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**Confessions of a Tiger Mom: Why Chinese parenting is best**

By TRALEE PEARCE
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**No boyfriends. No sleepovers. Total respect for parents. Yale professor Amy Chua's new book explains why Chinese child-rearing techniques were the best for her girls**

Yale law professor Amy Chua, 48, is known in academic circles for her work on globalization and free market democracy, the subjects of her books *Day of Empire* and *World on Fire*.

But this week, she's drawing attention to her private life with a provocative new memoir about parenting her two daughters, Sophia and Lulu, now 18 and 14. *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* maps the girls' gruelling hours of piano and violin, their push for top grades and the seemingly harsh techniques Prof. Chua used to maintain order. We reached Prof. Chua in her New Haven, Conn., home.

**How do you define Chinese parenting?**

Some of the superficial tenets are academic excellence and a lot more rules so that kids grow up much more slowly. No boyfriends. No sleepovers. Total respect for parents. Daily drilling in math and Chinese when they're little. Speaking Chinese at home.

I was raised by extremely strict but extremely loving Chinese immigrant parents, so I experienced this as a kid and I had a lot of issues: "Why can't I go to my friend's house? Why does everybody else get to celebrate when they get an A-? Why do I have these chores? Why can't I go to parties?" To this day I adore my parents and I feel that I owe everything to them. That's why even though my husband's not Chinese, I tried to raise my two daughters the same way my parents raised me.

Because most of the book is written in such a deadpan way I know there will be a lot of misunderstandings. What the Chinese parent is conveying to the child is not that "you've got to get A's or else I won't like you." On the contrary, it's, "I believe in you so much, I know that you can be excellent."

**You're even willing to be hated along the way.**

Yes. I'm willing to be different than other parents and go against the mainstream.

I haven't done a study but I think that, ironically, although Western parents are the ones that worry so much about self-esteem - and Chinese parents don't, they assume strength rather than fragility - I wonder if the Chinese approach isn't better at creating self-esteem. You can coddle your child and tell them, "You're the best no matter what." But in the end, when they go out into the real world, I think it's pretty tough out there and other children are cruel. When your child doesn't do so well at school or make the team they'd wished they'd made or can't get the job they want, that's when people really lose self-esteem.

The happiness question is up for grabs. I definitely don't think that one approach leads to happier children.

**How could this have seemed a good idea to publish? Both Chinese and Westerners are likely to squirm.**

I showed it to some family members and some Chinese friends of mine and a Korean friend. They all thought it was so funny and they completely related to it, but they all said, "Of course you can't publish this. You'll get in so much trouble." I thought, "I wonder why should that be?" Millions of people raise their children this way. It's not just Chinese people. It's really an immigrant thing. I know Indians and people from Nigeria and Ghana and Jamaica. Even some Irish. I did not write this book to promote the Chinese model. It's as much about mistakes as it is about successes.

**You do openly disdain the current "Western" parenting style.**

The dominant or prevalent Western approach right now is much more permissive than parenting was in the West, say, 60 years ago. Western parents romanticize the idea of pursuing passions and giving your kid choices. If you give a 10-year-old the choice to pursue his or her passion, it's going to be doing Facebook for six hours. I don't think it's going to be playing the violin or doing any school work very seriously.

**But we shouldn't confuse Chinese parenting with helicopter parenting?**

The Chinese mom is not the helicopter mom. I would never do their homework for them. It's all about: Take responsibility, don't blame others. Be self-reliant. Never blame the teacher.

**It also seems to be about harsh language. You've been know to call your daughters "garbage" when they don't do as you'd like.**

They just did a TV interview and they were asked about how they felt when their mother used these harsh words. My second daughter said, "Oh no, she was just saying that I had to be more respectful. I don't have any self-esteem issues." So I'm not endorsing that everyone should talk this way. But conversely I think it's possible to be very hurtful as a parent using perfectly innocuous words.

**Tell me the birthday card incident. You were really mean.**

My kids think the story is hysterical. My husband had forgotten my birthday and at the last minute had put together something at a very mediocre Italian restaurant and then he said, "Girls, we each have a little surprise for Mommy, right?" Lulu's surprise turned out to be a piece of paper folded in half, that had a happy face on the front and said, Happy Birthday Mommy. Misspelled. I knew that it couldn't have taken more than six seconds to make. I gave it back to Lulu and said, "I reject this. I want a better one. Think about it, I work so hard for you. Whenever you have a birthday I plan for months. I hand-make the invitations. I spend my salary on waterslides and magicians and party favours. And I deserve better than this." It worked. She made a much better one.

**The rigour of piano and violin take up most of the book. Three hours of practice a day, weekends filled with concerts and elite lessons. Did you want them to become professional musicians?**

No, never. It's funny. In retrospect I talk about music much more than schoolwork in the book. That's because schoolwork went without saying.

Westerners are too quick to let their kids give up. It's very familiar to see an Asian kid and Western kid both start on violin. Six months later the Western child is switched to the clarinet because the violin sounds so terrible when you start. But the Asian kids will still be playing the violin because the parents make them. Then often the Western child is moved to the drums or the guitar because that's going to be easier. I wasn't going to allow that. Let's stick with something before you decide whether you like it or not.

I just wanted my kids to be the best they could be because I felt like that was my best shot at having them be happy as adults and for the rest of their lives. And when the evidence seemed to be pointing in the other direction, that's when I retreated.

**Lulu rebelled on a family trip to Russia. It started with you calling her an "uncultured savage" for not trying the caviar in Red Square. It ended with her calling you a selfish, terrible mother and saying she hated the violin and you.**

I felt, "Oh my gosh. Is my family falling apart?" At that moment I thought nothing is worth the possibility of losing my daughter. I needed to change. I went cold turkey.

**But as rebellions go, Lulu's isn't earth-shattering. She scaled back the piano and took up tennis.**

We're in a much better place now. It's still painful for me to be honest. I know that her violin is not at the same level any more. I know that she can never be as good a tennis player as she was a violin player. You just can't start at 13. But the other day she said her most favourite thing was playing violin. That makes me happy.

I don't think I've retreated on the academic front at all. We're in hybrid mode right now. My daughters have so many more choices right now. They do have sleepovers and hang out with their friends now. Sophia just went to a rap concert.

**Was it your parents' wish for you to be a Yale law professor?**

My parents were very narrow. They wanted me to be a scientist and get a PhD or to be pre-med. The PhD/MD is a trope in Asian families. So in a way it was kind of rebellious that I didn't go into science and went into law. I forged my father's signature on my Harvard application [because Harvard required leaving home]. They're so happy now that they've figured out that law is a respectable profession in this country.

**Were there fights?**

Never.

**So why the open rebellion in your household? Is it a generational thing?**

Part of the book is about wondering why I couldn't do what my parents were able to do. Part of it is that they had an authenticity. They were immigrants. They came and they were very poor. My father wore the same pair of shoes for six years. They never bought clothes for themselves. Everything they did they saved for our education. In some ways I think that gave them the right to say an A- is not good enough. I never questioned it.

With my kids - and talking to Western parents there is a universal aspect to this - they're growing up not wealthy but much more privileged. They can look around and say, "Why isn't A- a good grade? For everybody else it is. Why do I have to be the best student? Why can't I hang out with my friends?" We're less credible. You just can't replicate the immigrant experience.

**So, any regrets?**

I have many. I wish I hadn't been so harsh. I wish I hadn't lost my temper so much. I wish I'd paid more attention earlier to the individual personalities of my daughters. Maybe given them a little more choice. If I'd had to do it all over again, I would basically do the same thing with some adjustments. Looking at my daughters now, I am incredibly proud of them. It's not just that they're good students. It's that they're really kind, generous, confident, happy girls with lots of friends and huge personalities. They're always putting me in my place. They're the opposite of robots.

**Amy Chua would never allow her daughters to:**

• have a play date

• be in a school play

• complain about not being in a school play

• 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

The truth is Lulu and Sophia would never have had time for a play date. They were too busy practising their instruments (two to three hours a day and double sessions on the weekend) and perfecting their Mandarin.

Of course no one is perfect, including Chua herself. Witness this scene:

"According to Sophia, here are three things I actually said to her at the piano as I supervised her practicing:

1. Oh my God, you're just getting worse and worse.

2. I'm going to count to three, then I want musicality.

3. If the next time's not PERFECT, I'm going to take all your stuffed animals and burn them!"

But Chua demands as much of herself as she does of her daughters. And in her sacrifices-the exacting attention spent studying her daughters' performances, the office hours lost shuttling the girls to lessons-the depth of her love for her children becomes clear. *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* is an eye-opening exploration of the differences in Eastern and Western parenting - and the lessons parents and children everywhere teach one another.

*This interview has been condensed and edited.*