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**2014 Commonwealth Essay Competition**

What part does competition play in people’s daily lives?

There is this word in my local slang that never fails to amuse with the contours of its syllables and the eclectic amalgamation of cultures that gave birth to its letters – “*kiasu*”. Speaking the word forces one to pull back her teeth and bark out the last sound. The result is a fierce declaration, one with a smiling lack of tact and diplomacy, but rich in spirit.

In the haze of sweltering afternoons, the language teacher who gesticulates wildly as he exalts the wisdom of ancient Chinese philosophers presents the words as a gift to his languid students – “*kiasu*” is the fighting spirit he wants then to have, the competitive desire to secure top grades: this is the spirit stemming from centuries of educational masochism that is deep-rooted in the Asian psyche. As he proclaims the word in his ramblings to the class, the teacher seeks solace and assurance in the age-old adage that he was indoctrinated with from young – “a scholar is at the top of society”<sup>1</sup>. He knows with certainty that it is an openly revered truth and the conviction rings in the echoes of his words.

In the cool of the evening breeze, the white-haired ah-ma<sup>2</sup> who sees her grandson buried under mountains of test papers thinks of the word as an evil. Her mind drifts back to a generation when “*kiasu*” was a label that earned one dirty looks from peers – there were only a few overtly competitive students, and they were never quite well-liked. Hers was a time when competitiveness was not celebrated but views with the distasteful detachment of a baby girl who sees an ugly gun displayed in a museum’s glass case.

In the warmth of the morning sun, the lanky teen runs lap after lap around the school track. Sweat pours off his skin and its glistens along with the fire in his eyes. The word “*kiasu*” isn’t in his vocabulary. He isn’t afraid of failure, and he knows that with every lap, it is another step in his pilgrimage to the winner’s stand. His mind is clear on what matters – not the product, but the process.

The many dimensions and nuances of the word “*kiasu*” bestow upon it a curious position in our culture. We use it frequently and flippantly – on the surface, we appear to be criticising a fear of failure when we see it in those around us (“Such a *kiasu* person!”); deep within, behind every instance of such a critique is a begrudging respect for the person’s drive for success. Yet, more importantly, the prevalence of the word in our daily conversations and thoughts points to the ingrained culture of competition in the lives of my fellow countrymen and more pertinently, the world.

Competition drives us, as individuals and as a nation. Singapore’s competitive culture is embedded in the makings of our history. Half a century ago, as a newly independent island-state with no natural resources and lowly-educated population, it was the competitive nature of the global economy which spurred us to develop our industries and our education system so as to survive as a nation. As individuals, competition keeps us going every day. We are challenged to outdo ourselves and are

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<sup>1</sup> 万般皆下品， 唯有读书高

<sup>2</sup> grandmother

inspired to match up to those who shine brighter. The language teacher and his steadfast belief in the pursuit of good scores are but some of the most common manifestations of competition in the Asian context – they aren't all that there is. More than just constantly comparing ourselves to others, competition also urges us to measure against our own selves with a sense of urgency. Without competition, the human mind is idle, our appetites for greater things starved and our potential to be the best versions of ourselves untapped. It is competition that makes us look forward to every tomorrow, for we yearn to do better than we have done today, and the next day symbolizes the possibility of further progress. Competition, after all, makes us aware of what we lack and what we want, and that odd combination of motivation and envy, and hope and despair drives us forward.

In the global world today, however, are we as humanity placing too much emphasis on competition? When we prize competition above collaboration, when the winners and losers of our systems are clearly defined and stratified, when we begin to justify the quest for perfection with the good of competition, competition itself will hinder us, divide us and swallow us in an uncontrollable vicious cycle of progress that comes with the cost of leaving more and more behind. We aren't meant to be competing at every moment in our lives. Competition's role in people's daily lives is to bring about growth and motivate self-awareness and self-empowerment. Yet, when competition becomes unhealthy, shifting the focus from means to ends, our intrinsic motivation slowly fades. We begin to zero in on the external dimension brought into the equation — the fruits of winning and the path which will lead us to victory. The ideals of unity, equality and equity lose their relevance in our society as the attention is on the end-product, rather than on the people, relationships and emotions (sympathy and empathy) we sacrifice on the altar of product-driven efficiency. Inequality is further entrenched since the existing differences in the abilities of people and the income hierarchy pre-determined by the birth lottery are accentuated in a world where skills and status are valued more than anything else.

How then does such unhealthy competition hinder those who are at the forefront of the rat race? It inspires the very "*kiasu*" mentality that is so popular in Singapore — a fear of failure. For this select group of people, winning becomes the only way to avoid this fear and their desire for winning is strengthened as the fear grows. The scary thing, however, is that the more one wins, the more he is afraid of failing and falling off from the pedestal he has climbed onto — none of them are able to extricate themselves from this never-ending race towards the top. That is why competition is so entrenched in their lives that it becomes their master, instead of the tool that it ought to be.

At the same time, paradoxically, competition can also unite us. In sports, competition's most transformative capacity is revealed— its ability to bring us together despite the different backgrounds we come from, make us look past our differences and play as a team or root for one. In the film *Invictus*, South Africa's all-white Springboks rugby team's climb from a national embarrassment to champions at the 1995 Rugby World Cup united a nation that was torn apart by apartheid and decades of racial tensions. The World Cup created a common identity for a divided South African society, an identity that transcended race, history and hatred. Competition in the form of sports succeeded where politics have failed— we now know that it is a force that can be reckoned with.

In addition, competition can inspire us when we least expect it. We are stirred when we see a genuine clap on the back by athletes from rival nations after a hard-fought match, we are touched when we see the straining muscles of an overweight girl who perseveres through the 10K road race by sheer strength of her iron will, and we have only the greatest respect for the inspiring Paralympian who defies his physical disability to triumph in a sport that even the average Joe dares not to dabble in. The spirit of competition in sports is an ode to the vitality, vibrancy and vivacity of the human spirit that emerge victorious even in the face of all of odds.

As each person in this world learns to balance the role of competition in his or her life, grasping more smartly as to when to let ourselves be driven and when to let ourselves be inspired, the fear of failure in our society's mentality will eventually dim.

I will only know years later if the word "*kiasu*" prevails in the local ambience.

Perhaps, there will be that one student in the language teacher's class who chooses not to heed his advice and will one day tell her children a different mantra for a different generation.

Or, on the contrary, perhaps there will be the same ah-ma who will vouch for the success of the "*kiasu*" mentality when she witnesses her grandson graduate magna cum laude — a moment of triumph for him after twelve years of hard work.

But, I believe most likely, there will be the lanky teenager who eventually does find his way to the winner's stand — and he will gladly realise that the value of his years of training is worth way more than the weight of the trophy in gold.