AN EXAMINATION OF CHINESE VS. WESTERN PARENTING THROUGH *BATTLE HYMN OF THE TIGER MOM*

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"I threatened her with no lunch, no dinner, no Christmas or Hanukkah presents, no birthday parties for two, three, four years. . . . I told her to stop being lazy, cowardly, self-indulgent, and pathetic," writes Amy Chua, a Yale Law School professor, describing the tactics she used to force her daughter Lulu to play "The Little White Donkey" on the piano (61). This is one example Chua chronicles of parenting her two daughters, Sophia and Lulu, in *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. In her book, Chua uses the term "tiger mother" to describe a style of parenting most commonly exercised by Chinese parents (4). Chua addresses the differences between Chinese and Western parenting in the introduction, writing, "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" (5). From this statement, Chua goes on to briefly illuminate these differences, such as Chinese parents spending "approximately ten times as long every day drilling academic activities with their children" in comparison to Western parents (5).

The book unleashed a heated response, with some readers even sending death threats against Chua (Dolak). Why did Chua's book elicit such backlash? On the one hand, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother's* reliance on Chinese and Western stereotypes and Chua's writing style may well invite controversy of this magnitude, but so do the responses of her critics. Through an examination of *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* and the discourse that the book spurred, we can see how representations of both Chinese and Western mothers have been distorted and, in turn, how these misrepresentations sidetracked what could have been an important discussion about Chinese versus Western parenting.

The controversy first erupted in January 2011 when the *Wall Street Journal* published an excerpt of *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, titled "Why Chinese Mothers are Superior." Chua, who has stated numerous times that her book is not a parenting manual, claimed that "the *Wall Street Journal's* article strung together the most controversial sections of her book and failed to highlight that the book is a memoir about a personal journey of motherhood" (Dolak). Ironically, Chua's criticism of the *Wall Street Journal* excerpt can be applied to her own book. Just as the *Wall Street Journal* article "strung together the most controversial sections of her book," Chua has strung together her most controversial parenting anecdotes in *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*.

We can better understand this parallel between the excerpt and the book by inspecting the letter in response that Chua's daughter Sophia wrote, which reads in

part, "No outsider can know what our family is really like. . . . 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" (Chua-Rubenfeld). Perhaps the reason why no outsider can get a glimpse into this charming vision of Chua's family is because Chua decides not to portray this vision in the book, even though one would expect moments of familial intimacy to be included in a "memoir about a personal journey of motherhood" (Dolak). To a certain extent, Chua's decision to include anecdotes like "The Birthday Card" (in which Chua rejects the birthday cards Sophia and Lulu made for her because they were made carelessly and tells her daughters "I deserve better than this. So I *reject* this.") over stories about family bonding almost makes sense (Chua 103). After all, Chua seems eager to point out how strict and demanding she is compared to her Western counterparts and these anecdotes arguably do the job. With her one-dimensional portrayal of Chinese parenting, Chua perpetuates "the media stereotypes of Asian-Americans that are already so prevalent in our society—quiet, obedient, good-at-math nerds that through their rigid discipline end up having deficient social skills" (Chi).

Not only does Chua describe her daughters and herself as walking Chinese stereotypes, she typecasts the Western mothers she discusses in her book. The author suggests that Chinese parents raise more successful kids because of their Chinese heritage while Western parents raise less successful kids because of their Western heritage. This idea is primarily illustrated through comparisons she draws between her family and their Western counterparts throughout the book, such as the juxtaposition of Sophia and her Western peers at the Neighborhood Music School. While Chua enforced a rigorous practice schedule of ninety minutes a day, seven days a week for Sophia, "Most of the other students at the school had liberal Western parents, who were weak-willed and indulgent when it came to practicing" and mentions a student named Aubrey, "who was required to practice one minute per day for every year of her age" (Chua 27–28). Eventually, and of course partly because of this intense practice schedule, Sophia ended up playing at Carnegie Hall as an eighth-grade student (140). Chua explicitly calls herself (and her ability to execute such a rigid practice schedule for her daughter) a "big cultural advantage" for Sophia (27). This quotation is crucial to our understanding of Chua's use of stereotypes, demonstrating that she is able to drive her daughters to success because she is Chinese and that following these "Chinese values" is more favorable to raising successful kids than being a Western mother following "Western values."

What is the difference between a "Chinese mother" and a "Western mother"? Chua addresses this question in an interview with *Time* magazine, saying,

> I think the biggest difference is that I've noticed Western parents seem much more concerned about their children's psyches, their self-esteem, whereas tough

> immigrant parents assume strength rather than fragility in their children and therefore behave completely differently. (Luscombe)

To further examine the ethnic distinctions that Chua makes, we must also consider her disclaimer regarding her usage of the terms "Chinese mother" versus "Western parents" in her book. Chua writes, "When I use the term 'Western parents,' of course I'm not referring to all Western parents—just as 'Chinese mother' doesn't refer to all Chinese mothers," adding that some Korean, Indian, Jamaican, Irish, and Ghanaian parents qualify as "Chinese mothers," as well (Chua 4). However, Chua's disclaimer is ineffective, because she does not readdress this clarification in the rest of her book, and instead, perpetuates stereotyped images of Chinese mothers and children versus Western parents and children. The effect of Chua's book is an oversimplification of "Chinese students" and "American students" (not to mention, of course, that students can be both): the former is obedient and good at rote tasks while the latter is lazy and undisciplined.

Unfortunately, the critics responding to *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* rely on the same stereotypes that Chua employs. We see this quite visibly in writer Ayelet Waldman's response to Chua's book in the *Wall Street Journal*, "In Defense of the Guilty, Ambivalent, Preoccupied Western Mom." In her article, Waldman employs the very stereotypes Chua uses in *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, beginning with a list, as Chua does, that detail the activities Waldman's children are allowed to do: quit studying the piano and the violin, sleep over at their friends' house, surf the Internet, etc. (*Wall Street Journal*). Waldman makes it quite obvious that she has taken Chua's list of forbidden activities for her children and has reversed it to make it a list of permitted activities. That is, Waldman seems to exaggerate the lax attitudes of certain Western parents just as Chua played up the harsh practices of the Chinese tiger mother. For instance, she writes that she always permits her children to "sleep over at their friends' houses, especially on New Year's Eve or our anniversary, thus saving us the cost of a babysitter" and to "participate in any extracurricular activity they wanted, so long as I was never required to drive farther than 10 minutes to get them there, or to sit on a field in a folding chair in anything but the balmiest weather for any longer than 60 minutes" (*Wall Street Journal*). It is clear from her essay that Waldman is a devoted and attentive parent, but she still resorts to such statements that reaffirms the idea of a lenient Western mother. Both Waldman and Chua perpetuate Chinese and Western stereotypes with a complacence that is hard to understand at times. Why are these mothers so willing to caricature their culture and parenting?

Waldman's essay demonstrates the divisive effect of both Chua's use of stereotypes and Chua's simplification of Chinese and Western parenting. For instance, Waldman recounts how her daughter Rosie overcame mild dyslexia "not because we forced her to drill and practice and repeat, not because we dragged her kicking and screaming, or denied her food, or kept her from the using the bathroom, but because she forced

herself." She is pointedly contrasting her daughter to Chua's daughters, who were forced to "drill and practice and repeat" and more specifically, Lulu, who was not allowed to use the bathroom until she mastered a piano piece (Waldman). "[Rosie] climbed the mountain alone, motivated not by fear or shame of dishonoring her parents but by her passionate desire to read," states Waldman. It seems that according to Waldman, to be self-motivated and to be motivated by fear or shame of disappointing one's parents are mutually exclusive and that the former is more respectable than the latter. However, such a categorization seems unfair to the children who are pushed by their parents, such as Chua's daughter Sophia.

Sophia disproves Waldman's argument through an essay that she wrote for school prior to Chua penning her book. In this essay, Sophia writes that just before her performance at Carnegie Hall, "I realized how much I loved this music" (Chua 140). That is, while Sophia may have followed her mother's rigidly enforced ninety minutes a day, seven days a week practice schedule because she was motivated by "fear or shame of dishonoring her parents," as Waldman would say, Sophia evidently grew a passion and a love for the piano that no one, not even Chua, could command her to develop. "Oftentimes training children fairly early to work very hard and be disciplined would be one way to foster their self-motivation," writes Professor Ruth K. Chao in her study "Beyond Parental Control and Authoritarian Parenting Style: Understanding Chinese Parenting Through the Cultural Notion of Training" (1117). That is, working hard from a young age may allow a child to see the benefits of doing so and thus, he may be inclined to set his own goals.

In contrast to Chua's simplified and stereotyped work, Chao delves into the cultural factors that have led these two cultures to develop distinct parenting styles. In her study, fifty immigrant Chinese mothers and fifty European-American mothers answered scales, or questionnaires, derived from "Block's 1981 Child Rearing Practices Report" (Chao 1114). After conducting the research, Chao concludes "that the concepts often used to describe Chinese parenting (i.e., 'authoritarian,' 'controlling,' or 'restrictive') have been rather ethnocentric and misleading" (1111). Chao dismantles these concepts by examining two Chinese terms: *chiao shun*, which "contains the idea of training (i.e., teaching or educating) children in the appropriate or expected behaviors" and *guan*, which Tobin et al. explain "literally means 'to govern'" but also can mean "'to care for' or even 'to love'" (qtd. in Chao 1112). She states that "the sociocultural traditions and values that have shaped [these] child-rearing concepts" do not exist in the West (1117). Furthermore, Chao found that even the word "training" itself triggered "very positive" associations for the Chinese mothers participating in her study, while the European American mothers associated "training" with words like "militaristic" or "regimented" (1117). These findings suggest the difficulties in classifying Chinese parenting in strictly American terms. Even the very same word, "training," evokes two very different responses in Chinese culture versus European-American culture. As Chao states, "These highly charged negative 'derivations' of

authoritarian [*sic*] have been applied to describe the parenting styles of individuals who in no way share this same historical and sociocultural context" (1117). Thus, Chao's analysis calls into question the disapproval expressed by critics of Chua who may not understand the cultural context of Chinese parenting. Chua's decision not to examine the cultural context in *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, but merely present its striking features, is what lends the book to such controversy. Had Chua given her largely American readership a better idea of the cultural concepts that fashioned Chinese parenting, Chua and her critics would have been able to engage in a more informed discussion of the merits and drawbacks of Chinese and Western parenting.

Discussions of *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* will have implications that far exceed the scope of the book. The book comes at a time of heightened American anxiety about China becoming a formidable economic challenger to the United States. More significantly, Chua's book comes at a time when students from Shanghai came in first in every subject tested by the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) while children from the United States placed 17th in reading, 23rd in science and 31st in math (*The Telegraph*). U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan's statement in response to the PISA test results almost seems to be taken directly off a page of *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. He says that U.S. students "express more self-confidence in their academic skills" than students in any other nation that participated in the PISA and that "this stunning finding may be explained because students here are being commended for work that would not be acceptable in high-performing education systems" (Ed.gov). While Secretary Duncan's comments deal with the 2009 test results, his speech is still relevant today because American students maintained this high self-regard in the most recent 2011 test results (*The Telegraph*). How we interpret these results is crucial: we cannot take a Chua-Waldman reading of these scores by assuming that all American students are thus lazier but have a higher sense of self-esteem than all Chinese students. Rather, by keeping Chao's study in mind, we can recognize the impact of culture on the parenting and education of both China and the United States.

No one culture holds the secret to successful parenting and even Chua herself recognizes this by the end of her book. After recounting an incident of dramatic rebellion from her daughter (involving chopping off her hair to just below her ear and smashing a glass in a restaurant), the author considers the possibility that there are merits in both Chinese parenting and Western parenting (Chua 174, 205–206). Indeed, Chua now allows Lulu to participate in improv, a very "American" pursuit, admitting, "I'm still in the fight, albeit with some significant modifications to my strategy" (221).

In his essay, "The Case for Contamination," Kwame Anthony Appiah, a professor at Princeton University, discusses how society accepts contentious concepts, such as women entering "learned professions" like law or medicine and poses the question, "Isn't a significant part of it just the consequence of our getting used to new ways of doing things?" (52). Indeed, society began to accept the idea of women entering

learned professions mostly because more and more women entered learned professions. Yet if we are to get used to "new ways of doing things," such as adopting Chinese parenting concepts, we must remove the stigma, get past the stereotypes, and promote a freer exchange of ideas through "conversations that occur across cultural boundaries" (Appiah 23). Chua and her book spurred "conversations," but not the kind that brings about change. Rather, these conversations reinforced the boundaries between Chinese and Western cultures. Perhaps, if we can get past the hyperbole and Chua's dramatics in *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, we will discover ideas that transcend the boundaries of culture: hard work and parents wanting the best for their children. What we must do, then, is to move away from a discourse of stereotypes and generalizations and toward an informed conversation that recognizes the specific cultural traditions and values that have shaped the parenting style of each culture. Through such a conversation, we will be able to better recognize the merits of both parenting styles.

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