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Book Review
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Mahjong: A Chinese Game and the Making of Modern American Culture
by Annelise Heinz

Reviewed by Kalman Goldstein

For historian Annelise Heinz, mah-jongg is more than just a game, and its American version contains sociological significance. In China, mah-jongg historically was a high-stakes game played by men. But from the first, American expatriates in Shanghai marketed it for women, devoting attention to its aesthetic qualities and standardized rules that were previously absent. A 1920's fad, requiring expensive paraphernalia, limited the game to wealthy women dressing up as Chinese. But mah-jongg is most associated with generations of Jewish-American women who created, shaped and marketed its mass allure, and those middle-class women refracted changes in mid-century Jewish-American culture. Heinz's book examines both how and why they Americanized the game, and how and why they played it.

Viola Cecil founded the National Mah-Jongg League in 1937; to this day it has been Jewish, with Hadassah Magazine a conduit to membership, and purchase of the annual edition of its rules. Though eventually manufactured by Parker Brothers, for decades the game's tiles and chips, racks, even ashtrays, were created by Sy Silverman in factories in Brooklyn and Queens. Rejecting unkosher tiles made from cow's horn, American scientists invented catalin, a celluloid plastic. Responding to members' tastes, mah-jongg sets added numerals and more familiar flower tiles. The League arranged tournaments in Conservative synagogues, vacation spas and beach clubs. Except for an independent organization by wives of military personnel (Mamie Eisenhower played), the game, its rules, and evenings of play embodied a beloved part of the American Jewish experience. Groups had photos taken while at table; my mother bequeathed me two, one from our rental apartment, one from our later co-op.

Heinz speculates that mah-jongg served a purpose for Jewish women, both as women and as part of the mid-century move from central cities to the suburbs. The games relieved the anxieties of suburban life: child-raising and domesticity in a new milieu,

hosting and cementing new relationships among young women, reducing a sense of isolation as they left densely-populated familiar neighborhoods, and indulging “non-productive” time away from the demands of husbands and young children. Playing mah-jongg provided a portable, common culture in challenging new social situations. Women gambled for low stakes; winning provided pocket money independent of a husband’s budget allowances. Players’ cries of “dot”, “bam” and “crak” as each hand unfolded now suggested the exotic without requiring the faux-Chinese outfits of the 1920’s matrons. The author conjectures that mah-jongg served a use akin to that of the Chinese restaurant: an adventurous departure from the safe ethnic homogeneity of the old neighborhood without encountering the dangerous attraction of mainstream Christian mass culture.

As American society changed, mah-jongg became just one among many games: Jewish women played canasta, rummy and bridge, as well. The feminist movement took different forms. There has been a recent renaissance in popularity, but now men, as well as women, play. In our family, the game skipped a generation, from my mother to my daughter; she plays with her husband and another couple. The League is now led by sons of former president Ruth Unger. Throughout the book are examples of anecdotes inspired by an older era: millennial’s nostalgia about parents’ stories, an inherited set, or a generator of camaraderie within retirement communities.