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Are Chinese parents really the best parents?



by Lylah M. Alphonse, Shine Staff, on Mon Jan 10, 2011 11:55am PST

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Her daughters were never allowed to go to sleepovers, have playdates, or be in a school play. Watching TV was not permitted. Neither was playing video games, choosing their own extracurricular activities, getting any grade lower than an A, or playing any instrument other than violin or piano. But they both grew up to be musical prodigies who excelled academically and so, in an excerpt from her new book, "Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother," Yale Law professor Amy Chua declares her "Chinese mother" parenting skills superior to those of lax, touchy-feely "Western parents" and describes the methods that led to her success.

After a quick disclaimer to address stereotyping (she says she uses the terms "Chinese mother" and "Western parents" loosely and acknowledges that parenting styles aren't exclusive to a particular

location), she launches into the ways in which Chinese and Western parents differ. For the most part, the Western parents don't make out so well.

"What Chinese parents understand is that nothing is fun until you're good at it," Chua writes in the excerpt, which was published in *The Wall Street Journal*. "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."

Parenting experts and readers had mixed reactions to Chua's conclusions.

"I was sort of horrified and fascinated by it, simultaneously," says Wendy Sachs, the author of "How She Really Does It: Secrets of Successful Stay-at-Work Moms" and the editor-in-chief of [Care.com](#). "I think there's definitely a validity in the argument that American parenting is a little too permissive, a little too soft. We tend to coddle our children."

But, Sachs adds, "I would argue that her method of extreme parenting would hinder critical thinking skills and creativity. Success is not just about getting all As." Even though [Emotional Intelligence](#) is said to be as important as intellect, what her excerpt proudly describes is "a very disciplined child who is told they must excel," Sachs points out. "We're not talking about a child who has empathy, one who has socialization skills, who is being a citizen of the world. And that's where, I think, there's a big difference between 'Eastern' and 'Western' parenting."

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Though Chua says that "Chinese mothers" heap praise upon their children when they do succeed, it's hard not to imagine the crippling rejection a child might feel when Chua [throws a homemade birthday card back in her young daughter's face](#), or when, after their grandmother dies, she forces them to write speeches to give at the funeral—and then tells them their work is awful. "It has no insight. It has no depth. It's like a Hallmark Card — which Popo hated. You are so selfish."

That kind of "motivation" rarely works on an adult. So why is it OK to talk like that to a child?

"Western parents are concerned about their children's psyches," Chua writes. "Chinese parents aren't. They assume strength, not fragility, and as a result they behave very differently.... 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."

Studies seem to show otherwise. "If you look at the suicide and depression statistics of Asian-Americans, I think they contradict her assumption that this kind of verbal abuse has no effect," says [Dr. Robyn Silverman](#), a child-development expert and professional speaker. "Suicide is the [second leading cause of death among Asian American women](#), ages 15-24. Asian American women, ages 15-24 and over 65, have the highest female suicide rates across all racial/ethnic groups...and family pressures are often cited as factors."

The child may not protest the parents' actions, but that may be because protest isn't permitted. Many Asian cultures teach children not to admit weakness or criticize their parents, Dr. Silverman points out. "So it might be assumed that these kinds of parenting techniques don't impact the child, when it actually does."

In China, where filial piety has long been a tradition, a tide may be turning: A new law is in the works that would [mandate that adults look after and visit their elderly parents](#), since single-child families and a push for a Westernized world-view are challenging long-standing beliefs that children are permanently indebted to their parents—and that parents always know best.

But do coercion, threats, and insults make sense if a parent is doing what he or she thinks is best for the child? Where is the line between discipline and abuse? "The upshot is that the tough love that Chua heralds is not just pointless, but cruel," writes Brian Chapman at [The Library of Economics and Liberty](#). "The defender of Chinese parenting might retort, 'Well, at least it does no lasting damage.' But only massive future benefits could conceivably justify the truly sadistic things that Chua proudly admits she did for her children's alleged benefit."

"I think a lot of people would be surprised and shocked at how this mother is raising her child, but that doesn't make it incorrect," says Dr. Charlotte Reznick, author of "The Power of Your Child's Imagination" and the founder of [Imagery for Kids](#). "We have a different emphasis in general in America, so it's hard to say that something is absolutely wrong or not."

And maybe we have more in common than we think. "Western parents worry a lot about their children's self-esteem," Chua writes. "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."

Says Sachs of Care.com: "There is something to pushing your kids to work harder. Maybe I need to be more of a Chinese mom in some areas, and not let them give up so easily."

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