

Chapter X: Tiger Mom's "Enlightened Authoritarianism"

Children of authoritarian parents tend to be withdrawn, mistrusting, and unhappy. They have low self-esteem, little self-reliance, and poor social skills, and in some cases they are overly aggressive with others (Coopersmith, 1967; Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991; Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Simons, Whitbeck, Conger, & Conger, 1991).¹

In her blockbuster global best-seller, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, Amy Chua criticizes American parents for not being demanding enough, declaring "Chinese mothers are superior."² Being actively involved in kids' lives is not enough, she argues. American parents foolishly let kids make too many important decisions, especially about how they spend their precious time. A quick glance at international test scores shows American kids could and should achieve and learn much more. And they would, Chua insists, if American parents – like "Asian parents" – would tell kids what to do, when to do it, force them to do it, and severely punish even the slightest deviations from perfection.

Chua and others – including the Korean-American authors of *Top of the Class: How Asian Parents Raise High Achievers—and How You Can Too* – argue for what I term "enlightened authoritarianism." Parents know best, so parents should force kids to become the best kids they can be. Kids must work extremely hard – something the Chinese call "eating bitter" (吃苦) – and always be #1 in every class. While Americans believe Asian-Americans outperform academically because they're smarter, Asian-Americans believe they outperform because they outwork everyone:

intrinsic intelligence, of course, is precisely what Asians don't believe in. They believe—and have proved—that the constant practice of test-taking will improve the scores of whoever commits to it. All throughout Flushing, as well as in Bayside, one can find "cram schools," or storefront academies, that drill students in test preparation after school, on weekends, and during summer break. "Learning math is not about learning math," an instructor at one called Ivy Prep was quoted in *The New York Times* as saying. "It's about weightlifting. You are pumping the iron of math." Mao puts it more specifically: "You learn quite simply to nail any standardized test you take."³

Tiger moms believe this self-improvement process is painful but necessary, so it's their duty to push their kids. Kids won't like practicing the violin three hours a day for ten years, so you must tell them they can't have a water or bathroom break until they play that piece perfectly! "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.”⁴ Chua’s proud that “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.”⁵

Parents must also prevent kids from wasting their precious time on non-productive activities like sleepovers, school plays, boyfriends, video games, craft projects, television, and hanging out with friends when they could be home solving math problems. Chua’s girls had to be the top student in every class, except gym and drama, and weren’t allowed to get any grade other than “A” or choose their own extracurricular activities. (They were, however, free to choose either piano or violin.)

Chua – whose goal is “letting them see what they’re capable of, and arming them with skills, work habits and inner confidence”⁶ – believes American parents accept – even praise – mediocrity because they’re obsessed with keeping their delicate children’s self-esteem high. Chua will do whatever it takes to coerce her daughters to perform to her high expectations. She breaks down their will with threats. And punishments. Insults. Anger. Mockery. She’s used them all: “I told her... she was secretly afraid she couldn’t do it. I told her to stop being lazy, cowardly, self-indulgent and pathetic.”⁷ Bluntness and unvarnished criticality toward children builds toughness and character. “It’s the thought that counts” is bull. When Chua’s daughter gave her a handmade birthday card she judged sub-standard, she threw it back in her face! Failures – like an “A-,” a.k.a. the “Asian ‘F’” – must be immediately rectified through unrelenting remedial education. Kids may resent parents for being so authoritarian, but they’ll thank them later when they see what a great headstart their parents gave them in life.

Positive Pushing

Chua’s most persuasive argument – which she overstates – contains an important kernel of truth:

[N]othing 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.⁸

Kids do need to be nudged to stick with tasks and work harder, but this must supplement a natural positive feedback cycle of increasing success and greater motivation. I doubt any Olympic champion has ever won a medal without tons of prodding from parents and coaches. But Olympic championships are only worth winning if athletes play fair and enjoy the years of grueling training and competition required. One book that encourages parents to push children, though far less aggressively than “tiger moms” do, is James Taylor’s *Positive Pushing: How to Raise a Successful and Happy Child*. Positive pushing works in synch with childrens’ preferences, helping them do better at things they basically enjoy doing. Perhaps your child chose to study flute but needs to be pushed to turn off the TV and practice. Taylor writes that driving your child like a rented mule to success is *not* success: “Success without happiness is not success at all. Implicit in the notion of successful achievers is that a necessary part of success and happiness is the internalization by children of universally held values such as respect, consideration, kindness, generosity, fairness, altruism, integrity, honesty, interdependence, and compassion.”⁹ The younger children are, the more adults should emphasize having fun, not winning. Premature emphasis on competition sucks the joy even out of playing games: “A longtime youth sports coach [says] 75% of children in the country stop playing sports by the time they reach age 12. It’s no wonder when the pressure to win is so great that adults behave like children when they don’t agree with an umpire.”¹⁰

That pushing is *sometimes* beneficial doesn’t prove parents should *always* push their kids. When our boy became temporarily discouraged with swimming and skating – as he did struggling to learn one-foot backward glides – we’ve nudged and cajoled him. But we also let him stop taking after-school Spanish because he wasn’t enjoying it and felt overscheduled. It’s fine to push kids through temporary rough spots when motivation wanes because progress is slow, but pushing your kid day after day to practice three hours of violin? We insisted he keep skating at least until the end of the session we had paid for because we knew his struggles were temporary. But encouragement is better than nudging. We pointed out kids skating while holding onto traffic cones to remind him how far he had progressed. And we encouraged him by my wife – who had long wanted to skate – signing up for a beginning adult lesson at the same time as his lesson. That sent two important messages: skating is fun, even when you’re no good, and it’s okay to struggle because everyone starts at the beginning. Soon afterward, our son signed up for a hockey class. He’s the youngest of a wide age range of kids, and he’s having fun.

Parental nudging to learn a devilishly complex written language is likely one reason Asian students

do so well academically. Memorizing thousands of characters trains them from a young age to concentrate and focus:

Chinese preschoolers were six months ahead of American children in developing mental control, like the ability to look to the left when shown a face pointing to the right. Another study found that Korean 3-year-olds did as well on such tasks as British children who were 17 months older. Like many brain capacities, self-control can be built through practice. Chinese parenting emphasizes child training, which combines close supervision of performance with substantial support and motivation for the child's efforts.¹¹

Our son began Chinese school at age 4 (using a book designed for 5-year-olds) and had daily homework. At 5, he was writing about 100 characters and reading many hundred. While learning to read and write such a complex language, he has been simultaneously developing greater powers of concentration. But excessive focus can be as damaging as too little. I've heard many students in China complain they lack imagination and creativity, and experts agree:

Traditional education concepts have been constraining children's imagination, and the reform of China's education must start with the emancipation of their curiosity, said Liu Daoyu, former president of Wuhan University...

Liu believes Chinese children's lack of imagination has made the scientific [community] feel worried. A survey by an international education evaluation group in 2009 shows that of 29 countries, Chinese children's calculation ability ranks first in the world, while their imagination ranks last, and their creativity ranks fifth from the bottom.

Only 4.7 percent of Chinese primary and secondary school students think they have curiosity and imagination.¹²

Also, as Chua notes, this positive feedback loop can happen while learning *anything*. So why can't her girls play the flute or the oboe? Why can't they pursue success in drama or art?

Do Kids Hate Their Tiger Moms?

In the short term, Chua succeeded in raising academically and musically successful daughters who were accepted into top colleges. Of course, they might have done so – and been happier and grown more self-reliant – even if Chua hadn't run her home like a drill sergeant. Could she have encouraged her children to enjoy math and music, rather than simply force them to study? Research shows “tiger moms” stress their kids out:

[H]igh-achieving Chinese American students can experience elevated levels of stress, especially comparing to their peers from other ethnic groups.... Drawing on survey data collected on 295

Chinese American and 192 European American 9th graders attending a highly selective magnet school [Stuyvesant], our findings show that Chinese American adolescents reported significantly lower levels of psychological adjustment ($d = -.31$), and significantly less family cohesion ($d = -.34$) and more conflict ($d = .56$) than their European American peers. Further, the ethnic differences on adjustment disappeared after controlling for perceptions of family cohesion and conflict, indicating that such perceptions may be a key factor in understanding the high academic achievement/low psychological adjustment paradoxical pattern of development among Chinese American adolescents.¹³

The study's author, Desiree Baolian Qin, who grew up in China, says, "Happiness matters tremendously for children to develop well, so they don't just have success now and then later on experience maladjustment. It's really important for parents to pay attention to this."¹⁴ Sometimes, the pressure has especially tragic consequences: At CalTech, "junior Brian Go, senior Jackson Ho-Leung Wang, and graduate student Long Phan ended their lives within a three-month period."¹⁵ And "from 1996 to 2006, of the 21 students who committed suicide at Cornell, 13 were [Asian Pacific Americans]. This 61.9 percentage is significantly higher than the overall percent of APA students, which is 14."¹⁶

Another test comes in future decades. Will Chua's daughters thrive without mom telling them what to do, when to do it, and screaming at them for losing focus? Will they demonstrate creativity and innovation? Can they become entrepreneurs or inventors or are they destined to follow orders for the rest of their lives? Have they developed a love of music or is music just a resume-buffing talent mom forced them to develop? And do they truly appreciate their mom pushing them to succeed? Evidence suggests tough-love tiger moms tend to have unhappier relationships with their children after they leave home:

Seventy-two mothers of Chinese ethnicity and 68 mothers of European extraction (M age = 49.8) completed questionnaires regarding their level of parenting satisfaction, relationship quality, and the perceived academic performance of their college-enrolled child (M age = 19.72). Chinese-American mothers reported significantly lower parenting satisfaction than did European-American mothers, as well as less positive relationship quality (i.e., lower mutual warmth and acceptance and higher parent-child conflict) and poorer perceived college performance by their young-adult child (i.e., grades, academic investment, and satisfaction with students' college experiences). Perceived grades and academic investment were correlated with the parenting satisfaction of Chinese-American mothers but not with that of European-American mothers. Regression analyses indicated that mutual warmth and acceptance contributed independently to maternal satisfaction with parenting and reduced ethnic differences in parenting satisfaction to nonsignificance. These results led us to conclude that mutual warmth with young-adult children is a key feature of midlife parenting satisfaction for mothers of both ethnic groups.¹⁷

Another dark side of "tiger moms" and similarly authoritarian parents is the potential wasted by

forcing children to become what they are not. After Jeremy Lin broke into the NBA – igniting global “Linsanity” – Gish Jen lamented what her brother might have achieved, had their parents not forced his square peg into their idealized round hole:

He could never sit still when he was in second grade; he had to get up every now and then and run around the room. And sure enough, he grew up to be a starting player for an N.C.A.A. championship lacrosse team. He was a Nike-endorsed marathoner, too, and reached the summit of Mt. Everest, unguided, in his 50s.

And yet my family never watched his lacrosse games... When Bob was in his glory days, our Shanghainese-born parents were completely consumed with getting him into medical school... Bob never did become a doctor...

Bob today could be the fittest 58-year-old on the planet. His doctor estimates his biological age at 35; he’s still climbing big mountains in the Himalayas. And, like Jeremy Lin, he’s a charmer. No one sees Bob without leaving with a laugh. He sometimes jokes he could be mayor of his building, and it’s true. To know him is to root for him.

And yet my parents did not root for him. What if my mother had sat on the sidelines with her stats, like Jeremy Lin’s mother? What if my father had played videos of athletes for my brother to watch and imitate?¹⁸

Jeremy Lin wouldn’t be world-famous today without his special mom, Shirley: “my mom’s friends would tell her that she was wasting everyone’s time by letting me play so much basketball. And so she would get criticized, but she let me play because she saw that basketball made me happy. ...[N]ot many other Asian parents would have done the same.”¹⁹ As Lin entered middle school, his mom even helped create a National Junior Basketball program in Palo Alto so he could play with and against superior players. Without that strengthened competition, Lin wouldn’t have maximized his potential and Lin’s Palo Alto team wouldn’t have won the state championship. His mom drove him to practices and games and cheered his every move. And Lin might never have touched a basketball but for his dad who “started teaching Jeremy the game and putting him through drills when [Jeremy] was not long out of diapers”²⁰ and videotaped his games so he could watch them and improve. Ironically, “Once I got into Harvard, the same moms that were criticizing her were asking her questions about which sports their kids could play to go to Harvard.”²¹ For a “short,” undrafted player from Harvard to become an overnight NBA star is most improbable. But the most improbable aspect of Lin’s story is the tremendous support he received from his Taiwanese parents.

The Bamboo Ceiling

Perhaps most worrisome is the problem of Asian-American children being so focused on academics that they fail to develop social and emotional skills essential to success beyond the classroom. Hilariously, David Brooks called Amy Chua “a wimp” because “She’s protecting [her girls] 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... 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... impose cognitive demands that blow away any intense tutoring session or a class at Yale...

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.²²

Asian-American students study diligently. Over a full year (including summers), the average Asian-American student studies 13.0 hours/week versus 5.6 hours/week for Whites, 3.4 hours/week for Blacks, and 4.6 hours/week for Hispanics.²³ They average twice as much study as their White classmates and nearly four times as much as their Black classmates! In college, the study gap narrows somewhat but remains wide: “Asian students spend more time studying - more than 15 hours per week in comparison with White students who spend a little over 10 hours per week, and with Black and Hispanic students who spend even less.”²⁴

Unsurprisingly, given their studiousness, Asian-Americans perform extremely well academically: Asian-Americans make up 12.6% of New York’s population but 72% of students at Stuyvesant High School,²⁵ the New York school requiring the highest Specialized High Schools Admissions Test score. 12% of California high school graduates are Asian, but 35% of students admitted to the University of California are Asian,²⁶ so Asians are three times as likely to be admitted as the average California high school graduate. And “While Asian Americans make up only 4% of the U.S. population, Asian-American students make up a much higher percentage of student bodies in top universities...: 24% at Stanford, 18% at Harvard, and 25% at both Columbia and Cornell. (Those amazing numbers would

likely be even higher if top schools didn't emphasize diversity and prioritize "legacy" applicants.) More Asian Americans over the age of 25 have bachelor's degrees and advanced degrees than any other race or ethnic group."²⁷

But intelligence and hard work get you only so far. We live in a world full of people, so we must equip our children to collaborate and get along well with others. We also live in a world that increasingly prizes initiative and innovation. Learning facts and formulas does not train students for the inventiveness, creative thinking and collaborative group work so prized in business today. Daniel Goleman says social and emotional skills are what make or break corporate leaders:

IQ scores predict extremely well whether we can handle the cognitive challenges that a given position demands. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of studies have shown that IQ predicts which career rungs a person can manage...

But IQ washes out when it comes to predicting who, among a talented pool of candidates *within* an intellectually demanding profession, will become the strongest leader. ...[E]veryone at the top echelons... has already been sifted for intellect and expertise. At those lofty levels a high IQ becomes a "threshold" ability...

At the very highest levels, competence models for leadership typically consist of anywhere from 80 to 100 percent [emotional intelligence]-based abilities. As the head of research at a global executive search firm put it, "CEOs are hired for their intellect and business expertise—and fired for a lack of emotional intelligence."²⁸

Despite the presence of so many Asian-Americans at top universities and in key technical and scientific roles, shockingly few serve in business management roles. Wesley Yang contrasts this tremendous academic success with what Asian-Americans call the "Bamboo Ceiling," an invisible barrier separating technical work and mid-level management from top management that few Asian-Americans ever break through:

Asian-Americans represent roughly 5 percent of the population but only 0.3 percent of corporate officers, less than 1 percent of corporate board members, and around 2 percent of college presidents. There are nine Asian-American CEOs in the Fortune 500. In specific fields where Asian-Americans are heavily represented, there is a similar asymmetry. A third of all software engineers in Silicon Valley are Asian, and yet they make up only 6 percent of board members and about 10 percent of corporate officers of the Bay Area's 25 largest companies. At the National Institutes of Health, where 21.5 percent of tenure-track scientists are Asians, only 4.7 percent of the lab or branch directors are.²⁹

Evidence suggests one reason is that Asian-Americans tend to lack social contacts and "people skills." Asian students study much harder than other kids and average 8.5 hours/week playing on

computers vs. 5.6 hours/week for Whites. Where they don't spend their time is on socializing (5.2 hours/week vs. 7.7 hours/week), sports (3.4 hours/week vs. 5.1 hours/week) and work (2.4 hours/week vs. 5.8 hours/week).³⁰ What do socializing, sports, and work have in common? They all involve interacting with others. So the average Asian-American child gets far less practice interacting with other people than the average White child.

It's so bad that some Asian-Americans actually must study – in college! – how to be friendly:

[W]hen he arrived at Williams [College], Chu slowly became aware of something strange: The white people in the New England wilderness walked around smiling at each other. "When you're in a place like that, everyone is friendly."

He made a point to start smiling more. "It was something that I had to actively practice," he says. "Like, when you have a transaction at a business, you hand over the money—and then you smile." He says that he's made some progress but that there's still plenty of work that remains. "I'm trying to undo eighteen years of a Chinese upbringing. Four years at Williams helps, but only so much." He is conscious of how his father, an IT manager, is treated at work. "He's the best programmer at his office," he says, "but because he doesn't speak English well, he is always passed over."³¹

There's even a school where desperate Asian-American geeks can learn – for \$1,450! – how to attract the ladies. The school teaches how to use tone of voice to convey emotion, how to stand straight, how to walk like an alpha male, how far away to stand from other people, and how to communicate effectively through touch, body language and facial expressions. Most humorously, the school builds confidence by taking students way outside their comfort zone and teaching them, for example, to shout "To crush my enemies, see them driven before me, and to hear the lamentation of their women—in my bed!"³²