

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 (insert writing noise), and mine always seemed to lag behind.

So I was surprised 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 (insert chatter in Cantonese), invited to eat dinner around a huge round table with my many 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)...
and saw the servers carrying enormous delicious dishes –
(insert steam noises) roasted duck decorated with colorful raw vegetables...
(insert food steam noise) wontons with bulbs of pork sealed to perfection...
and traditional bread buns with creamy custard cores, which led to an Olympic-worthy eating competition.

(Insert Chinese restaurant chatter) Occasional shouts of laughter pierced the room, juxtaposed by the meditative sounds of the mandolin (insert faint Chinese music) flowing through the restaurant speakers.

The scene and its sounds brought a mix of comfort and exasperation. (insert conglomeration of all noises together, and then silence.)

When I won the fifth game, my extended relatives laughed with warmth at my achievement. I laughed along with them – mostly because I didn't know what supernatural force let me win so many times in a row. Able to speak only broken sentences in Cantonese, I made sure that my enthusiasm and appreciation showed through the biggest grin I could muster.

(Insert overlay music)

Over six years have passed since I played that 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 constantly reminded that I haven't taken advantage of everything that my heritage offers. Mahjong tiles, with their smooth jade polish and delicate engravings, serve as a consolation – a newfound fluency has emerged through them, so now I can communicate with my grandparents in ways I otherwise could not.

(Let music play, message can soak in.)

Only while playing mahjong am I able to put the language barrier aside and indulge in my family's company.

(Another pause with music)

The game has made me aware that communication takes place beyond the conventional medium of the 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, can be found in many places. But I find it most clearly through the medium of quiet power – showing conviction through respect, empathy, and understanding. Quiet power should not be mistaken for submissiveness, for table-slamming assertiveness and confidence. It should share the strength of patience and tolerance. The power of a gentle touch has long been recognized by my ancestors, who have taught me that thoughtful compromise is often the key to creating stronger unity.

When I think of mahjong, I am not only warmed by childhood memories but also reminded of the gentle power of compassion. And of the way sometimes lessons can be delivered without words.

(Music fades out)

The clinking of dainty herbal tea cups, the plucking of the mandolin in beautiful traditional music, and the clicking of green mahjong tiles evoke feelings of gratitude for my cultural identity. I realize that there are many ways of communicating culture and connecting with others. I am humbled by the thought that I might be able to take this insight and become the voice for those who cannot speak (insert clicking tiles).