**The secret behind the tiles**

[Gregg plays mahjong with her friends.]

**Gregg & Friends:** “Nine crack.” “Three bam.” “Nine dot.”

**Yuchen Li:** Gregg Swain is playing mahjong. It’s a tile-based game that originated in China more than two hundred years ago. The game needs four players, a set of mahjong, all of your wisdom, and a bit of luck.

Gregg is a big name in the mahjong world. She is the author of three mahjong books and numerous vintage mahjong set collections. Believe it or not, she learned the game a little more than a decade ago - when she was in her 50s.

**Gregg:** “Mahjong!”

**Gregg’s friend:** “Look at that joker lady!”

[Mahjong tiles shuffle.]

**THEME MUSIC**

**YL:** I'm Yuchen Li, and this is Onomatopoeia, a podcast about the people and places of NYC. In this episode, *The Secret Behind the Tiles*.

I first met Gregg in her apartment. Even though it was under construction, there were many Chinese elements at a glance -- an old floor clock with golden ornaments from the 19th century, a Chinese antique herb medicine cabinet, and a blue and white porcelain jar.

Gregg wore a necklace made from a four-dot mahjong tile and a scarf with mahjong images. Growing up in Manhattan, Gregg first learned about the game as a little girl in the 1960s.

**Gregg:** “I was growing up when everybody didn't have the need for air conditioning. And people would be gathered around game tables that were set up on the street, and I'd hear saying like Dragon, Green Dragon, Red Dragon, soap, bamboo, flower... And I thought, my goodness, this is sounding so exciting. And then what really attracted me is that at the end of the game, they’d be all this ‘haha!’ They’d all be this laughter. And I thought, oh my goodness, I really want to learn to play this game.”

**YL:** But she didn’t get the chance to play until four decades later.

**Gregg:** “My first lesson, I sat there, overwhelmed. Oh, I don't know why I'm here. I don't understand anything. I don't know what these tiles are. I'm really worried. Why did I think I wanted to play this game?”

**YL:** It took her quite a while to figure out how to play mahjong. But what really interested Gregg was the beautiful artwork on Chinese vintage tiles. The trigger? A strutting Phoenix.

**Gregg:** “This was a hand-carved set. And it would have been carved back in the 1920s when a lot of the sets were hand-carved.”

**YL:** Gregg put her background as an art historian to work. She started looking back at the history of mahjong and the carvings on the tiles. Gregg published her first book – *Mah Jongg, The Art Of The Game* in 2014.

Gregg has also become a collector of vintage sets….

**Gregg:** “I have a lot of different types of sets. I've got everything, and I really don't want to count. It will make me too scared.”

**Woody:** “Several years ago, Greg bought a Mahjong set from a collector.”

**YL:** Woody Swain is Gregg’s husband. He sees himself as Gregg’s assistant.

**Woody:** “And it's in this beautiful leather case. And on the front of it is a steamship sticker that says NYK line stateroom in the name of a Mr. E.A.R. Fowles destination London.”

**YL:** Gregg and Woody went online, and learned that Fowles had lived in Shanghai since 1932. His name also appeared on a very short list of British who were running the ex-pat community in Shanghai.

The couple was intrigued…

[**Music:** *Aloscape* starts]

**Woody:** “And in 1937, the second Sino-Japanese war began in Shanghai where Japanese fired on Chinese soldiers. And two years later, he took this Japanese liner to England...”

**Gregg:** “And the fact that he disappeared, right when he got to England, there is no record of him at all. None. I think he was a spy. I think it was a fake name. And his name, if you look at his initials, is EAR Fowles. I think he was the British ear in Shanghai...”

**Woody:** “Gregg thinks, you know, maybe he was a spy.”

[**Music -** *Aloscape* stops]

**Gregg:** “What we wanted to show you is that here are the flower tiles. And you can see images of bombs dropping on to… that's a Japanese man there...”

**Woody:** “And on the far right, a Chinese aerial bomber over a mountain range… ”

**Gregg:** “You can read the Chinese words on them...”

[**Music** **-** *Heavenstill* starts]

**Woody:** “The top row says aviation to save the country. Here it takes on a new meaning to help the Chinese war effort against the Japanese. And the bottom row says move the troops to save territory…”

**Gregg:** “The carvers were trying to make the Chinese feel strong that they could overcome the enemy. So there were many messages like that about Chinese military strength that would often appear in these years. But I can't believe the bravery of the man who took this particular set onto a Japanese ship. So maybe the intention was because nobody in the world was really paying attention to the terrible situation in China. But he wanted the word to get out.”

[**Music -** *Heavenstill* stops]

**YL:** Gregg and Woody can’t know whether this story is true. But their interpretation connects the history I know and the game I love in an unexpected way.

I grow up in China. I play Mahjong. I think I’m good at it. I believe China has one of the strongest mahjong cultures in the world.

But I have never ever heard of any history about mahjong. Especially about the tiles. I played with machine-made mahjong tiles. They all looked the same.

While I am thinking of a time when those hand-carved mahjong sets can come back to game tables, Gregg imagines a world in which American kids grow up playing Mahjong…..

**Gregg:** “You know, away from the screens and everything, there's a real opportunity to connect. And I think that people are gonna be looking to that more and more, especially because mahjong helps you forget about all the things you are worried about.”

**YL:** And not have to wait decades for someone to teach them.

**THEME MUSIC**

**YL:** This episode of Onomatopoeia was created by me, Yuchen Li. Onomatopoeia is a production of the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism. Joanne Faryon is our executive producer and professor. Original theme music by Lee Feldman. Other music by Blue Dot Sessions. Special thanks to Columbia Libraries.