
Reviewed by: Neely Stebner, MacEwan University

Amy Chua’s book, “Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother,” is a memoir of her trials and successes as a third-generation Chinese immigrant practicing a Chinese parenting style in a Western culture. In her memoir, she compares Western and Chinese parenting styles. Notably, she expresses her expectations surrounding success and failure as defined by the Chinese parenting model throughout. Further, she discusses the challenges she faced in trying to raise her children in the West with societal pressures to conform. Chua reflects on old memories with her family, recognizes her mistakes, and shares the lessons that she learned from her extreme parenting style. In doing so, she challenges Western cultural values and norms. The book explores varying themes of success throughout as Chua faces newfound opposition from her strong-willed youngest daughter, Lulu.

Chua compares Chinese and Western parenting styles throughout her memoir. She acknowledges that there are many diverse parenting styles within Western parents, as with Chinese parents. Throughout her book, however, she scrutinizes Western parenting for its “lax” rules, its lack of pressure for academic success, and its lack of discipline (p. 20). In contrast, Chinese parents believe that their children can be “the best,” and if they are not, they are con-
sidered unsuccessful as parents (p. 20). Chua consistently returns to these cultural differences in parental values.

For example, Chua highlights the determinants of success as a parent. She suggests that Western parents “only ask their kids to try their best.” In turn, Chinese parents can “order their kids to get straight As” (p. 67). She adds that Western parents are concerned about their children’s self-esteem. Thus, they provide reassurance to support them. Chinese parents, however, believe that their children are strong and resilient. With this, they demand excellence by means of shame and punishment, as needed (p. 68). She submits that Western parents all “walk the same party line about what’s good for children,” but argues that they must question their choices as parents for the success of their counterparts (p. 235)

Chua elaborates, submitting that the Chinese parenting style does not account for failure. With this, she suggests that in pushing for success, the virtuous circle of “confidence, hard work, and more success is generated” (p. 153). Throughout her book, she recounts the hard work that she put into ensuring the success of her children. This hard work includes “psychological warfare.” For example, she recalls a war with her daughter, Sophia, in which she called her “garbage” (p. 66). Chua told this story to Western parents at a dinner party and was ostracized for this exchange (p. 66). This highlights the different cultural values regarding raising children as compared to Chinese and Western parents. In another example, she acknowledges that “Chinese parents can do things that would seem unimaginable - even legally actionable - to Westerners” (p. 66). She explains that all parents want the best for their children, but “the
Chinese just have a totally different idea of how to do that” by means of harsh punishment and psychological warfare (p. 77).

Chua has two daughters: Sophia, the eldest, and Lulu, the youngest. She has a unique relationship with each of her children. To put it succinctly, Lulu suggested Chua call the book “The Perfect Child and the Flesh-Eating Devil or Why Oldest Children are Better” (p. 233). Sophia is portrayed as obedient, hard-working, and successful. Lulu, however, is portrayed as challenging, rebellious, but also successful. Chua recounts many battles with Lulu throughout her memoir. For example, following numerous compliments on Lulu’s musical talent with the violin, Chua describes the “bloodbath practice sessions back home, where Lulu and [Chua] fought like jungle beasts - Tiger versus Boar [which are Chua and Lulu’s Chinese zodiac signs, respectively]” (p. 61). In using the Chinese parenting style, Chua describes a recurring quote to her daughters: “my goal as a parent is to prepare you for the future - not to make you like me” (p. 64). This highlights her persona in interacting with her daughters. While Sophia obeyed her parents, Lulu struggled with her mother.

Chua recounts numerous stories of the successes of her daughters throughout her book. Typically, Sophia was intrinsically motivated to perform well in all aspects of her life. She did so without questioning authority or challenging her mother. However, Lulu tended to fight back. She rejected Chua’s “vision of a valuable life” as she grew resentful of her mother’s demands (p. 176). Lulu wanted to lead the life of a typical Western teenager in which she could spend free time with her friends, rather than the constant work associated with her mother’s idea of “success.” Chua’s mother suggested that Lulu was different; she may need to take a different
approach with Lulu. Chua insisted that she would raise Lulu the “Chinese way,” which did not last (p. 176).

Chua suggests that every family has a symbol, and theirs was the violin (p. 215). She describes it as a symbol of “respect for hierarchy, standards, and expertise;” the same refinement that she expected of her family (p. 215). Notably, she elaborates, suggesting that the violin symbolizes control “over generational decline. Over birth order. Over one’s destiny. Over one’s children” (p. 215). For Lulu, the violin symbolized the oppression she succumbed to due to the Chinese parenting model. Chua decided to forfeit the battle with Lulu over the violin, thus losing the sense of control over success that is typically associated with the Chinese parenting model.

In submitting to Lulu, Chua learned lessons about herself. Chua attempted to involve herself in Lulu’s new activity, tennis, but Lulu asked that she not wreck it for her as she did with violin. Chua learned to become accepting and open-minded (p. 228). She concludes questioning the meaning of life and the power of choice. She declares that she made many good choices as a parent, such as forcing her daughters to play the violin, holding that she refuses to conform to Western social norms.

Chua’s memoir asserts the importance of choice and non-conformity. Through her accounts as a third-generation Chinese immigrant, she describes the challenges as triumphs of resisting conformity. Admirably, Chua challenged Western ideologies, avoiding the patterns typically set out by third generation immigrant parents in which they conform (p. 38). This allows readers to consider different perspectives and challenge their own biases surrounding parenting styles. As she suggests, all parents want the best for their children. There are different ways of achieving this, though.
Although Chua wants the best for her children, she acknowledges that she can be “preachy” (p. 97). I submit that this preachiness was expressed regarding her criticisms of Western parenting. Chua expresses a fresh perspective in challenging cultural norms, but her points can be moralistic and controversial. However, Chua’s ability to admit to her flaws is admirable.

Chua’s book can be studied by multiple disciplinaries due to its controversial nature surrounding her extreme parenting style. I believe it to be a useful resource for adolescent development, sociology, and anthropology scholars. I ponder how adolescent development scholars would interpret her unique parental values surrounding success and punishment. Further, sociologists may use this book to study Chinese immigrant families as a minority group in the West. Lastly, anthropologists may analyze the cross-cultural similarities and differences as a minority.

Additionally, I think that post-secondary students studying issues related to families, social issues, or human behaviour, to name a few, would benefit from this book as a learning resource. I found “Battle Hymn of the Mother Tiger” a funny, controversial, and honest book that made me question my own Western values as it relates to expectations, success, and discipline.