The Tiger Mother: Is Tough Love Best?

**Secondary 1 iSpark & Ortus (Term 1 Week 9 – 4th Mar), Aphelion & ProEd (Term 2 Week 1 – 25th Mar)**

**Background:**

Dr Amy Chua, a Professor of Law at Yale Law School, caused a global furore when she wrote in the Wall Street Journal in January this year about “why Chinese mothers are superior.” The article, written in conjunction with the publishing of her book *The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, created a controversy amongst parents in the West for her extremist parenting methods in bringing up her two girls. She claims that Chinese parents are better at raising children than Western parents, and that tough parenting is better than indulging one’s children in protection of their self-esteem. This has made her unpopular in the US, with some adverse criticisms over forums for being “a monster”. She has even received death threats as a result of her article.

Dr Chua’s style is infamously associated with Asian, and in particular Chinese, culture: tough parenting. Supporters of tough parenting usually claim to have strict upbringing by their parents and have grown up to be responsible, mature adults all the same. They, hence, have no qualms imposing the same treatment on their children. Opponents of tough parenting, however, claim that pushing a child too hard can backfire, creating rebels that try to break free from oppression. Also, children of different personalities and age groups may need different handling styles, so it might be difficult to enforce strict parenting on all children.

There could also be other factors at play here. As the Chinese saying goes, “Longing to see one’s son become a dragon; longing to see one’s daughter become a phoenix.” Are parents being too earnest about wanting their children to succeed? Might parents even be vicariously living their desires through their children, such as wanting their son to become a doctor, because they themselves were unable to fulfil such dreams? Or are parents just developing ‘trophy children’ as showcase ornaments to stage a boast and behave like the Joneses?

**Debate Motion:**

The parenting styles of Asian parents have always been seen as different from that of Western parents, focusing on a differing set of priorities and views about what is important for the child. In light of this, panellists are to debate the following motion:

**Tough parenting is the best strategy to raise a successful child**

**Guiding Questions:**

- Do parents know best? Should parents be determining their child’s goals and aims in life?
Is the ‘Tiger Mum’ phenomenon reflective of Asian or Chinese culture in general? Is the ‘Tiger Mum’ phenomenon restricted to Asian or Chinese culture?

Are the Westerners over-reacting to the ‘Tiger Mum’ phenomenon? What are the underlying reasons for their reactions to Dr Chua’s article?

What stereotypes do Westerners have about the Asian / Chinese parenting? Are such stereotypes justified?

How will tough parenting positively and / or negatively affect children? Conversely, how will tender, loving care positively and / or negatively affect children?

How do we qualify a successful child? What qualifies being soft / tough on children?

Do the social status and wealth of a family influence the parenting styles of different parents?

What is the role of education in helping parents to raise their children?

Instructions:

The 8 panellists will adopt the roles shown on the next page. They must act and argue within the boundaries of the position assigned to them. Their arguments must be logical and well-substantiated with examples. They can make use of the guiding questions below to structure their arguments. They should refer to the resources provided as well as their own research in preparing for the panel discussion.

The rest of the class will role-play the general public. They are free to adopt any reasonable position on the issue. When speaking, they must likewise present a rational, well thought-out argument.

Debate Proceedings:

The Chairman will first introduce the topic, after which each panellist will be assigned to speak for 3-4 minutes. The discussion will then be opened to the floor for the rest of the duration. Panellists can continue contributing and responding to comments even as the discussion opens to the floor.

The Chairman should conclude the debate with some personal remarks and do a brief summary. The panellists should stay in character throughout the discussion so as to be convincing and prevent confusion.

The flowchart on the following page illustrates the order of proceedings.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stand</th>
<th>Panellist &amp; Student Name</th>
<th>Point of View</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The best way</td>
<td>Dr Amy Chua</td>
<td>Dr Chua was brought up in a strict manner yet she loves her parents all the same. Even though her strict methods managed to produce results with her elder daughter Sophia, she struggled when using the same parenting style on Lulu. She feels each parent is entitled to their own way of parenting, whatever works. In retrospect she would still be tough with her children but she wished she did not have to resort to being nasty to bring them up.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Dr Amy Chua’s elder daughter Sophia</td>
<td>As the elder daughter she may have borne the brunt of much of her mother’s expectations, but she nevertheless has thrived and learnt many lessons from her mother’s tough love. She laughs at how people who do not understand the situation pass judgement about her family so easily, and she is thankful for her mother’s style of parenting which shaped her positively as a person.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>‘Kiasu’ Singaporean Chinese mother</td>
<td>Being the stereotypical ‘kiasu’ Singaporean Chinese mother, she has high expectations of her children and worry about how they will turn out as adults. She is strict with her children and sign them up for as many enrichment activities as possible to ensure they do not lose out in the intense competition in life in future.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Wealthy father of son in Hwa Chong Institution</td>
<td>As the chairman of a self-initiated enterprise, he wants his only son to take after him and he intends to hand over the reins of leadership to him eventually. He pushes his son hard because he knows as an adult his son will not get a second chance at anything, so his son must be able to cope well with challenges in life.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not the best way</td>
<td>Dr Amy Chua’s younger daughter Louisa (Lulu)</td>
<td>As the younger daughter, she did not like being compared to her sister Sophia for everything that Sophia could do while she was at Lulu’s age. She gave her parents a lot of trouble, to the extent that her mother gave in to her demands to stop learning the violin after long, heated arguments. She grew up well eventually but feels that her mother could have been nicer yet remains as strict.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Liberal ‘angmoh’ father</td>
<td>He abhors Dr Chua’s parenting style and feels that it hurts the self-esteem of the children. He can never contemplate calling his child “garbage”! If his children are not academically-inclined he is permissive of letting them explore other areas of interest and skills.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Moderate Singaporean Chinese father</td>
<td>While his wife plays the devil’s advocate, he plays the nice guy in the family, where the child can seek solace. He feels there needs to be a balance between being strict and being nice, especially as there is a chance that the child may end up rebelling against the heavy-handed approach that tough parenting entails.</td>
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<td>Poor father of son in neighbourhood school</td>
<td>As a hawker, he spends little time with his son hence he cherishes whatever time he has. He feels it is pointless to push his son for academic success when his son can inherit his business and remain uneducated. If his son is unable to perform in school, he would withdraw his son immediately and get him to work at his stall.</td>
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* EL teachers have the autonomy to reorganise the panel.*
Proceedings Flowchart:

**Chairman’s Introduction**
*Introduce topic & assign order of speech*
(1-2 minutes)

**Proposition**
(1) Dr Amy Chua
(2) Dr Chua’s elder daughter Sophia
(3) ‘Kiasu’ Singaporean Chinese mother
(4) Wealthy father of son in HCI
(3-4 minutes each)

- **Chairman’s Summary**
*Summarizes discussion thus far*
(2-3 minutes)

**Opposition**
(1) Dr Chua’s younger daughter Louisa
(2) Liberal ‘angmoh’ father
(3) Moderate Singaporean Chinese father
(4) Poor father of son in neighbourhood school
(3-4 minutes each)

- **Open Discussion**
*Chairman monitors as discussion opens to the floor & all panel members*
(15-20 minutes)

**Assessors’ Feedback**
*Comments & suggestions on discussion*
(2-3 minutes)

- **Chairman’s Conclusion**
*Summarize & conclude discussion*
(2-3 minutes)
References:


Article 1: Why Chinese Mothers are Superior

By: AMY CHUA
Publication: Wall Street Journal 08/01/2011

Can a regimen of no playdates, no TV, no computer games and hours of music practice create happy kids? And what happens when they fight back?

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 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.

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.

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 anything 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 disappointed 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—there 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 sleepaway 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.

“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.

"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.

—Amy Chua is a professor at Yale Law School. This essay is excerpted from “Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother” by Amy Chua, published by the Penguin Press

http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704111504576059713528698754.html
Article 2: Why we all need a Tiger Mother

By: ALISON PEARSON
Publication: The Telegraph 13/01/2011

Her methods are extreme - but Allison Pearson sees lessons for parents everywhere in the controversial new book by Amy Chua.

Be afraid, be very afraid. After Pushy Mum, that Ghenghis Khan of secondary-school applications, here comes Tiger Mother. Tiger Mother is Chinese with a fearsome outboard-motor of ambition for her offspring. By the age of four, Tiger Mother’s baby is reading Sartre, but thinks that, on balance, Balzac is the better prose stylist. Tiger Mother’s children are never allowed to watch television, play computer games or go to sleepovers, which are a time-wasting invention of indulgent Western parents who are too lazy to put in the hours needed to raise a genius. Tiger Mother rarely sleeps herself. Why would she? Sleep prevents you shouting at your child to practise her violin!

If you think you are ambitious for your child, Amy Chua’s new book, Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother, will make you think again. Compared to Chua, who is a professor at Yale, you are a gutless, kiddy-spoiling amateur. Forget potty training; this is Pol Potty training. Ruthless, rote-learning and hellbent on world domination.

Chua, born to a hyper-achieving immigrant family, never lets her daughters, Sophia and Lulu, think that getting less than an A was acceptable. Mere Bs trigger “a screaming, hair-tearing explosion”. While Sophia practises, Chua looms over the piano saying encouraging things like: “If the next time’s not perfect, I’m going to take all your stuffed animals and burn them.”

And you wonder why the Midlands will soon be a giant call-centre for Shanghai.

The worst thing about Tiger Mother’s method is this: it works. Sophia, Chua’s compliant elder daughter, made her Carnegie Hall piano debut at 14. Lulu, the rebellious one – we’re talking polite Chinese rebellion here, not the heroin-dependent British variety – led a prominent youth orchestra and still found time to score straight As. Obviously, it would be cheering to report that both girls are humourless automatons with terrible dress sense. Sadly not. They have turned out so well they call their mother “insane”.

Chua’s book has caused outrage among American parents, who have accused her of cruelty and even racism. The latter charge is unfair. Chua is at pains to point out that anyone – an Irish working-class father, a Jamaican matriarch – can qualify as a “Chinese mother”. It’s attitude, discipline and three hours’ violin practice a day, not ethnicity, that count.

I found myself alternately recoiling and laughing out loud at the psychotically driven Chua. Still, there are moments when she makes you ask yourself what the Chinese are doing right and we are doing wrong. The latest OECD survey put China’s 15-year-olds at the top of the world’s academic rankings. British children had slithered down the ladder to 28th in maths and 25th in reading. What mum or dad would not cheer Chua’s indignant observation that “instead of making kids study from books, schools are constantly trying to make learning fun by having parents do all the work”?

The lesson Tiger Mother teaches us is that Western parents are signed up to the idea that all stress is bad for children and the thing that matters is self-esteem, a nebulous concept which was unknown when this country won two world wars. “What Chinese parents understand is that nothing is fun until you’re good at it. To get good at anything you have to work, and children on their own never want to work, which is why it is crucial to over-ride their preferences.”
Chua reckons Western parents give up too easily because we are scared of making our children unhappy. Yet how many adults – myself included – now say, “I wish I’d never stopped piano lessons”? Every week, the Small Boy tells me, “I wanna quit choir”. (“I wanna quit” is the mantra of my son’s generation; they are of the view that homework, turning off the X Box and other outrageous demands are “too stressy”.)

Trying to be a Tiger Mother for a change, I insist that he continues choir, which is laying down a terrific work ethic and a storehouse of pleasure for the future. As if to prove the point, Ashes hero Alastair Cook says he believes that his years as a St Paul’s Cathedral chorister helped give him the patience and endurance for those long hours at the crease. I don’t know if Alastair has a Tiger Mother, but a demanding, self-disciplined childhood produced one hell of a cub. You can just imagine Tiger Mother’s bloodcurdling roar at the league tables, published yesterday, which showed that fewer than one in six pupils gained five good GCSEs in traditional subjects, the equivalent of their great-grandparents’ school leavers’ certificate. Schools have switched to “softer” topics to boost results.

I would bet my house that not one Chinese-British pupil, whether rich or poor, failed to get five good GCSEs. Amy Chua’s philosophy of child-rearing may be harsh and not for the fainthearted, but ask yourself this: is it really more cruel than the laissez-faire indifference and babysitting-by-TV which too often passes for parenting these days? Millions of failing British children could use a Tiger Mother in their tank.

http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/8255804/Why-we-all-need-a-Tiger-Mother.html
Article 3: ‘Tiger Mother’: Are Chinese Moms Really So Different?

By: EMILY RAUHALA

Publication: TIME 14/01/2011

An editorial cartoon in the Jan. 13 edition of Hong Kong's English daily the South China Morning Post shows a family — a father, mother and frowning boy — together in the kitchen. On the table sits an untouched breakfast — the sodden castoffs, we infer, of the insolent child. "If you don't eat it," the father threatens, "we're going to have you adopted by Amy Chua." The child looks horrified.

Amy Chua is a professor at Yale Law School, an author and, as of last week, one of the most talked-about mothers in the world. On Jan. 8, the Wall Street Journal published an essay she wrote Headlined "Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior," in which she discusses her approach to child rearing. Her kids, Louisa and Sophia, were never allowed to have playdates, watch TV or get anything less than A's in school. They played instruments of her choosing (piano, violin) and practiced for hours under close watch. If they resisted, she pounced: at one moment she called her daughter "garbage," in another "pathetic."

The piece, adapted from Chua's just-released memoir, Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother, is now at the center of a raucous global debate about parenting, identity and family. More than a million people have read the story online, more than 5,000 have commented on it, and countless others have passed it along to friends and family members. It's doing the rounds on Facebook and has been animated, to hilarious effect, by the folks at Taiwan's Next Media (of Tiger Woods drama re-enactment fame). Reactions range from (to paraphrase) "You're on to something" to "You're a bigot and a bad mother" to "You're just like my mom" — often in the same breath.

For better or for worse, many people saw themselves or their parents — or both — in Chua's portrait. In accounts that are by turns intimate, hilarious and angry, hundreds of people of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds have shared their own childhood stories online, articulating, perhaps for the first time, the pressure they felt as children and how it shaped their lives. Gene Law, a Chinese-Canadian journalist and son of a Taiwanese immigrant mother and a Chinese-Canadian father, could relate to Chua's tale. "As the article said, I'm indebted to my parents until they die," he wrote in an e-mail. "This is my mom's school of thought. I dare not disagree." But Law questioned the long-term efficacy of the "Tiger Mother" approach: the harder his mother pushed him, the more he rebelled. Now, he wrote, "my relationship with my mother is more tense than the Korean DMZ."

But do such clashes have anything to do with Chinese culture, or with culture at all? "Hiding behind culture to justify cruelty is offensive," wrote one commenter, "IansMom," on Quora.com, a social-media message board. "Chua is a bully, and she's teaching her kids to be the same." Whether they admire Chua or not, few readers accept the precept that calling a child "garbage" is a cultural practice rather than an ill-tempered expression of exasperation. Chua, to be fair, anticipates this objection in her essay. "I'm using the term 'Chinese mother' loosely," she writes. "I know Korean, Indian, Jamaican, Irish and Ghanaian parents who qualify too." Yet the piece, as many critics point out, seems to turn on clichés about what Chineseness entails (good grades, music, no sports), echoing the stifling model-minority tropes that have trailed Asian immigrants for decades.

Indeed, in my conversations with friends, sources and colleagues in Hong Kong and China, the word that came up most frequently in relation to Chua — after wrong and stereotype — was old-fashioned. Here, as elsewhere, parenting practices are always changing — the Tiger Mother, if she ever existed, is not as fierce as she once was. Jiang Xueqin, deputy principal at Beijing's Peking University High School, says he was "shocked" by the "crass generalizations" in Chua's piece. "It goes without saying that there is no one type of Chinese parent," he says. "Some are disengaged, some are deeply involved — it's the same as anywhere." Describing her hopes for her 8-year-old son, a 34-year old Beijing resident named Xiang Yuqiong says, "I want my son's life to be like mine, but better." Each parent is different, but that sentiment, we can all agree, is universal.

— With reporting by Chengcheng Jiang / Beijing

http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2042535,00.html
Article 4: Why I love my strict Chinese mother

By: SOPHIA CHUA-RUBENFELD
Publication: New York Post 17/01/2011

Writer Amy Chua shocked the world with her provocative essay, “Why Chinese Mothers are Superior,” when it appeared in the Wall Street Journal earlier this month.

The article, excerpted from her new book, “Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother,” described “how Chinese parents raise such stereotypically successful kids.” It led with a manifesto: “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.”

While Chua says she has received death threats for her comments (one critic called her the “worst mother ever”), the question remains: What do her own children think? Now Chua’s eldest daughter, Sophia Chua-Rubenfeld, 18, tells her side of the story exclusively to The Post.

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Dear Tiger Mom,

You’ve been criticized a lot since you published your memoir, “Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother.” One problem is that some people don’t get your humor. They think you’re serious about all this, and they assume Lulu and I are oppressed by our evil mother. That is not true. Every other Thursday, you take off our chains and let us play math games in the basement.

But for real, it’s not their fault. No outsider can know what our family is really like. They don’t hear us cracking up over each other’s jokes. They don’t see us eating our hamburgers with fried rice. They don’t know how much fun we have when the six of us — dogs included — squeeze into one bed and argue about what movies to download from Netflix.

I admit it: Having you as a mother was no tea party. There were some play dates I wish I’d gone to and some piano camps I wish I’d skipped. But now that I’m 18 and about to leave the tiger den, I’m glad you and Daddy raised me the way you did. Here’s why.

A lot of people have accused you of producing robot kids who can’t think for themselves. Well, that’s funny, because I think those people are . . . oh well, it doesn’t matter. At any rate, I was thinking about this, and I came to the opposite conclusion: I think your strict parenting forced me to be more independent. Early on, I decided to be an easy child to raise. Maybe I got it from Daddy — he taught me not to care what people think and to make my own choices — but I also decided to be who I want to be. I didn’t rebel, but I didn’t suffer all the slings and arrows of a Tiger Mom, either. I pretty much do my own thing these days — like building greenhouses downtown, blasting Daft Punk in the car with Lulu and forcing my boyfriend to watch “Lord of the Rings” with me over and over — as long as I get my piano done first.

Everybody’s talking about the birthday cards we once made for you, which you rejected because they weren’t good enough. Funny how some people are convinced that Lulu and I are scarred for life. Maybe if I had poured my heart into it, I would have been upset. But let’s face it: The card was feeble, and I was busted. It took me 30 seconds; I didn’t even sharpen the pencil. That’s why, when you rejected it, I didn’t feel you were rejecting me. If I actually tried my best at something, you’d never throw it back in my face.
I remember walking on stage for a piano competition. I was so nervous, and you whispered, “Soso, you worked as hard as you could. It doesn’t matter how you do.”

Everybody seems to think art is spontaneous. But Tiger Mom, you taught me that even creativity takes effort. I guess I was a little different from other kids in grade school, but who says that’s a bad thing? Maybe I was just lucky to have nice friends. They used to put notes in my backpack that said “Good luck at the competition tomorrow! You’ll be great!” They came to my piano recitals — mostly for the dumplings you made afterward — and I started crying when I heard them yelling “bravo!” at Carnegie Hall.

When I got to high school, you realized it was time to let me grow up a little. All the girls started wearing makeup in ninth grade. I walked to CVS to buy some and taught myself how to use it. It wasn’t a big deal. You were surprised when I came down to dinner wearing eyeliner, but you didn’t mind. You let me have that rite of passage.

Another criticism I keep hearing is that you’re somehow promoting tunnel vision, but you and Daddy taught me to pursue knowledge for its own sake. In junior year, I signed myself up for a military-history elective (yes, you let me take lots of classes besides math and physics). One of our assignments was to interview someone who had experienced war. I knew I could get a good grade interviewing my grandparents, whose childhood stories about World War II I’d heard a thousand times. I mentioned it to you, and you said, “Sophia, this is an opportunity to learn something new. You’re taking the easy way out.” You were right, Tiger Mom. In the end, I interviewed an terrifying Israeli paratrooper whose story changed my outlook on life. I owe that experience to you.

There’s one more thing: I think the desire to live a meaningful life is universal. To some people, it’s working toward a goal. To others, it’s enjoying every minute of every day. So what does it really mean to live life to the fullest? Maybe striving to win a Nobel Prize and going skydiving are just two sides of the same coin. To me, it’s not about achievement or self-gratification. It’s about knowing that you’ve pushed yourself, body and mind, to the limits of your own potential. You feel it when you’re sprinting, and when the piano piece you’ve practiced for hours finally comes to life beneath your fingertips. You feel it when you encounter a life-changing idea, and when you do something on your own that you never thought you could. If I died tomorrow, I would die feeling I’ve lived my whole life at 110 percent.

And for that, Tiger Mom, thank you.

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Reported by Mandy Stadtmiller

http://www.nypost.com/p/entertainment/why_love_strict_chinese_mom_uUvfMLcA5eteY0u2KXt7hM/1
Sometime early last week, a large slice of educated America decided that Amy Chua is a menace to society. Chua, as you probably know, is the Yale professor who has written a bracing critique of what she considers the weak, coddling American parenting style.

Chua didn’t let her own girls go out on play dates or sleepovers. She didn’t let them watch TV or play video games or take part in garbage activities like crafts. Once, one of her daughters came in second to a Korean kid in a math competition, so Chua made the girl do 2,000 math problems a night until she regained her supremacy. Once, her daughters gave her birthday cards of insufficient quality. Chua rejected them and demanded new cards. Once, she threatened to burn all of one of her daughter’s stuffed animals unless she played a piece of music perfectly.

As a result, Chua’s daughters get straight A’s and have won a series of musical competitions.

In her book, “Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother,” Chua delivers a broadside against American parenting even as she mocks herself for her own extreme “Chinese” style. She says American parents lack authority and produce entitled children who aren’t forced to live up to their abilities.

The furious denunciations began flooding my in-box a week ago. Chua plays into America’s fear of national decline. Here’s a Chinese parent working really hard (and, by the way, there are a billion more of her) and her kids are going to crush ours. Furthermore (and this Chua doesn’t appreciate), she is not really rebelling against American-style parenting; she is the logical extension of the prevailing elite practices. She does everything over-pressuring upper-middle-class parents are doing. She’s just hard core.

Her critics echoed the familiar themes. Her kids can’t possibly be happy or truly creative. They’ll grow up skilled and compliant but without the audacity to be great. She’s destroying their love for music. There’s a reason Asian-American women between the ages of 15 and 24 have such high suicide rates.

I have the opposite problem with Chua. I believe she’s coddling her children. She’s protecting them from the most intellectually demanding activities because she doesn’t understand what’s cognitively difficult and what isn’t.

Practicing a piece of music for four hours requires focused attention, but it is nowhere near as cognitively demanding as a sleepover with 14-year-old girls. Managing status rivalries, negotiating group dynamics, understanding social norms, navigating the distinction between self and group — these and other social tests impose cognitive demands that blow away any intense tutoring session or a class at Yale.

Yet mastering these arduous skills is at the very essence of achievement. Most people work in groups. We do this because groups are much more efficient at solving problems than individuals (swimmers are often motivated to have their best times as part of relay teams, not in individual events). Moreover, the performance of a group does not correlate well with the average I.Q. of the group or even with the I.Q.’s of the smartest members.

Researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Carnegie Mellon have found that groups have a high collective intelligence when members of a group are good at reading each others’ emotions — when they take turns speaking, when the inputs from each member are managed fluidly, when they detect each others’ inclinations and strengths.

Participating in a well-functioning group is really hard. It requires the ability to trust people outside your kinship circle, read intonations and moods, understand how the psychological pieces each person brings to the room can and cannot fit together.
This skill set is not taught formally, but it is imparted through arduous experiences. These are exactly the kinds of difficult experiences Chua shelters her children from by making them rush home to hit the homework table.

Chua would do better to see the classroom as a cognitive break from the truly arduous tests of childhood. Where do they learn how to manage people? Where do they learn to construct and manipulate metaphors? Where do they learn to perceive details of a scene the way a hunter reads a landscape? Where do they learn how to detect their own shortcomings? Where do they learn how to put themselves in others’ minds and anticipate others’ reactions?

These and a million other skills are imparted by the informal maturity process and are not developed if formal learning monopolizes a child’s time.

So I’m not against the way Chua pushes her daughters. And I loved her book as a courageous and thought-provoking read. It’s also more supple than her critics let on. I just wish she wasn’t so soft and indulgent. I wish she recognized that in some important ways the school cafeteria is more intellectually demanding than the library. And I hope her daughters grow up to write their own books, and maybe learn the skills to better anticipate how theirs will be received.

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/18/opinion/18brooks.html?_r=1&pagewanted=print
Article 6: The Tiger Nanny: The Missing Link in the Parenting Debate

By: MAIA SZALAVITZ
Publication: TIME 21/01/2011

With all the fuss over the harshness of Amy Chua's unrelenting "tiger mother" parenting style — the discussion, which was sparked by a Wall Street Journal excerpt of Chua's new memoir about motherhood, made its way onto the cover of TIME this week — few have commented on one simple fact. This tiger mother had help.

Chua says that she often spent three hours a day ensuring that her children completed their violin or piano practice, and hours more supervising their homework or otherwise snuffing their desire for a normal social life (no sleepovers, no playdates, no school plays, no sports and certainly no computer games or TV). Since Chua also has a day job as a professor at Yale Law School — hardly a part-time gig — and since she fails to indicate that she's been taking speed to stay awake 24/7 to keep up with her duties, something doesn't add up. That missing piece is her Mandarin-speaking nanny.

That's right, the full-time growing Tiger Mom didn't raise her daughters herself, or even in a simple partnership with her husband. She isn't a stay-at-home mom, she isn't a middle-class working mom, she is a rich woman. And although she insists that her recently published book, Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother (Penguin Press, Jan. 2011), is not meant to be taken as parenting advice, its message is widely being read as suggesting that the "Chinese" mothering style is superior to the more lenient "Western" way. In any case, the truth is that for mothers who don't have her resources, following her lead would be impossible.

Amy Chua wants it both ways. She argues that tough, intensive mothering is essential to children's success. But she seems unaware of how dependent her career as a mother has been on the work of others. Without the nanny, my bet is that she wouldn't have had the energy for many of the parent-child battles she waged — like forcing her reluctant 7-year-old daughter Lulu to practice piano for hours, "right through dinner into the night," with no breaks for water or the bathroom, until at last she learned to play the piece.

What's sad to me about our debate over the Tiger Mom is that we really do need a national debate on child care. Every family with children has to improvise its own solution to the question of work vs. family: in the overwhelming majority of two-parent families, both parents work. And in one-parent families, of course, that percentage is even higher.

Over and over and over, we debate the intricacies of the best way to raise our children without ever addressing the fact that much of the early-life care they receive is given by paid help, whether in day care or by a nanny. And it's not like women are suddenly going to quit the workforce; that horse left the barn decades ago.

Yet we remain in denial. The economic and emotional stress on working parents that results is overwhelming, but rather than concede that we have a big social problem on our hands or look for national solutions, we spend our time debating whether moms are doing their jobs right and seeking answers (or blame) in individual parenting styles.

Research shows repeatedly that low-quality day care can harm children, particularly infants, over the long term, leading to academic and cognitive deficits in adolescence and greater risk-taking and impulsivity. But as a country, we are still ignoring the issue: we don't require companies to provide paid parental leave, for instance, and we do little else to support quality early child care. Instead, we endlessly debate the Tiger Mom.

It was the "Little White Donkey" incident that pushed many readers over the edge. That's the name of the piano tune that Amy Chua, Yale law professor and self-described "tiger mother," forced her 7-year-old daughter Lulu to practice for hours on end — "right through dinner into the night," with no breaks for water or even the bathroom, until at last Lulu learned to play the piece.

For other readers, it was Chua calling her older daughter Sophia "garbage" after the girl behaved disrespectfully — the same thing Chua had been called as a child by her strict Chinese father.

And, oh, yes, for some readers it was the card that young Lulu made for her mother's birthday. "I don't want this," Chua announced, adding that she expected to receive a drawing that Lulu had "put some thought and effort into." "The card back at her daughter, she told her, "I deserve better than this. So I reject this."

Even before Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother, Chua's proudly politically incorrect account of raising her children "the Chinese way," arrived in bookstores Jan. 11, her parenting methods were the incredulous, indignant talk of every playground, supermarket and coffee shop. A prepublication excerpt in the Wall Street Journal (titled "Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior") started the ferocious buzz; the online version has been read more than 1 million times and attracted more than 7,000 comments so far. When Chua appeared Jan. 11 on the Today show, the usually sunny host Meredith Vieira could hardly contain her contempt as she read aloud a sample of viewer comments: "She's a monster"; "The way she raised her kids is outrageous"; "Where is the love, the acceptance?"

Chua, a petite 48-year-old who carries off a short-skirted wardrobe that could easily be worn by her daughters (now 15 and 18), gave as good as she got. "To be perfectly honest, I know that a lot of Asian parents are secretly shocked and horrified by many aspects of Western parenting," including "how much time Westerners allow their kids to waste — hours on Facebook and computer games — and in some ways, how poorly they prepare them for the future," she told Vieira with a toss of her long hair. "It's a tough world out there."

Chua's reports from the trenches of authoritarian parenthood are indeed disconcerting, even shocking, in their candid admission of maternal ruthlessness. Her book is a Mommie Dearest for the age of the memoir, when we tell tales on ourselves instead of our relatives. But there's something else behind the intense reaction to Tiger Mother, which has shot to the top of best-seller lists even as it's been denounced on the airwaves and the Internet. Though Chua was born and raised in the U.S., her invocation of what she describes as traditional "Chinese parenting" has hit hard at a national sore spot: our fears about losing ground to China and other rising powers and about adequately preparing our children to survive in the global economy. Her stories of never accepting a grade lower than an A, of insisting on hours of math and spelling drills and piano and violin practice each day (weekends and vacations included), of not allowing playdates or sleepovers or television or computer games or even school plays, for goodness' sake, have left many readers outraged but also defensive. The tiger mother's cubs are being raised to rule the world, the book clearly implies, while the offspring of "weak-willed," "indulgent" Westerners are growing up ill equipped to compete in a fierce global marketplace.

One of those permissive American parents is Chua's husband, Jed Rubenfeld (also a professor at Yale Law School). He makes the occasional cameo appearance in Tiger Mother, cast as the tenderhearted foil to Chua's merciless taskmaster. When Rubenfeld protested Chua's harangues over "The Little White Donkey," for instance, Chua informed him that his older daughter Sophia could play the piece when she was Lulu's age. Sophia and Lulu are different people, Rubenfeld remonstrated reasonably. "Oh, no, not this," Chua shot back, adopting a mocking tone: "Everyone is special in their special own way. Even losers are special in their own special way."
With a stroke of her razor-sharp pen, Chua has set a whole nation of parents to wondering: Are we the losers she’s talking about?

Americans have ample reason to wonder these days, starting with our distinctly loserish economy. Though experts have declared that the recent recession is now over, economic growth in the third quarter of 2010 was an anemic 2.6%, and many economists say unemployment will continue to hover above 9%. Part of the reason? Jobs outsourced to countries like Brazil, India and China. Our housing values have declined, our retirement and college funds have taken a beating, and we’re too concerned with paying our monthly bills to save much, even if we had the will to change our ingrained consumerist ways. Meanwhile, in China, the economy is steaming along at more than 10% annual growth, and the country is running a $252.4 billion trade surplus with the U.S. China’s government is pumping its new wealth right back into the country, building high-speed rail lines and opening new factories.

If our economy suffers by comparison with China’s, so does our system of primary and secondary education. That became clear in December, when the latest test results from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) were released. American students were mired in the middle: 17th in reading, 23rd in science and 31st in math — 17th overall. For the first time since PISA began its rankings in 2000, students in Shanghai took the test — and they blew everyone else away, achieving a decisive first place in all three categories. When asked to account for the results, education experts produced a starkly simple explanation: Chinese students work harder, with more focus, for longer hours than American students do. It’s true that students in boomtown Shanghai aren’t representative of those in all of China, but when it comes to metrics like test scores, symbolism matters. Speaking on education in December, a sober President Obama noted that the U.S. has arrived at a 'Sputnik moment': the humbling realization that another country is pulling ahead in a contest we’d become used to winning.

Such anxious ruminations seem to haunt much of our national commentary these days, even in the unlikeliest of contexts. When the National Football League postponed a Philadelphia Eagles game in advance of the late-December blizzard on the East Coast, outgoing Pennsylvania governor Ed Rendell was left fuming: "We've become a nation of wusses," he declared on a radio program. "The Chinese are kicking our butt in everything. If this was in China, do you think the Chinese would have called off the game? People would have been marching down to the stadium. They would have walked, and they would have been doing calculus on the way down."

These national identity crises are nothing new. During the mid–20th century, we kept a jealous eye on the Soviets, obsessively monitoring their stores of missiles, their ranks of cosmonauts and even their teams of gymnasts, using these as an index of our own success (not to mention the prospects for our survival). In the 1980s, we fretted that Japan was besting us with its technological wizardry and clever product design — the iPod of the '80s was the Sony Walkman — and its investors' acquisitions of American name-brand companies and prime parcels of real estate.

Now the Soviet Union has dissolved into problem-plagued Russia, and our rivalry with the Japanese has faded as another one has taken its place: last year, China surpassed Japan as the world’s second largest economy. The U.S. is still No. 1 — but for how long? We’re rapidly reaching the limit on how much money the federal government can borrow — and our single biggest creditor is China. How long, for that matter, can the beleaguered U.S. education system keep pace with a rapidly evolving and increasingly demanding global marketplace? Chinese students already have a longer school year than American pupils — and U.S. kids spend more time sitting in front of the TV than in the classroom.

The document that finally focused the nation's attention on these crucial questions was not a blue-ribbon study or a hefty government report, but a slender book that sprang from one mother’s despair over her daughter’s teenage rebellion.

Amy Chua lives in New Haven, Conn., in an imposing mock-Tudor mansion — complete with gargoyles — that was built in the 1920s for a vaudeville impresario. The woman who descends the winding stone stairway and
The first thing Chua wants you to know is that she is not a monster. "Everything I do as a mother builds on a foundation of love and compassion," she says. Love and compassion, plus punishingly high expectations: this is how Chua herself was raised. Though her parents are ethnically Chinese, they lived for many years in the Philippines and immigrated to America two years before Chua was born. Chua and her three younger sisters were required to speak Chinese at home; for each word of English they uttered, they received a whack with a pair of chopsticks. On the girls' report cards, only A's were acceptable. When Chua took her father to an awards assembly at which she received second prize, he was furious. "Never, ever disgrace me like that again," he told her.

Some react to an exceedingly strict household by becoming permissive parents, but not Chua. When she had children of her own, she resolved to raise them the same way. "I see my upbringing as a great success story," she says. "By disciplining me, my parents inculcated self-discipline. And by restricting my choices as a child, they gave me so many choices in my life as an adult. Because of what they did then, I get to do the work I love now." Chua's path to her profession was not a straight one — she tried out the premed track and a major in economics before settling on law school — but it was made possible, she says, by the work ethic her parents instilled.

All the same, Chua recognizes that her parents' attitudes were shaped by experiences very different from her own. Her mother and father endured severe hardship under the Japanese occupation of the Philippines; later they had to make their way in a new country and a new language. For them, security and stability were paramount. "They didn't think about children's happiness," Chua says. "They thought about preparing us for the future." But Chua says her children's happiness is her primary goal; her intense focus on achievement is simply, she says, "the vehicle" to help them find, as she has, genuine fulfillment in a life's work.

The second thing Chua wants you to know is that the hard-core parenting she set out to do didn't work — not completely, anyway. "When my children were young, I was very cocky," Chua acknowledges. "I thought I could maintain total control. And in fact my first child, Sophia, was very compliant." Then came Lulu.

From the beginning, Chua's second daughter was nothing like her obedient sister. As a fetus, she kicked — hard. As an infant, she screamed for hours every night. And as a budding teenager she refused to get with her mother's academic and extracurricular program. In particular, the two fought epic battles over violin practice: "all-out nuclear warfare doesn't quite capture it," Chua writes. Finally, after a screaming, glass-smashing, very public showdown, the tiger mother admitted defeat: "Lulu," she said, "you win. It's over. We're giving up the violin." Not long after, Chua typed the first words of her memoir — not as an exercise in maternal bravado but as an earnest attempt to understand her daughters, her parents and herself.

That was a year and a half ago. Today, Chua has worked out some surprising compromises with her children. Sophia can go out on dates and must practice the piano for an hour and a half each day instead of as many as six hours. Lulu is allowed to pursue her passion for tennis. (Her mother's daughter, she's become quite good at the sport, making the high school varsity team — "the only junior high school kid to do so," as Chua can't help pointing out.) And Chua says she doesn't want to script her children's futures. "I really don't have any particular career path in mind for Sophia and Lulu, as long as they feel passionate about it and give it their best." As her girls prepare to launch themselves into their own lives — Sophia goes off to college next fall — Chua says she wouldn't change much about the way she raised them. Perhaps more surprising, her daughters say they intend to be strict parents one day too — though they plan to permit more time with friends, even the occasional sleepover.
Most surprising of all to Chua’s detractors may be the fact that many elements of her approach are supported by research in psychology and cognitive science. Take, for example, her assertion that American parents go too far in insulating their children from discomfort and distress. Chinese parents, by contrast, she writes, “assume strength, not fragility, and as a result they behave very differently.” In the 2008 book A Nation of Wimps, author Hara Estroff Marano, editor-at-large of Psychology Today magazine, marshals evidence that shows Chua is correct. “Research demonstrates that children who are protected from grappling with difficult tasks don’t develop what psychologists call ‘mastery experiences,’” Marano explains. “Kids who have this well-earned sense of mastery are more optimistic and decisive; they’ve learned that they’re capable of overcoming adversity and achieving goals.” Children who have never had to test their abilities, says Marano, grow into “emotionally brittle” young adults who are more vulnerable to anxiety and depression.

Another parenting practice with which Chua takes issue is Americans’ habit, as she puts it, of “slathering praise on their kids for the lowest of tasks — drawing a squiggle or waving a stick.” Westerners often laud their children as “talented” or “gifted,” she says, while Asian parents highlight the importance of hard work. And in fact, research performed by Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck has found that the way parents offer approval affects the way children perform, even the way they feel about themselves.

Dweck has conducted studies with hundreds of students, mostly early adolescents, in which experimenters gave the subjects a set of difficult problems from an IQ test. Afterward, some of the young people were praised for their ability: “You must be smart at this.” Others were praised for their effort: “You must have worked really hard.” The kids who were complimented on their intelligence were much more likely to turn down the opportunity to do a challenging new task that they could learn from. “They didn’t want to do anything that could expose their deficiencies and call into question their talent,” Dweck says. Ninety percent of the kids who were praised for their hard work, however, were eager to take on the demanding new exercise.

One more way in which the tiger mother’s approach differs from that of her Western counterparts: her willingness to drill, baby, drill. When Sophia came in second on a multiplication speed test at school, Chua made her do 20 practice tests every night for a week, clocking her with a stopwatch. "Tenacious practice, practice, practice is crucial for excellence; rote repetition is underrated in America," she writes. In this, Chua is right, says Daniel Willingham, a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia. "It's virtually impossible to become proficient at a mental task without extensive practice," he notes.

What’s more, Willingham says, "if you repeat the same task again and again, it will eventually become automatic. Your brain will literally change so that you can complete the task without thinking about it." Once this happens, the brain has made mental space for higher-order operations: for interpreting literary works, say, and not simply decoding their words; for exploring the emotional content of a piece of music, and not just playing the notes. Brain scans of experimental subjects who are asked to execute a sequence of movements, for example, show that as the sequence is repeated, the parts of the brain associated with motor skills become less active, allowing brain activity to shift to the areas associated with higher-level thinking and reflection.

Cognitive neuroscience, in other words, confirms the wisdom of what the tiger mother knew all along. "What Chinese parents understand," says Chua, "is that nothing is fun until you're good at it." That may be an overstatement — but if being good at reading or math or music permits a greater degree of engagement and expressiveness, that would seem to be a very desirable thing.

All that said, however, psychologists universally decry the use of threats and name calling — verbal weapons frequently deployed by Chua — as harmful to children’s individual development and to the parent-child relationship. So just what does she have to say about the notorious episodes recounted in her book?

About "The Little White Donkey": she was perhaps too severe in enforcing long hours of practice, Chua says now. Still, she says, it was important for Sophia and Lulu to learn what they were capable of. "It might sound harsh, but kids really shouldn’t be able to take the easy way out," she explains. "If a child has the experience, even once, of successfully doing something she didn’t think she could do, that lesson will stick with her for the rest of her life." Recently, Chua says, Lulu told her that during a math test at school that day she had looked at
a question and drawn a blank. "Lulu said, 'Then I heard your annoying voice in my head, saying, "Keep thinking! I know you can do this" — and the answer just came to me!'"

On calling Sophia "garbage": "There are some things I did that I regret and wish I could change, and that's one of them," Chua says. But, she notes, her father used similar language with her, "and I knew it was because he thought well of me and was sure I could do better." Chua's parents are now in their 70s, and she says she feels nothing but love and respect for them: "We're a very tight family, all three generations of us, and I think that's because I was shown a firm hand and my kids were shown a firm hand."

And Lulu's birthday card? Chua stands by that one. "My girls know the difference between working hard on something and dashing something off," she says firmly. "They know that I treasure the drawings and poems they put effort into."

More than anything, it's Chua's maternal confidence — her striking lack of ambivalence about her choices as a parent — that has inspired both ire and awe among the many who have read her words. Since her book's publication, she says, e-mail messages have poured in from around the globe, some of them angry and even threatening but many of them wistful or grateful. "A lot of people have written to say that they wished their parents had pushed them when they were younger, that they think they could have done more with their lives," Chua recounts. "Other people have said that after reading my book they finally understand their parents and why they did what they did. One man wrote that he sent his mother flowers and a note of thanks, and she called him up, weeping."

So should we all be following Chua's example? She wrote a memoir, not a manual. She does make it clear, however, that Chinese mothers don't have to be Chinese: "I know some Korean, Indian, Jamaican, Irish and Ghanaian parents who qualify too," she writes. The tiger-mother approach isn't an ethnicity but a philosophy: expect the best from your children, and don't settle for anything less.

Among those who are decidedly not following Chua's lead are many parents and educators in China. For educated urban Chinese parents, the trend is away from the strict traditional model and toward a more relaxed American style. Chinese authorities, meanwhile, are increasingly dissatisfied with the country's public education system, which has long been based on rote learning and memorization. They are looking to the West for inspiration — not least because they know they must produce more creative and innovative graduates to power the high-end economy they want to develop. The lesson here: depending on where you stand, there may always be an approach to child rearing that looks more appealing than the one you've got.

Marano doesn't see us whistling Chua's battle hymn just yet. "Kids can grow and thrive under a wide variety of parenting styles," she says. "But American parenting, at its best, combines ambitious expectations and a loving environment with a respect for each child's individual differences and a flexibility in parental roles and behavior. You can set high standards in your household and help your children meet them without resorting to the extreme measures Chua writes about." Western parents have their own highly effective strategies for promoting learning, such as free play — something Chua never mentions. On a national scale, the U.S. economy may be taking a hit, but it has far from collapsed. American secondary education may be in crisis, but its higher education is the envy of the world — especially China. We have not stopped inventing and innovating, in Silicon Valley or in Detroit.

There's no doubt that Chua's methods are extreme (though her stories, she hints, may have been slightly exaggerated for effect). But her account, arriving just after those unnervingly high test scores from Shanghai, has created a rare opportunity. Sometimes it takes a dramatic intervention to get our attention. After the 1957 launch of Sputnik, America did rise to the Soviets' challenge: less than a year later, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act, which invested billions of dollars in the U.S. education system. Within five years, John Glenn was orbiting Earth, and less than a decade after that, we put a man on the moon.

Clare Boothe Luce, the American playwright, Congresswoman and ambassador, called the beeps emitted by Sputnik as it sailed through space "an intercontinental outer-space raspberry," a jeer at the notion that
America had some "gilt-edged guarantee of national superiority." Think of Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother as a well-timed taunt aimed at our own complacent sense of superiority, our belief that America will always come out on top. That won't be the case unless we make it so. We can get caught up in the provocative details of Chua's book (did she really threaten to burn her daughter's stuffed animals?), or we can use her larger point as an impetus to push ourselves forward, the way our countrymen often have in the past.

For though Chua hails the virtues of "the Chinese way," the story she tells is quintessentially American. It's the tale of an immigrant striver, determined to make a better life for himself and his family in a nation where such dreams are still possible. "I remember my father working every night until 3 in the morning; I remember him wearing the same pair of shoes for eight years," Chua says. "Knowing the sacrifices he and my mother made for us made me want to uphold the family name, to make my parents proud."

Hard work, persistence, no patience for excuses: whether Chinese or American, that sounds like a prescription for success with which it's very difficult to argue.