

Pua Tiong Chiu 跋中秋

The Mid-Autumn Dice Game, as Chinese-Filipino Families Play It

Six dice, one porcelain bowl, and sixty-three prizes. Players take turns throwing the dice, and the fours decide who wins what. The game comes from Xiamen in southern Fujian, where it's called Bo Bing, and it travelled with Hokkien families to Manila and beyond. It's played on or around the Mid-Autumn full moon, the fifteenth night of the eighth lunar month.

This is how our family plays it. Every family has its own house rules, so treat these as a starting point, and settle any changes before the first throw.

What You Need

- **A wide porcelain bowl**, about 25–30 cm across, with a rounded bottom so the dice can bounce and settle. Set it on a folded towel so it doesn't slide.
- **Six dice**, plus a spare or two. Chinese dice have the four (and the one) in red, and the four is the number that matters.
- **Sixty-three prizes** in six ranks: 1, 2, 4, 8, 16 and 32. See page 3.
- **A scorekeeper** with a pen and the score sheet on page 4, to track who holds the champion's title.
- **Six to ten players** is ideal for one set. For a bigger crowd, run a bowl and a set of prizes per table.

How to Play

1. **Take turns.** Go round the table. On your turn, throw all six dice into the bowl, once.
2. **Read the fours.** Count the fours (and look for four or five of a kind, or a straight). The table on page 2 tells you which rank you've rolled, if any.
3. **Collect on the spot.** If you roll one of the five lower ranks, take one prize from that rank's pile right away.
4. **One throw, one prize.** If a throw qualifies for more than one rank, you take the higher one only.
5. **An empty rank pays nothing.** Once a rank's prizes are all gone, rolling it wins nothing.
6. **The champion's prize waits.** A champion roll puts your name down as the current holder of the title. Anyone who rolls a better champion hand takes it from you. See page 2.
7. **The game ends** when the other sixty-two prizes have all been won. Whoever holds the title then takes the champion's prize.

Fouls

If a die jumps out of the bowl, or lands tilted against the side or stacked on another, the throw doesn't count and you lose your turn. It teaches everyone to throw like they mean it, without throwing like they're angry.

The Ranks

The prizes are named after the ranks of the old imperial examinations, which for more than a thousand years decided who in China got to govern. Here they're decided by a bowl of dice. Names are given the way Chinese-Filipinos say them, in Hokkien.

RANK		EXAM TITLE	ROLL	PRIZES	ODDS
Siu Tsai	秀才	passed the county exam	exactly one 4	32	about 37%
Ki Din	舉人	provincial graduate	exactly two 4s	16	about 20%
Tsin Si	進士	passed the highest exam	four of a kind (not 4s)	8	about 4%
Tam Hue	探花	third in the palace exam	exactly three 4s	4	about 5%
Pong Gan	榜眼	second in the palace exam	a straight: 1-2-3-4-5-6	2	about 1.5%
Tsiong Guan	狀元	first in the empire	four+ 4s , or five+ of a kind	1	about 1.2%

Anything else wins nothing, which is roughly three throws in ten. Two sets of three (say 2-2-2-5-5-5) wins nothing in our house; some families count it as a Pong Gan.

The Champion (Tsiong Guan)

The champion's prize isn't handed out when someone rolls for it. The title goes to the best champion roll so far, and anyone can take it away with a better one. From highest to lowest:

1. **Six of a kind**, any number but 4
2. **Five 4s**
3. **Five of a kind plus a 4**
4. **Five of a kind**
5. **Four 4s**. Between two of these, the higher total on the other two dice wins.

Exact ties: in our house, whoever rolled it first keeps the title. Some families settle it with a roll-off instead.

Winner Takes All: Six 4s

Roll six fours and the game ends on the spot. You take every prize still on the table, the champion's prize included.

A family footnote: the one time it happened to us, in the first three rounds, my mother wouldn't let the winner collect, so that the game could go on. Which tells you most of what you need to know about what the game is really for.

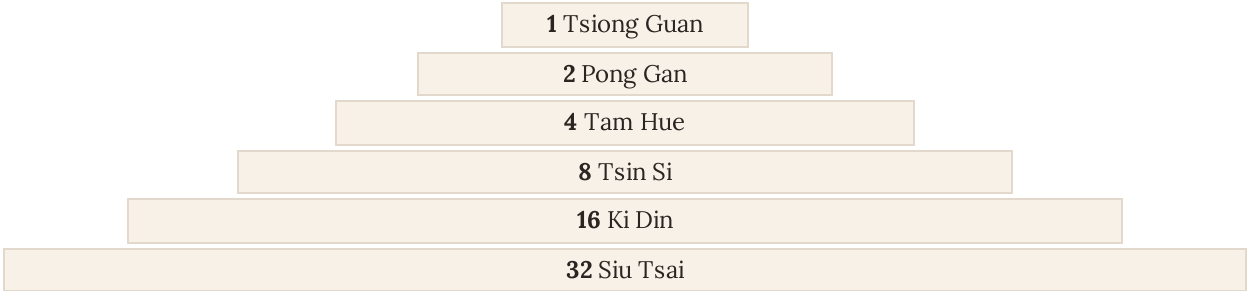
Before the First Throw

Agree on these out loud, so nobody argues about them later:

- Does a throw that qualifies for two ranks win both, or only the higher? (Ours: only the higher.)
- Does a foul mean a re-roll or a lost turn? (Ours: a lost turn.)
- Does six fours end the game, and will anyone's mother overrule it?
- Who's paying for the prizes: one host, or everyone chipping in?

Choosing the Prizes

You need sixty-three, in a pyramid that doubles as it goes down, whether six people are playing or sixteen.



Setting a Budget

Divide your budget into six equal parts, one for each rank. Then split each rank's share across its prizes. The champion's prize gets a whole share, and each step down halves in value.

WITH A \$600 BUDGET	SHARE	EACH PRIZE
1 Tsiong Guan	\$100	\$100
2 Pong Gan	\$100	\$50
4 Tam Hue	\$100	\$25
8 Tsin Si	\$100	\$12.50
16 Ki Din	\$100	about \$6
32 Siu Tsai	\$100	about \$3

What to Play For

In Xiamen the prizes were mooncakes. In Manila they became household things, because nobody minds winning several useful prizes.

- **Siu Tsai, Ki Din:** snacks: chips, Pocky, egg rolls, pancit canton.
- **Tsin Si:** pantry staples: sesame oil, soy sauce, rice.
- **Tam Hue, Pong Gan:** good tea, a candle, a kitchen gadget.
- **Tsiong Guan:** one prize worth wanting.

How Long It Takes

About 220 throws on average to clear the sixty-two lower prizes, usually between 135 and 315. Allow about an hour. Tsin Si tends to clear last, so the final stretch has a lot of throws that win nothing.

Will Anyone Go Home Empty-Handed?

Very rarely. From 20,000 simulated games per table size:

PLAYERS	PRIZES EACH	ANYONE WITH NONE
6	about 10	1 in 2,000
8	about 8	1 in 3,000
10	about 6	1 in 2,500
14	about 4½	1 in 90
20	about 3	1 in 7

Setting the Table

Lay the prizes out where everyone can see them, grouped and labelled by rank. Watching the piles shrink is half the game. Dinner usually follows.

Score Sheet

Tick a box each time a prize is won. When a rank's boxes are full, that rank pays nothing more.

Pong Gan 榜眼
a straight · 2

Tam Hue 探花
three 4s · 4

Tsin Si 進士
four of a kind · 8

Ki Din 舉人
two 4s · 16

Siu Tsai 秀才
one 4 · 32

Tsiong Guan 狀元 Tracker

Write down each champion roll. The title stays with the best hand so far; whoever holds it when the other prizes run out wins.

#	NAME	HAND (E.G. FOUR 4S + 5 + 6)	HOLDS TITLE?
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			

Champion ranking, highest first: six of a kind (not 4s) · five 4s · five of a kind + a 4 · five of a kind · four 4s (higher total on the other two dice wins). Six 4s ends the game: winner takes all.