

# Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior

By **AMY CHUA**

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A lot of people wonder how Chinese parents raise such stereotypically successful kids. They wonder what these parents do to produce so many math whizzes and music prodigies, what it's like inside the family, and whether they could do it too. Well, I can tell them, because I've done it. Here are some things my daughters, Sophia and Louisa, were never allowed to do:

- attend a sleepover
- have a play date
- be in a school play
- complain about not being in a school play
- watch TV or play computer games
- choose their own extracurricular activities
- get any grade less than an A
- not be the No. 1 student in every subject except gym and drama
- play any instrument other than the piano or violin
- not play the piano or violin.

I'm using the term "Chinese mother" loosely. I know some Korean, Indian, Jamaican, Irish and Ghanaian parents who qualify too. Conversely, I know some mothers of Chinese heritage, almost always born in the West, who are not Chinese mothers, by choice or otherwise. I'm also using the term "Western parents" loosely. Western parents come in all varieties.

All the same, even when Western parents think they're being strict, they usually don't come close to being Chinese mothers. For example, my Western friends who consider themselves strict make their children practice their instruments 30 minutes every day. An hour at most. For a Chinese mother, the first hour is the easy part. It's hours two and three that get tough.



Amy Chua with her daughters, Louisa and Sophia, at their home in New Haven, Conn.

Despite our squeamishness about cultural stereotypes, there are tons of studies out there showing marked and quantifiable differences between Chinese and Westerners when it comes to parenting. In one study of 50 Western American mothers and 48 Chinese immigrant mothers, almost 70% of the Western mothers said either that "stressing academic success is not good for children" or that "parents need to foster the idea that learning is fun." By contrast, roughly 0% of the Chinese mothers felt the same way. Instead, the vast majority of the Chinese mothers said that they believe their children can be "the best" students, that "academic achievement reflects successful parenting," and that if children did not excel at school then there was "a problem" and parents "were not doing their job." Other studies indicate that compared to Western parents, Chinese parents spend approximately 10 times as long every day drilling academic activities with their children. By contrast, Western kids are more likely to participate in sports teams.

What Chinese parents understand is that nothing is fun until you're good at it. To get good at any-

thing you have to work, and children on their own never want to work, which is why it is crucial to override their preferences. This often requires fortitude on the part of the parents because the child will resist; things are always hardest at the beginning, which is where Western parents tend to give up. But if done properly, the Chinese strategy produces a virtuous circle. Tenacious practice, practice, practice is crucial for excellence; rote repetition is underrated in America. Once a child starts to excel at something - whether it's math, piano, pitching or ballet - he or she gets praise, admiration and satisfaction. This builds confidence and makes the once not-fun activity fun. This in turn makes it easier for the parent to get the child to work even more.

Chinese parents can get away with things that Western parents can't. Once when I was young - maybe more than once - when I was extremely disrespectful to my mother, my father angrily called me "garbage" in our native Hokkien dialect. It worked really well. I felt terrible and deeply ashamed of what I had done. But it didn't damage my self-esteem or anything like that. I knew exactly how highly he thought of me. I didn't actually think I was worthless or feel like a piece of garbage.

As an adult, I once did the same thing to Sophia, calling her garbage in English when she acted extremely disrespectfully toward me. When I mentioned that I had done this at a dinner party, I was immediately ostracized. One guest named Marcy got so upset she broke down in tears and had to leave early. My friend Susan, the host, tried to rehabilitate me with the remaining guests.

The fact is that Chinese parents can do things that would seem unimaginable - even legally actionable - to Westerners. Chinese mothers can say to their daughters, "Hey fatty - lose some weight." By contrast, Western parents have to tiptoe around the issue, talking in terms of "health" and never ever mentioning the f-word, and their kids still end up in therapy for eating disorders and negative self-image. (I also once heard a Western father toast his adult daughter by calling her "beautiful and incredibly competent." She later told me that made her feel like garbage.)

Chinese parents can order their kids to get straight As. Western parents can only ask their kids to try their best. Chinese parents can say, "You're lazy. All your classmates are getting ahead of you." By contrast, Western parents have to struggle with their own conflicted feelings about achievement, and try to persuade themselves that they're not dis-

appointed about how their kids turned out.

I've thought long and hard about how Chinese parents can get away with what they do. I think there are three big differences between the Chinese and Western parental mind-sets.

First, I've noticed that Western parents are extremely anxious about their children's self-esteem. They worry about how their children will feel if they fail at something, and they constantly try to reassure their children about how good they are notwithstanding a mediocre performance on a test or at a recital. In other words, Western parents are concerned about their children's psyches. Chinese parents aren't. They assume strength, not fragility, and as a result they behave very differently.

For example, if a child comes home with an A-minus on a test, a Western parent will most likely praise the child. The Chinese mother will gasp in horror and ask what went wrong. If the child comes home with a B on the test, some Western parents will still praise the child. Other Western parents will sit their child down and express disapproval, but they will be careful not to make their child feel inadequate or insecure, and they will not call their child "stupid," "worthless" or "a disgrace." Privately, the Western parents may worry that their child does not test well or have aptitude in the subject or that there is something wrong with the curriculum and possibly the whole school. If the child's grades do not improve, they may eventually schedule a meeting with the school principal to challenge the way the subject is being taught or to call into question the teacher's credentials.

If a Chinese child gets a B - which would never happen - here would first be a screaming, hair-tearing explosion. The devastated Chinese mother would then get dozens, maybe hundreds of practice tests and work through them with her child for as long as it takes to get the grade up to an A.

Chinese parents demand perfect grades because they believe that their child can get them. If their child doesn't get them, the Chinese parent assumes it's because the child didn't work hard enough. That's why the solution to substandard performance is always to excoriate, punish and shame the child. The Chinese parent believes that their child will be strong enough to take the shaming and to improve from it. (And when Chinese kids do excel, there is plenty of ego-inflating parental praise lavished in the privacy of the home.)

Second, Chinese parents believe that their kids

owe them everything. The reason for this is a little unclear, but it's probably a combination of Confucian filial piety and the fact that the parents have sacrificed and done so much for their children. (And it's true that Chinese mothers get in the trenches, putting in long grueling hours personally tutoring, training, interrogating and spying on their kids.) Anyway, the understanding is that Chinese children must spend their lives repaying their parents by obeying them and making them proud.

By contrast, I don't think most Westerners have the same view of children being permanently indebted to their parents. My husband, Jed, actually has the opposite view. "Children don't choose their parents," he once said to me. "They don't even choose to be born. It's parents who foist life on their kids, so it's the parents' responsibility to provide for them. Kids don't owe their parents anything. Their duty will be to their own kids." This strikes me as a terrible deal for the Western parent.

Third, Chinese parents believe that they know what is best for their children and therefore override all of their children's own desires and preferences. That's why Chinese daughters can't have boyfriends in high school and why Chinese kids can't go to sleep away camp. It's also why no Chinese kid would ever dare say to their mother, "I got a part in the school play! I'm Villager Number Six. I'll have to stay after school for rehearsal every day from 3:00 to 7:00, and I'll also need a ride on weekends." God help any Chinese kid who tried that one.

Don't get me wrong: It's not that Chinese parents don't care about their children. Just the opposite. They would give up anything for their children. It's just an entirely different parenting model.

Here's a story in favor of coercion, Chinese-style. Lulu was about 7, still playing two instruments, and working on a piano piece called "The Little White Donkey" by the French composer Jacques Ibert. The piece is really cute - you can just imagine a little donkey ambling along a country road with its master - but it's also incredibly difficult for young players because the two hands have to keep schizophrenically different rhythms.

Lulu couldn't do it. We worked on it nonstop for a week, drilling each of her hands separately, over and over. But whenever we tried putting the hands together, one always morphed into the other, and everything fell apart. Finally, the day before her lesson, Lulu announced in exasperation that she was giving up and stomped off.



From Ms. Chua's album: 'Mean me with Lulu in hotel room... with score taped to TV!'

"Get back to the piano now," I ordered.

"You can't make me."

"Oh yes, I can."

Back at the piano, Lulu made me pay. She punched, thrashed and kicked. She grabbed the music score and tore it to shreds. I taped the score back together and encased it in a plastic shield so that it could never be destroyed again. Then I hauled Lulu's dollhouse to the car and told her I'd donate it to the Salvation Army piece by piece if she didn't have "The Little White Donkey" perfect by the next day. When Lulu said, "I thought you were going to the Salvation Army, why are you still here?" I threatened her with no lunch, no dinner, no Christmas or Hanukkah presents, no birthday parties for two, three, four years. When she still kept playing it wrong, I told her she was purposely working herself into a frenzy because she was secretly afraid she couldn't do it. I told her to stop being lazy, cowardly, self-indulgent and pathetic.

Jed took me aside. He told me to stop insulting Lulu - which I wasn't even doing, I was just motivating her - and that he didn't think threatening Lulu was helpful. Also, he said, maybe Lulu really just couldn't do the technique - perhaps she didn't have the coordination yet - had I considered that possibility?

"You just don't believe in her," I accused.

"That's ridiculous," Jed said scornfully. "Of course I do."

"Sophia could play the piece when she was this age."

"But Lulu and Sophia are different people," Jed pointed out.



Chua family. Sophia playing at Carnegie Hall in 2007.

"Oh no, not this," I said, rolling my eyes. "Everyone is special in their special own way," I mimicked sarcastically. "Even losers are special in their own special way. Well don't worry, you don't have to lift a finger. I'm willing to put in as long as it takes, and I'm happy to be the one hated. And you can be the one they adore because you make them pancakes and take them to Yankees games."

I rolled up my sleeves and went back to Lulu. I used every weapon and tactic I could think of. We worked right through dinner into the night, and I wouldn't let Lulu get up, not for water, not even to go to the bathroom. The house became a war zone, and I lost my voice yelling, but still there seemed to be only negative progress, and even I began to have doubts.

Then, out of the blue, Lulu did it. Her hands suddenly came together - her right and left hands each doing their own imperturbable thing - just like that.

Lulu realized it the same time I did. I held my breath. She tried it tentatively again. Then she played it more confidently and faster, and still the rhythm held. A moment later, she was beaming.

"Mommy, look - it's easy!" After that, she wanted to play the piece over and over and wouldn't leave the piano. That night, she came to sleep in my bed, and we snuggled and hugged, cracking each other up. When she performed "The Little White Donkey" at a recital a few weeks later, parents came up to me and said, "What a perfect piece for Lulu—it's so spunky and so her."

Even Jed gave me credit for that one. Western

parents worry a lot about their children's self-esteem. But as a parent, one of the worst things you can do for your child's self-esteem is to let them give up. On the flip side, there's nothing better for building confidence than learning you can do something you thought you couldn't.

There are all these new books out there portraying Asian mothers as scheming, callous, overdriven people indifferent to their kids' true interests. For their part, many Chinese secretly believe that they care more about their children and are willing to sacrifice much more for them than Westerners, who seem perfectly content to let their children turn out badly. I think it's a misunderstanding on both sides. All decent parents want to do what's best for their children. The Chinese just have a totally different idea of how to do that.

Western parents try to respect their children's individuality, encouraging them to pursue their true passions, supporting their choices, and providing positive reinforcement and a nurturing environment. By contrast, the Chinese believe that the best way to protect their children is by preparing them for the future, letting them see what they're capable of, and arming them with skills, work habits and inner confidence that no one can ever take away.

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This essay is excerpted from "*Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*" by Amy Chua, Penguin Press, 2011.

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*Follow Up Essay*

## **In China, Not All Practice Tough Love**

by Victoria Ruan

*Some parents want their children to be creative, independent and less obsessed with test scores*

**P**arenting advice in China has long stressed discipline and authority. Those lessons are reinforced in best-selling books like "Harvard Girl Liu Yiting," a how-to manual published in 2000 by the parents of a student who won a coveted spot at the Ivy League school. Among the character-building exercises to which they subjected their daughter was having her hold ice cubes in her hands for long stretches.

In recent years, however, books that encourage parents to nurture their children's independence and confidence, as opposed to focusing exclusively on high academic achievement, have grown increasingly popular. They reflect a quiet shift in the parenting style of middle-class families, especially in China's growing cities.

The current best-selling parenting book, "A Good Mom Is Better Than a Good Teacher," by former Beijing public school teacher Yin Jianli, has sold more than two million copies since it was published in January 2009. Ms. Yin advocates listening to kids and developing their potential without forcing them to obey authority.

Chinese parents rarely question the decisions of teachers, but Ms. Yin sometimes offered to do homework for her daughter. In one case, a teacher had asked the girl to copy the same words over a dozen times one night as punishment for failing to memorize them. Ms. Yin believes that such tasks hurt children's interest in studying.

Another best-seller, "Catching Children's Sensitive Periods" by Sun Ruixue, follows a similar approach. Ms. Sun writes that she "aims to help more parents understand their kids and let every kid grow up healthily in love and freedom." It is a sequel to her 2000 book "Love and Freedom," which focused on the idea of discovering a child's "true nature," as developed by the Italian physician and education reformer Maria Montessori.

In "My Kid Is a Medium-Ranking Student," author Fang Gang stresses that children don't necessarily need the highest test scores to enjoy a happy and successful life. "Our society, to some extent, remains a society full of ranking-related prejudice," he writes. But among the students with the top test scores, he asks, "how many have kept independent thinking, creativity and their unique characteristics?"

Many readers of these books—parents in their 30s and 40s—were born during the Cultural Revolution that took place in China from 1966 to 1976. After the turmoil of that difficult period, traditional thinking about education persisted. At schools, teachers continued to evaluate students on the basis of test scores and how closely they followed instructions. As China has gradually opened up to the world, however, Western ideas about education have spread, and many parents have started to question the traditional approach.

Now, most of the best-selling parenting books

listed on Dangdang.com, China's largest online book retailer, are written by authors from outside of mainland China, including South Korea, the U.S., Taiwan, Japan, Germany and the U.K. American imports on the list include John Gray's "Children Are From Heaven: Positive Parenting Skills for Raising Cooperative, Confident and Compassionate Children," and "How To Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk," by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish.

Another best seller, "One Must Not Fail in the Enterprise of Being a Father," is co-written by Alex Xu, an American businessman who was born in China's countryside and later received his master's degree in the U.S., and his daughter Ashley Xu, who was born and educated in the U.S. Mr. Xu, who runs a hotel chain in China and heads several other multinational companies, urges parents to ease the burden of their children's studies and to choose supplementary after-school activities based on their children's interests rather than on their own ambitions for them.

Mr. Xu encouraged his daughter Ashley to be "as confident as a foreign kid," resisting the traditional Chinese emphasis on quiet deference to authority. Children shouldn't be arrogant, he says, but they also shouldn't be "overly modest."

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### *Follow Up Essay*

## **Are US Parents Too Soft?**

By John J. Edwards III and Erin Patrice O'Brien

**H**ow do we motivate our children to succeed in school, and in life? It's a fundamental question that animates every parent's juggle, and there are as many answers as there are families. Amy Chua, author of the new book "Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother," shares her own forceful, unyielding answer in an excerpt published in Saturday's Review section.

Near the beginning, Ms. Chua writes, "Here are some things my daughters, Sophia and Louisa, were never allowed to do:

- attend a sleepover
- have a playdate
- be in a school play
- complain about not being in a school play
- watch TV or play computer games

- choose their own extracurricular activities
- get any grade less than an A
- not be the No. 1 student in every subject except gym and drama
- play any instrument other than the piano or violin
- not play the piano or violin.”

Ms. Chua says that being a “Chinese mother” doesn’t require being Chinese, but it does require ignoring most of what parenting has come to mean in upper-middle-class Western societies. Where Western parents obsess over a child’s self-esteem and couch criticism in only the most oblique and supportive terms, Chinese parents “assume strength, not fragility,” and thus deploy insults and pressure with abandon.

“Chinese mothers can say to their daughters, ‘Hey fatty—lose some weight,’ ” Ms. Chua writes. “By contrast, Western parents have to tiptoe around the issue, talking in terms of ‘health’ and never ever mentioning the f-word, and their kids still end up in therapy for eating disorders and negative self-image.” (Interestingly, in China, books that encourage parents to nurture their children’s independence and confidence, as opposed to focusing exclusively on high academic achievement, have grown increasingly popular, as we’ve posted about before.)

A centerpiece of Ms. Chua’s excerpt is her tale of teaching her daughter Louisa, known as Lulu, to play a difficult piano piece at age 7. Lulu struggles with the different rhythms required for each hand in the piece, finally tearing up the sheet music in frustration; Ms. Chua tapes it together, laminates it and forces Lulu back to the keyboard. As the battle rages, she eventually tells Lulu “to stop being lazy, cowardly, self-indulgent and pathetic,” which draws a gentle rebuke from the Western parent in her own household, her husband, Jed. Ms. Chua, undeterred, goes back to work on Lulu, through dinner and into the night, with no water or bathroom breaks. Finally, Lulu succeeds, leading to a joyful, snuggly night at home and, weeks later, a brilliant recital performance.

In sharp contrast to Ms. Chua’s philosophy is the cult hit documentary “Race to Nowhere,” made by a parent, Vicki Abeles, who was prompted to shoot the film after her daughter started having stress-related stomachaches. The book features boys who take leaves from high school because of the intense pressures, girls who suffer stress-induced insomnia and other maladies, and rampant cheating, as stu-

dents struggle to keep up, according to a New York Times feature about the film. “When success is defined by high grades, test scores, trophies,” a child psychologist says in the film, “we know that we end up with unprepared, disengaged, exhausted and ultimately unhealthy kids.”

My wife’s and my own experience with our 9-year-old daughter and 6-year-old son is between the extremes, for now. We encourage academic achievement (and I chafe at the current pedagogical practice of not correcting our first-grader’s spelling), but we’re hardly taskmasters for perfection. And when our son, who has showed early promise at tennis, got tired of formal lessons, we let him drop them rather than, say, call him lazy, cowardly, self-indulgent and pathetic.

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**Review of Amy Chua’s  
*Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*  
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## Home Truths, Marching On

*No play dates, no TV. Then a 13-year-old rebels.*

By CLARE MCHUGH

There’s nothing like parenting for uncovering our most deeply held beliefs. In general conversation with friends, plenty of us exercise a certain liberal-mindedness, a flexibility of perspective that eases social intercourse. Why alienate pals by lecturing them on the need to be more detail-oriented, or frugal, or neat? At work it’s rarely smart to tell colleagues that their thinking is sloppy or dull, even if it is.

But this self-restraint goes out the window when we are confronted with our own teenage offspring. With them we do not hesitate to pontificate on everyday virtues, every day. We extol the benefits of doing homework and studying for tests. We pass on our hard-won nuggets of wisdom to the people we most love in the world. And how do these people react? They roll their eyes.

Asian parents are renowned not only for attempting to steer their children in the right direction but also for exerting such impressive control over them that young Asians excel in almost every area of worthwhile endeavor. Can we all learn from this example? Can we move from merely spouting off to shaping prodigies? Can we get our children to

achieve more, misbehave less and revere us all the way to a sunny graduation day in Harvard Yard?

Amy Chua addresses such questions in "Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother," an account of her attempt to bring up her two daughters, now teenagers, in the Asian way. Ms. Chua is herself a high-achieving Chinese-American—she is a Yale law professor—but her child-rearing campaign is not easy. "Chinese parenting is incredibly lonely—at least if you're trying to do it in the West, where you're on your own," she writes. "You have to go up against an entire value system—rooted in the Enlightenment, individual autonomy, child development theory and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights."

Such grand pronouncements are characteristic of the driven, passionate and insightful Ms. Chua. Her sweeping statements do begin to pall after a while, but what saves "Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother," and makes Ms. Chua ultimately an endearing presence, is her ability to be candid about her excesses and poke fun at herself.

After her first daughter, Sophia, was born in 1993, and then Louisa three years later, Ms. Chua decided to set the bar high: They're not allowed to go on play dates or to sleep over at friends' houses. The TV is off-limits, as are videogames. She requires her daughters to be fluent in Mandarin, although she herself learned the Hokkien dialect at home. She expects them to be straight-A students, advising them to check test answers three times and look up every word they didn't know and memorize its exact meaning.

She also fears that her children will be pampered and decadent, growing up in America's prosperity. So she insists that they do physical labor. As often as possible she tries "to make them carry heavy objects—overflowing laundry baskets up and down stairs, garbage out on Sundays, suitcases when we traveled." She brooks no disrespect. When Sophia acts out on one occasion, her mother tells her that she's "garbage."

Ms. Chua considers most extra-curricular activities a waste of time, except one: playing a musical instrument. And it is in this realm that her fanaticism reaches full flower. She selects the piano for Sophia and starts her with lessons at age 3. She chooses the violin for Louisa. Both girls turn out to be talented musicians, and Ms. Chua is a determined taskmaster. "My Western friends who consider themselves strict make their children practice

their instruments thirty minutes every day. An hour at most," she writes. "For a Chinese mother, the first hour is the easy part. It's hours two and three that can get tough."

The descriptions of Ms. Chua's interactions with her children during practice sessions are hair-raising in their intensity and belie any notion that Chinese kids are naturally more compliant than children in the West. For hours she bullies the girls and cajoles them to do more, hovering over them to criticize their fingering and rhythm. Because she attends their lessons, she has notes on the teacher's comments and cites them incessantly. When Ms. Chua has to miss a daily practice, she leaves memos covering what her daughters should do. One point among dozens in a typical missive: "Page 8, [measure] 40: This chord is way too heavy! ½ bow pressure and high violin! Articulate short notes."

One marvels at Ms. Chua's energy and focus—she has a demanding full-time job on top of all this musical monitoring—but one feels for the children. Only in her dealings with the family's two dogs does the author seem, well, normal. "I don't make any demands of them . . . or their future," she writes of the big cuddly Samoyeds. "For the most part, I trust them to make the right choices for themselves. I always look forward on seeing them, and I love just watching them sleep. What a great relationship."

In the end it's not the dogs but Louisa who persuades Ms. Chua that she needs to modify her approach. Always the more defiant of the two daughters, Louisa finally cracks, on a family trip, when her mother insists that she try caviar in a restaurant near Moscow's Red Square. Somehow that demand triggers in the 13-year-old girl a true American-style teenage outburst featuring thrown glasses and I-hate-you's ricocheting around the room. After this shocking display of disobedience, Ms. Chua concludes that she needs to relax her hold and grant the girls a modicum of independence. Louisa promptly dials back her violin-practicing to a mere 30 minutes a day and bans her mother from kibitzing.

So where does that leave Ms. Chua? Pretty much where millions of other parents are, standing on the sidelines of our children's lives, proud, anxious observers trying to offer useful advice. Meanwhile, Ms. Chua is thinking about getting another dog.

