*Wok & Roll by Peter Kwong, (Frederic) Inter-County Leader*

**How I became king of the fish stomach**

Growing up in Hong Kong, one cannot survive without knowing how to play Mahjong. It is a game among friends, neighbors, business associates and the elderly and it is played on any occasion — weddings, birthday parties, social gatherings, and before and after business meetings.

Mahjong is a game of chance and skill. One can be as lucky as can be and get the tiles needed, or one could use his skills to block his opponents from getting the tiles needed in order to win the game.

Somehow, I was never interested in the game, as I do not like to gamble. Folks said the game is for entertainment and fun, but I just didn’t have the desire to learn the game even though it was wildly popular in our daily lives.

There would be Mahjong games before banquet time. Usually it would be an hour or two. It takes four players to play the game, but the new rules allow three players. The rules might vary, depending on the players. But if one has a winning streak, they might take home a few hundred dollars. It is better than going to the casinos.

Someone talked me into learning the game before I came to the U.S., I think it may have been my high school pals. They wanted to get a game going but only had three players, so one of my buddies convinced his mother to teach me the rules and guide me by sitting behind me. So, her coaching paid off when I ended up winning (not much, but hey, a win is a win).

It is a very simple game, but rather difficult to explain the rules. The old-timers would shuffle the tiles, restack them and be ready for a new game in less than a minute. But as a beginner, they patiently waited for me to do all that and even helped me count how many stacks of tiles I had gathered so I wouldn’t mess up. What true friends, indeed.

I have learned how to play the game by sitting behind my mother or Pao-Pao (grandma) when they were playing. If they were lucky and won, they would give me a dollar for my service of giving them a warm towel to wipe their faces, bringing them hot tea or ice water, snacks and sometimes fanning them when I was sweating in the intense Hong Kong heat.

Customer service 101, I learned that at a young age. Somehow, I was doomed to work in the hospitality industry, darn Mahjong games!

If you know how to play Rummikub or Tiles, you can master playing Mahjong. The same principles are used. There are sets and runs with different color tiles. The minute you get rid of your tiles, you win.

Well, Mahjong is a bit more complicated, but it is quite easy to learn. There are 144 tiles and basically three different sets — the dots, the stripes and the Mahns (characters). Then, there are the east, south, west and north tiles and other additions that, at first glance, will make your head spin. But once you understand the rules, it becomes a game of chance and how to outwit one another.

I became a regular player after I was broken in. Yes, there would be a bet on the game; but since we were all students, broken and poor, we would just play for pennies and have fun. Still, pennies added up. One can end up losing $10 to $20 in a “friendly” game. But to have a few hours of fun, it was cheaper than going to a movie.

Even though it is a friendly game, one has to focus and concentrate on different strategies. What tiles to keep and what tiles to discard has to be decided in a split second.

A lot of folks would use Mahjong to socialize and to gossip about everyone’s business. But not my mother! She would quietly play along, with a smile on her face. But she would carefully watch everyone’s move. What tiles do they discard and in what sequence? After a while, she could guess what tiles her opponents needed and would hold the tiles so they couldn’t win. Even at a minor loss, she would do it. Goodness, she would make a great general, suffering a minor casualty with a loss instead of losing a major battle! And everyone thinks playing Mahjong is for fun. They don’t know my mother well enough.

Another thing about the game: If all players know the rules of the game and the mechanics of shuffling the tiles and restacking them, each round of the game can be over in less than five minutes. Talk about keeping your mind sharp! When you discard a tile, your mind is already expecting what to do when your opponents discard their tiles.

I learned the game before I left Hong Kong and never had a chance to play again until my parents visited me in the States, bearing with them a set of Mahjong games. But I never got efficient in playing the game, even though I knew the rules. When I visited my buddies in different states, we would have friendly Mahjong games to keep in touch with our culture and in remembrance of the good old days.

My nickname is “Fish Stomach,” and I am the favorite player who all desire. No, not because of my sophisticated skill, but fish stomach translates to tasty, easy to eat — no bones and soft and tender. So, I played along and emptied my wallet for good laughs. Now you know why all my buddies love me, the king of fish stomach.

I dare not try to explain the rules of the game, but I heard that in many libraries or book clubs, they would introduce the game of Mahjong and a lot of folks are hooked. It is like playing bridge, but a bit more challenging, as you are playing on your own and not depending on your partner.

It takes four people to start a game and, trust me, it is addictive. Maybe I’ll sharpen my skills and start teaching the game in some libraries? Then maybe I can pass my title of Fish Stomach King on to someone else. Wouldn’t that be nice?