, or from the wall of the player to the left if the above shuffling method was used); he also must discard a tile. He must, however, announce what the tile is while discarding it. If another player needs that tile for one of his own sets, he can claim it, but he must also expose that set to the rest of the players. For example: let’s say Jerry discards a “two of bamboo” tile. Marvin already has two other “two of bamboo” tiles, and with that third tile he can make a “pong” set. So he can announce “pong” and claim the tile Jerry

discarded, but he must leave that “pong” face up on the table for the others to see. If two people try to claim the same discarded tile, the person with the better hand gets preference. Flower tiles are immediately set aside, face up, in front of each player and replaced with new tiles.

If the players take all the tiles in the draw pile and no one wins, it’s a draw and the same dealer starts over. But if a player completes a full winning hand, he declares “mah jongg,” and the player to his right becomes dealer. In some variations of the game, a player must also warn the other players when he is are only one tile away from a winning hand. In others, a player who makes a mistake and calls “mah jongg” when he doesn’t have a complete hand must pay the other players a penalty. A full game consists of four full rounds in which each player gets to be a dealer.

Players also receive points for each of their winning hands. As with poker, certain combinations are worth more points—a hand in which the highest “pong” set is a set of “dragons” is worth more than a hand with a “pong” set of only “nine of bamboo,” for instance, just as a poker hand with a straight flush is worth more than a hand of four aces. But in some versions points are also awarded to players who *don’t* win a hand—each player can receive points for any “flower” tiles he has collected during each round, for example. At the end of game play, the player with the most points is declared winner of the entire match.

There are a great many variations on these basic rules. Most involve scoring, so much so that players in China often must collectively discuss the scoring system they’re going to use for a given match. The most common version in China is the “Hong Kong” method, which has only minor differences from “classical” mah jongg. There is also a Sichuan variation which eliminates certain tiles from play, a three-player version, and a Taiwanese style of play with bonuses awarded to dealers. “American mah jongg” has some significant differences in play—the “Charleston” shuffling method has been described earlier, and American style also includes the use of “joker” tiles, which can be used in any hand, and allows for a greater

number of different kinds of sets in addition to the “pong” and “chow”—one example is the “news” set, consisting of one of each of the different wind tiles (the first letters of each wind spell “news”). Finally, “Pusser Bones” is a newer variant developed by soldiers in the Australian navy—it’s a bit simpler than standard game play, and uses an alternative vocabulary for the game—referring to the winds as Eddie, Sammy, Wally, and Normie instead of East, South, West, and North.

In an effort to regulate the rules somewhat, and also to discourage its connections with gambling, the China Sports Commission published an official set of rules for mah jongg tournaments in 1998, introducing an even greater number of winning patterns and scoring opportunities. A few years later, the first World Championship Mah Jongg match, using these “tournament” rules, was held in Tokyo. While the world championships have enjoyed an



The winners pose at the First World Mah Jongg Championships in Tokyo, Japan, in 2002. Japanese player Mai Hatsune, appearing in the center, took first prize.

active following each year, few players outside the tournament world ever use these rules—the local rules are simply too well-established.

While You Are There

PA Arts and Humanities Standards
Elements of Theatre: Critical Response 9.3

As you enjoy the play, keep some of the questions you find below in mind so that you can discuss them at the talk-back or with friends and teachers upon your return home.

Questions about the actors:

Voice: Please observe the quality of the actors' voices.

1. How do the actors use voice to help promote the meaning of their words?

2. Do the voices sound natural or strained?

3. Is there any difference between the voices the actors use while performing and the voices we ordinarily use in conversation? If so, what are these differences?

Movement: Please observe the actors' movements.

1. Give an example of how body language communicates with the audience?

2. Give an example of how characters reveal themselves through movement?

3. Isolate some specific gestures or movements that seem particularly meaningful to you. List who does what:

Questions about the Set Design, Lighting, and Costumes

1. Are the sets abstract, minimal or realistic? How does the set design contribute to the meaning of the play?

2. What choices have been made for costumes? Why were these choices made?

3. Is lighting used to contribute to mood and meaning? How? When?

Questions about the Directing

Blocking

1. Consider the blocking of the production. What does it add to the play?

2. Would you have made the same blocking choices? Why or whynot?

Directing

1. Are there any changes you would have made to the way actors portrayed their characters if you had been the play's director? What scenes or parts might you do differently?

Questions

Use this space to write down any questions you might want to ask the performers, director or technical staff after the performance.

Rubric: Writing a Play Review

The Men of Mah Jongg

Paragraph 1

Student introduced the name of the play
Student introduced the name of the playwright
Student introduced the place of performance
Student introduced the date of performance
Student introduced the name of the director

Paragraph 2

Student reacted to the characters in regards to:
Voice
Body
Emotions
Relationships
Projection

Paragraph 3

Student addressed the set
Student addressed the lights
Student addressed the costume and make-up
Student addressed the sound effects

Paragraph 4

Student wrote about audience reaction
Student placed own opinion regarding the play as a whole
You are in control of your own grade. If you address each of these aspects, you will do well.
Don't forget to write about what you didn't like.