



Cher Yue Yang*

Winning: Why Is it so Sought After in Life, and Why Does it Matter if We Lose?

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"PONG!" The explosive cry exploded the absolute stillness like a deafening thunderclap and startled the players seated around the mahjong table. I saw a hand, fast as lightning, grab a discarded tile like a ravenous eagle hunting its prey from the sky using its sharp talons. Eyebrows knitted. The players gripped their mahjong tiles firmly like warriors holding on tight to their weapons during an intense combat. The battle-worn mahjong table had just witnessed yet another shift in the tide of war. At the opposite end, a grandmother, her fingers bore the delicate wrinkles of time, gently but superstitiously stroked a lucky charm hanging from her neck. With a barely audible mumble, she prayed, not for herself, but for Lady Luck to smile upon her next draw on a mahjong tile. The young man beside her used his squinting eyes to concentrate while developing his strategy like a military commander who prepares for battle. I stared in the direction he was scrutinizing - the discarded tiles scattered across the table like fallen soldiers who sacrificed themselves in a bloody war. I could not help but wonder, in puzzlement and curiosity, why he would expend so much energy calculating the probability of a single tile. The effort seemed immense. Yet, to me, this was just a game. "So, what if you win? So, what if you lose?" I wondered.

As I observed the game and the players' facial expressions, I was drawn to the concept of this relentless pursuit of victory, in which the smallest decisions we make carried immense weight. Even a discarded tile might be a message, a whisper of one's strategy, and an accidental reveal of the sets forming in their hands. The veterans understood this well, but not me. Their faces often remained emotionless and unreadable, even enigmatic, while their hands moved with precision, executing smooth plays. The fourth player, a newcomer, however, was an open book. Her frowns, hesitation, and the subconscious rhythmic tapping of her fingers all betrayed her thoughts. It was intriguing how much significance was placed on such unnoticeable actions, and the cunning strategies veterans employed to bluff their opponents. There was an

undeniable energy in the room, a palpable tension that hung in the air, where each player was engaged in a battle far beyond the confines of the wooden borders of the table. The atmosphere was no weaker than when fighters gasped for their breath within the boxing ring. Each player, in their own way, with a blend of excitement, hope for luck, calculation, and the anxiety - all wishing for victory and the honour that came with it.

Then, the inevitable happened. The amateur player exhaled sharply, her face in disbelief and frustration as she lost the game, discarding a tile that completed another player's set. She slumped back into her chair. Her mouth twitched, as if she wanted to complain but held back, as if she was questioning what went wrong. It appeared to me that losing the mahjong game carried a psychological burden that extended beyond the game itself. Why, I wondered, was winning so sought after in life, and why did it matter so much if we lose?

The disappointment in the amateur player's eyes reminded me of students failing their examinations, athletes falling short, and job seekers facing rejection. This moment was never just about mahjong. It was, instead, a microcosm of life, where victories and wins are celebrated, while losses are perceived as downright failures. If losing just a game could invoke such strong emotions, how much more significant would it be with larger stakes in life? Losing is not merely a setback. It carries a psychological burden that extends beyond the game itself. The pain of losing is deeply ingrained, a concept known as loss aversion. According to Gordon (2020), a clinical social worker, loss aversion explains why humans feel losses more intensely than wins, making failure especially frustrating and painful. Anger and frustration often mask deeper emotions of shame, helplessness, and worthlessness when individuals fail. In the mahjong game, the amateur player's physical reaction - her deep sighs, her slumped posture, and the unspoken disappointment reflected this ingrained response. More than that, society continues to condition individuals to associate losses with incompetence. In life, losing is not just a one-time event; it is a prolonged assault and harassment on one's self-worth. In a world that glorifies winners and worships victories, to lose is to feel lesser.

The pain from losing is not the only driving force towards winning. A different catalyst - one's innate competitiveness - amplifies one's obsession with winning. This obsession stems from what is known as competitive arousal, a state in which emotions override rational thinking, pushing individuals into an all-consuming desire to win. Malhotra et al. (2008) highlight three main factors that amplify competitive arousal: rivalry, time pressure, and the presence of an audience. Rivalry intensifies one's motivation to outperform others; time pressure compresses decision-making, while the presence of an audience creates pressure to perform. These factors could amplify one's competitiveness towards winning. In the mahjong game, the players were

not just playing for themselves; they were competing against seasoned veterans, with the weight of silent judgment pressing down on every other player. The loss was not just about missing a win, but about what it meant in the eyes of others. Consider an entrepreneur pitching a business idea to a panel of investors on Shark Tank - their confidence may waver, not just because of potential failure but because of the scrutiny under experienced and renowned business pundits evaluating their every word. Similarly, students racing against time in an exam hall feel an immense sense of urgency, knowing that every ticking second brings them closer to an irreversible outcome. Employees vying for a long-awaited promotion find themselves locked in silent competition, knowing that only one of them will come out on top. Meanwhile, social media influencers live under the constant gaze of an audience, where their success is not only measured by personal growth but also by how many likes, shares, or followers they accumulate. In all these situations, the stakes are never just about the outcome itself but about the fear of judgment, comparison, rejection, pain and loss.

If the desire to win is fuelled by competitive arousal (rivalry, time pressure, presence of an audience) and the pain of losing is intensified by loss aversion, then the relentless pursuit of victory might not be as much about triumph as it is about avoiding defeat. Winning is glorified, not necessarily because of its intrinsic value, but it could be because it shields us from the sting of losing. This raises an unsettling possibility: winning is so sought after not because we truly desire it, but because we fear the consequences of failure. The mahjong game was just one symbolic example that mirrors the same patterns in life - in academics, careers, relationships and personal aspirations. Additionally, the amateur player's disappointment mirrors the experiences of countless individuals who invest their emotions into the hope of success, only to face the crushing reality of loss. Although one could argue that her response was possibly intensified by her ego, it was still true that she was frustrated losing to her "mahjong rivals", even losing some "face". Perhaps the problem is never losing itself, but how we perceive it. If society were to reshape its narrative, if losing was seen as part of growth, not failures, would the punch of defeat still feel as heavy and hurting? Would the pursuit of winning still hold the same power over us?

When we assess why winning is so sought after in life without understanding the motivation behind it, we tend to lose sight of why we seek to win and be consumed by an endless pursuit of victory. However, shifting our perspective to see losses as lessons rather than failures can offer a sense of liberation from the vicious cycle of chasing victory. True success is not found in the number of wins we accumulate, but in our ability to embrace setbacks, adapt, and grow beyond them. In the end, perhaps the ultimate triumph is not in winning, but in

learning how to lose without losing ourselves. Perhaps learning how to lose without losing ourselves is symbolic of something bigger yet deeper – being kind to ourselves, because after all the losing, who can we run to but ourselves? And how can we understand others who are losing if we don't try to understand how it feels to lose?

Bionote

Cher Yue Yang is pursuing a Bachelor of Computing in Computer Science at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. Beyond academics, he is deeply interested in cybersecurity and post-quantum cryptography. He has gained valuable experience through hands-on internships and aspires to be part of a team that safeguards systems against both cyber and quantum threats.

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