

I learned how to play mahjong from my parents, who wanted to gift a piece of their childhood to my sister and me. Playing became a routine for months. Instead of a Family Friday spent with Life and Scrabble, we were the Joy Luck Club, mastering the ways of mahjong tiles (insert tile noises). Tallies on a scratch piece of paper kept track of our scores, and mine always seemed to be lagging behind.

So it came as a surprise when I managed to score a five-time winning streak against my grandparents, my most experienced opponents. I was in Hong Kong for a family gathering, invited to eat dinner around a huge round table with a ton of my relatives. The room was bright with red drapes trimmed with golden fabric, intricate designs of whimsical dragons dancing along the walls, and a balcony that overlooked the dusky bustle of the city (insert faint city noise). I heard the clinking of dainty herbal tea cups (insert tea cups clink), felt the smooth rolling of the turning plate in the table's center (insert rolling sound) , and saw the servers carrying enormous drool-inducing dishes – (insert steam noises) roasted duck decorated with colorful raw vegetables, wontons with bulbs of pork sealed to perfection, and traditional bread buns with creamy custard cores, which resulted in an Olympic-worthy consumption rate inclusive of an ultimate sugar high and the following crash-and-burn (insert ASMR chewing noises). Waves of indistinct Cantonese chatter lingered in the air (insert Chinese restaurant chatter); occasional shouts of laughter pierced the room, juxtaposed by the meditative sounds of the bamboo flute (insert faint flute music) flowing through the restaurant speakers. (insert conglomeration of all noises together, and then silence) Both the small movements and big gestures around the room allowed me to find comfort in community, while the voices that faded in and out with every second gave me feelings of exasperation.

When I won the fifth game, my extended relatives laughed (insert laughter) in warm awe at my achievement. I laughed along with them – mostly because I didn't know what supernatural force gave me the ability to win *so* many times in a row. Able to speak only broken sentences in Cantonese, I ensured that my enthusiasm and appreciation showed through the biggest grin I could muster.

(Insert overlay music) Over six years have passed since I played this game of mahjong. My limited Cantonese vocabulary, which has kept me from expressing myself wholly to my extended family, fills me with regret. I am grateful for the rich perspective that my culture provides, but I am constantly reminded that I've failed to take advantage of everything that my heritage gives me. Mahjong tiles, with their smooth jade polish and delicate engravings, serve as a consolation – a newfound fluency exists within them, allowing me to communicate with my grandparents in ways I otherwise could not. Only while playing mahjong am I able to put the language barrier aside and indulge in my family's company.

The game has made me aware of a much larger notion: communication exists beyond the conventional medium of spoken or written word. Perhaps a universal language *does* exist, and perhaps – this language is compassion. Like mahjong, compassion transcends thousands of years and unites people generations apart. Compassion is ubiquitous and elastic in nature, and its various modes harbor in the smallest places of daily life; it does not know barriers like language disparities, differences in individuality, culture, or background.

Compassion, a vehicle for progress, manifests in powerful demonstrations and loud protests of oppression. But it also exists through the medium of quiet power – showing conviction through respect, empathy, and understanding. Quiet power should not be mistaken for submissiveness.

Conviction is not only shown with table-slamming assertiveness and confidence, but also with patience and tolerance. The power of a gentle touch is not the opposite of progress made from loud, ambitious initiative. Western ideals of leadership usually take the form of a loud, outspoken, and ambitious trailblazer. But these ideals have been countered by my ancestors, who have taught me that thoughtful compromise is often the key to creating stronger unity. By listening to what others have to say in a world that cannot stop talking, a genuine concern for others can turn into thoughtful conversation and problem-solving. The things I learn from people

and the relationships I form with others are what drives me forward. I long to live not for superficial reasons, but to ensure that everyone around me is capable of their own pursuits.

When I think of mahjong, I am not only warmed by childhood memories, but reminded of the gentle power of compassion. (insert restaurant noises) The clinking of dainty herbal tea cups, the plucking of the mandolin in beautiful traditional music, and the clicking of green mahjong tiles being shuffled on the table evoke feelings of gratitude for my cultural identity. While I am energized by exploring alternative modes of communication and empowered by creatively reaching out to others, I am nonetheless humbled by my capability to do so. (insert tile noises) With tiles in hand, I aim to take advantage of this privilege – to take initiative and become the voice for those who cannot speak.