

TOUGH LOVE

Have western parents gone soft on their kids? Yale professor Amy Chua thinks so, according to her controversial new book *The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*.



AMY CHUA doesn't think much of western parenting. When her seven-year-old daughter, Lulu, couldn't master a tricky piano piece, Chua didn't praise her for trying hard. She went to war. After a week of frustration at the difficulty of the piece — Jacques Ibert's *The Little White Donkey* — Lulu announced she wanted to give up. Chua forced her back to the piano and told her she couldn't leave until she got it right. When Lulu tore up the music score, her mother taped it back together and covered it in plastic. Then came the threats: Lulu's dollhouse was prepared for delivery to the Salvation Army, meals were cancelled, then Christmas and birthdays. She was berated for being lazy and pathetic. Her dad tried to intervene, to no effect, and the house became a warzone.

And then Lulu got it. Her performance at the school recital a few weeks later was a triumph, and today, 10 years later, Lulu is a gifted pianist who has played at Carnegie Hall and has a bright future. A job well done, according to Chua, who is a professor at Yale Law School and the author of a controversial new book, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, which promotes a functional, goal-oriented approach to parenting. Or, in other words, a Chinese approach.

SUPERIOR PARENTING?

"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," she wrote in an essay published in *The Wall Street Journal* in January, provocatively titled *Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior*. "On the flip side, there's nothing better for building confidence than learning you can do something you thought you couldn't."

Many parents can probably agree with that, to some extent, but

Chua goes much further. "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."

Even that might sound reasonable enough, but for Chua's two daughters it meant a laundry list of things they 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 top student in every subject except gym and drama
- play any instrument other than the piano or violin
- not play the piano or violin.

Many western parents would consider that several steps too far. For most, sociability and self-expression are important and desirable things to instill in their kids, particularly in an age when communication has become constant and immediate, and social networks, whether online or off, are key to getting ahead.

Not so for Chua, evidently. She says there are three traits that make Chinese parents superior. First, "they assume strength, not



fragility, and as a result they behave very differently.” Second, “Chinese parents believe that their kids owe them everything.” And, 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.”

Unsurprisingly, many Americans have responded angrily to Chua’s views, with some critics even accusing her of child abuse. But she also has supporters who agree that liberal parenting nurtures under-performance.

“Chua hammers western parenting, but she could learn from it too. And if she knew her Confucius, she would know that moderation in all things is the essence of Chinese culture.”

Sun Shuyun, *The Observer*

SCHOOL GRADES

Evidence from the UK might suggest that Chua and her supporters have a point. A report on inequality in Britain by the Equality and Human Rights Commission showed that British Chinese children do better at school than any other ethnic group, regardless of whether they are rich or poor.

Surprisingly, Chinese children from poor backgrounds — those who are eligible for free school meals — do just as well at GCSE as their wealthier Chinese peers. In both groups, about 70% get five

good grades, including English and Maths. At primary school, the poorer kids are doing even better.

It should be noted that Chinese pupils make up less than half a percent of the student population in any one school year, so it is difficult to read too much into the results. But they provide interesting food for thought, particularly in light of Chua’s theories about Tiger Mums.

Hong Kong, of course, is a whole city of Tiger Mums, which leads to the question: Are the kids here any brighter than back home?

Well, as it turns out, they are. In fact, Hong Kong ranked fourth in the OECD’s latest Pisa survey of reading literacy among 15-year-olds. Singapore ranked one spot behind, while the province of Shanghai, which took part for the first time, scored higher than any country. It also topped the table in maths and science, and more than one-quarter of Shanghai’s 15-year-olds demonstrated the kind of advanced mathematical thinking skills needed to solve complex problems, compared to an OECD average of just 3%.

Averaged across the three subjects, Shanghai and Hong Kong top the table, with Asian economies filling five of the top six spots.

“This shows that an image of a world divided neatly into rich and well-educated countries, and poor and badly-educated countries is now out of date,” said OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurría. “Better educational outcomes are a strong predictor for future economic growth.”

That doesn’t bode well for most western economies, where students are under-performing relative to these Tiger Kids. But test scores are not everything, as liberal parents will readily attest.

“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.”

Allison Pearson, Daily Telegraph



FLEXIBILITY

In the postwar period, western parents were influenced by prominent figures, such as paediatrician Dr Benjamin Spock, to be more flexible and affectionate with their children. This was contrary to previous conventional wisdom, which was, in effect, the Tiger Mum approach: an over-bearing focus on discipline. Spock’s ideas about childcare influenced several generations of parents to treat their children as individuals.

To Chua, western parents have simply gone soft. For social mobility to work, parents need to nurture resilient kids who are brighter than their richer, better-connected peers. And, in Asia particularly, parents are acutely aware that their children’s peers are not just local, but global.

The huge amount of foreign investment that has flowed into the region during the past few decades has brought more than just jobs and infrastructure. It has also brought the prospect of working at any number of leading international businesses and organisations — landing a cushy government job is no longer the only way to get ahead.

But no matter how good the grades, employers still value people who are flexible, able to solve problems creatively and, most important, enjoy their work. Tough love can only go so far in helping to instil these traits. At some point, Amy, you just need to chill out.

TOP-OF-THE-CLASS TIGERS

The OECD’s most recent Pisa survey, published in December, focused on reading but also assessed maths and science performance. The survey is based on two-hour tests of half a million students conducted during 2009 in more than 70 economies. It aims to help countries see how their school systems match up globally with regard to quality, equity and efficiency.

	Reading	Maths	Science	Avg
Shanghai-China	556	600	575	577
Hong Kong-China	533	555	549	546
Finland	536	541	554	544
Singapore	526	562	542	543
Korea	539	546	538	541
Japan	520	529	539	529
OECD Avg	493	496	501	497

Source: OECD Pisa 2009 Results