

COMMENTARY

On Better Footing to Understand Parenting and Family Process in Asian American Families

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Amy Chua's now notorious *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (2011) was not a scholarly treatise on the empirically tested merits of Chinese versus European American parenting traditions. The advance publicity for the memoir drew national and international attention to parenting in Chinese and Asian American families. The public reaction to Chua's description of her methods of "Chinese" mothering drew vehement criticism both from mainstream media and from ethnic studies scholars. The former decried the use of strict parenting practices seen as promoting achievement at the costs of child self-esteem and emotional well-being; the latter abhorred the promotion of stereotypical model minority images of Chinese American families. Both camps objected to Chua's claims about the merits of so-called Chinese parenting, based on her family experience rather than rigorous research. Yet, her memoir has achieved the effect of organizing a new and valuable nexus of research centered on this topic. The articles included in the current issue represent a collection of articles that helps us advance our understanding of Chinese and Asian American parenting.

Chua's proclamation of the merits of tiger mothering was met with two strands of outrage. First, there was objection to the stereotypic depiction of Chinese parenting as harsh and relentlessly demanding. Second, there were wrenching testimonials of Asian Americans who suffered personal distress in the wake of being parented in this very manner. Frank Chi (2011) spelled out both objections, decrying Chua's perpetuation of stereotypes and her glorification of shared childhood traumas of Asian Americans. On the face of it, these two grievances are somewhat at odds with each other. Does Chua's characterization reflect a false generalization about cultural differences in parenting? Or are these differences observable at the aggregate level and have they harmed Asian American children collectively? This commentary integrates

the original research in this special issue to deconstruct three claims that Chua makes in the *Battle Hymn*: (a) compared with European American parents, Asian-origin parents favor tiger parenting marked by harsh control and emphasize achievement over emotional and social developmental outcomes, (b) differences in parenting between European American and Asian American parenting are attributable to culturally shaped values, and (c) tiger parenting results in high levels of achievement and well-being.

Cultural/Ethnic Differences in Parenting

The first and most straightforward of Chua's claims asserts a main effect of culture or ethnicity such that, compared with Western mothers, Chinese mothers place greater emphasis on children's achievement rather than social adjustments and positive parent-child relations. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, researchers in this special edition debunked widely held stereotypes of Chinese (American) families and the ways in which parents exert control and discipline. Cheah, Leung, and Zhou (this issue, pp. 30–40) discussed the acute awareness of first generation Chinese immigrant mothers in understanding the nuanced differences in American and Chinese contexts for parenting. Cheah, et al.'s respondents described the respective strengths of each approach and highlighted aspects of Western parenting they admire and appreciate. For example, while mothers stated that they generally prefer strict discipline to enforce children's compliance, they reported valuing the use of praise and encouragement in building confidence and fostering children's social development. Contrary to Chua's claim that Chinese mothers tend to focus exclusively on children's scholarly achievement, a majority of immigrant Chinese expressed dismay at a perceived overemphasis on childhood academic success. Most mothers discussed holistic attention to the children's social, moral, and personality development.

Such findings echo narratives from Way et al.'s (this issue, pp. 61–70) study of Chinese mothers of middle schoolers in Nanjing. While all mothers believed in the importance of academic success, they all placed equal if not greater emphasis in raising children to be socially skilled, happy, healthy, and autonomous. Mothers were acutely aware of the amount of pressure placed on their children and some disapproved of the amount of homework assigned. The mothers spoke about the need for their children to have good communication skills, demonstrate independence, take initiative, and assume leadership. Mothers wished to be intimate friends with their children rather than

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Preparation of this article was supported by grants from the UCLA Asian American Studies Center, the Patrick and Lily Okura Foundation for Asian Pacific American Mental Health, and the Foundation for Psychocultural Research (FPR)—UCLA Center for Culture Brain and Development.

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merely authority figures and strived to give their children the freedom to make decisions about activities, prioritizing children's personal happiness over success. The theme of mother and child as friends also emerged in the narratives from Lam-born, Nguyen, and Bocanegra's (this issue, pp. 50–60) study of Hmong American adolescents' perceptions of their mothers. Most Hmong adolescents described feeling loved and accepted by their mothers, some even naming their mothers as their best friends. Furthermore, contrary to notions of tiger parenting that is primarily hierarchical in nature, most Hmong adolescents described being able to talk candidly about problems with their mothers who were a major source of emotional support.

Emic descriptions of family socialization processes have moved the field forward in understanding parenting in a way that avoids the pitfalls of the comparative, superior-inferior lens. Choi, Kim, Kim and Park (this issue, pp. 19–29) described an indigenous parenting construct, *ga-jung-kyo-yuk* (family socialization and processes) to capture family processes that are specific to Korean American families. Their description of *ga-jung-kyo-yuk* yields a more nuanced and detailed understanding of one variant of Asian American parenting that involves directive control (e.g., emphasis on family hierarchy, demonstration of respect for and the use of appropriate etiquette with parents and the elderly and family obligations) as well as reasoning, warmth, and a close parent-child bond. Indeed, endorsement of *ga-jung-kyo-yuk* was found to be positively associated with both the Western concepts of authoritative and authoritarian styles, suggesting that Korean American parents are likely establishing bicultural parenting in which they retain traditional cultural practices that serve families well in the local context while adopting certain more American-identified practices and values that promote family adaptation.

Perhaps most to the point of the question of whether the moniker of tiger parenting applies to Chinese American parents is Kim, Wang, Orozco-Lapray, Shen, and Murtuza's (this issue, pp. 7–18) novel study leveraging the utility of latent class analysis for empirically laying out a typology of Chinese American parenting. To assess parenting profiles using an expanded model of parenting dimensions that may better reflect the parenting practices of a sample of Chinese Americans, Kim et al. identified four parenting profiles in Chinese American families based on multiple positive (warmth, reasoning, monitoring, and democratic parenting) and negative (hostility, control, shaming, and punitive parenting) parenting dimensions. Contrary to the common perception, tiger parenting (high positive and high negative) was not the most typical parenting profile in Chinese American families, regardless of informant. Supportive parenting profile (high positive and low negative), on the other hand, was the largest group, constituting a half or more of the parents sampled.

The studies collectively suggest that Asian parenting is much more dynamic and multifaceted than suggested by the tiger mother brand. Parents of Asian descent in America and in Asia appear to be constantly negotiating and balancing emphases from both East Asian heritage cultures and migration and globalization influences. Data also suggest that most Asian parents appear to have relinquished certain domains or types of control, seeking to cultivate emotional closeness with their children and foster their independence and autonomy in contexts that increasingly demand individuation and self-expression. While most parents con-

tinue to express a desire for their children to succeed academically, they are often aware and vigilant of the negative emotional consequences that are associated with academic pressure and thus refrain from exacerbating these demands. As such, a concern about their academic or career future is often balanced (or at times substituted) by a concern for personal happiness and well-being.

Attributions of Cultural/Ethnic Differences in Parenting

A second related assertion made by Chua is that differences between Chinese American families and European American families are attributable to something about culture or culturally shaped personal values. Indeed, Chua locates the origin of her reliance on tiger mothering in her Chinese ancestry and associated cultural practices and values. Yet, she also acknowledges that anyone can be a Chinese mother (e.g., a Ghanaian father), and that some ethnically Chinese mothers (usually born in the West) do not engage in Chinese mothering, by choice or otherwise. May-Lee Chai (2011), for one, argued that Chua's perspective is grossly essentialist, ignoring how the extremes in child rearing recounted are related more to class privilege than ethnicity or culture. For example, Chua's investments in her daughters' success are afforded by human and financial capital enabling such driven devotion to child achievement. Thus, Chua's assertion of tiger parenting as a product of static cultural mores fails to take into account the power of broad ecological, economic, and social conditions that shape what is important in the everyday world of families that drives choices and habits in parenting.

To this point, Chua's categorization of Chinese parenting fails to take into account the context of rapid societal changes in China that holds important implications for parenting ideology and practices. Child rearing practices as well as the level of parental support and investment are largely impacted by resources associated with social context and class. Chua's family assets, class privilege, and high income allow her to invest in her daughters' schooling and academic success in ways that most Chinese families cannot. Indeed, there are important differences among families within the Chinese diaspora that can be understood within population-level changes in social and economic societal contexts, and individual-level transitions in the social and economic priorities of families. Greenfield (2009) has articulated how changing sociodemographic ecologies alter cultural values and the resultant socialization and development of children. Globally, developing societies show increased movement from rural residence, informal education at home, subsistence economy, and low-technology environments to urban residence, formal schooling, commerce, and high-technology environments. These societal developments toward urbanization tend to shift cultural values in an individualistic direction and developmental pathways toward more independent social behavior and values. To that end, contemporary Chinese parents have had to contend with an expanded repertoire of desirable characteristics to cultivate in their children.

Indeed, evidence suggests that cultural ideologies and parenting are changing rapidly in mainland China as a reflection of the rapid societal changes in China over the past three decades. From Cheah, et al.'s (this issue) qualitative interviews, Chinese immigrant mothers described that while academic attainment is important, they became more flexible and relaxed when they realized that the

larger academic environment is not as competitive in the United States as it was for them in mainland China. With the realization that there are multiple pathways to success, mothers are in fact more open to having their children choose their future academic paths or develop their own interests even when they are different from the parents' expectations. Furthermore, narratives from Way et al.'s (this issue) study of Nanjing mothers also highlight that, attributable in part to publicly salient negative outcomes associated with academic pressure (e.g., the news of adolescent suicides), mothers are now resisting the high academic pressure in China and seeking to provide a more balanced home life with the goal of raising children to be socially and emotionally well-adjusted. This is in line with cultural studies that suggest that child shyness-sensitivity, which once was an indicator of peer acceptance and maturity in China (Chen, Rubin, & Sun, 1992), may have become increasingly unsuitable for the demands of the changing society. There appears to be a shift to qualities such as independence, assertion, and self-confidence as valued socialization goals in the new social environment (Chen, Cen, Li, & He 2005).

Likewise, the studies by Lamborn, et al. (this issue) and Supple and Cavanaugh (this issue, pp. 41–49) of Hmong American adolescents highlight the historic context in which Hmong immigrant families were situated. Because of the military conflict in Vietnam, first generation Hmong families who migrated to the United States faced a great deal of social and economic hardships as most of them came as refugees either directly from traumatic experiences or after years in refugee camps. The unique contextual demands and challenges placed upon immigrant parents often result in their desire to advance the family so that the children could attain economic and educational mobility, which then leads to the use of stricter discipline and higher levels of parental control. Much earlier, Sue and Okazaki (1990) discussed the concept of *relative functionalism* promoting academic achievement as the single attainable avenue for socioeconomic advancement among Asian American groups in the 1970s and 1980s. When the early post-1965 generations of Asian Americans migrated to the United States, Asian American youth may have been steered toward higher education for upward mobility because other avenues toward advancement were largely blocked to them. However, later generation parents having attained greater social capital may modify such a single avenue plan as the landscape of opportunity and needs for survival and advancement are perceived to change in the larger societal structure. As such, with reduced stress to gain upward social mobility, parents may relinquish some control and grant greater autonomy to their children.

Beyond the larger socioeconomic and political contexts in understanding parenting behaviors, Kim et al.'s (this issue) study highlights the importance of examining parenting behaviors in the context of development across adolescence. In her three-wave longitudinal study spanning 8 years, Kim et al. showed that parenting styles evolve within Chinese American families. The proportion of so-called tiger mothers decreases across waves and virtually disappears when offspring reach young adulthood, when parents relinquish control. While previous studies have shown that autonomy timetables are delayed among Chinese families compared with European Americans (e.g., Stewart, Bond, Deeds, & Chung, 1999), Kim et al.'s findings reaffirm that the expected developmental endpoint of offspring autonomy is shared among Chinese American families.

Developmental Correlates of Parental Control

The third claim asserted in Chua's *Battle Hymn* is that strict Chinese parenting results in high levels of achievement and self-efficacy among children. She argues that the tiger mothers' imposition of relentlessly high expectations for achievement is rooted in the fundamental belief in the ability and resilience of her children. While most would characterize the punitive nature of certain of Chua's methods as detrimental to children, there is a healthy debate about whether the effects of parental control vary according to the larger social and cultural context in which it occurs (Pomerantz, Ng, & Wang, 2008). This body of research examines how parental control dimensions relate to other aspects of family adjustment, as well as child academic and emotional development. In terms of family adjustment, Choi et al. (this issue) found that certain aspects of *ga-jung-kyo-yuk* (Korean parental virtues and enculturation of familistic values) were positively associated with positive parenting dimensions (warmth, acceptance, monitoring and communication) and were not significantly associated with harsh parenting (rejection and negative discipline). This finding harkens other research demonstrating that indigenous East Asian forms of parental behavioral and psychological control are associated with family affective climate among Asian families in ways not observed among European American families (e.g., Chao & Aque, 2009; Fung & Lau, 2012). Supple and Cavanaugh (this issue) also found that parental behavioral control in the form of close monitoring buffered the negative emotional correlates of family cultural conflict among Hmong American adolescents. In these respects, data from the special issue suggest some support for a cultural relativism in the associations between parental control strategies and family relational climate for Asian American adolescents.

Yet, the forms of parental control that appear most ameliorative for youth functioning do not resemble the extreme demanding and shaming tactics described in the *Battle Hymn*. For example, Way, et al. (this issue) and Cheah, et al.'s (this issue) qualitative data from Chinese mothers reveal beliefs that the use of praise and encouragement helps foster child self-confidence and curiosity, which ultimately promote achievement. Furthermore, most mothers interviewed by Cheah, Leung, and Zhou believed that using upward social comparisons creates pressure which is unproductive whereas pointing out children's strengths and offering encouragement bolsters the confidence needed to persist. Way, et al. noted that none of the mothers in her sample reported using shaming to shape their children's character or behavior. In fact, some mothers stressed that criticizing their children would not only be ineffective but also potentially damaging.

Two quantitative studies that link data on parental control to youth outcomes support the wisdom of these maternal beliefs. Supple and Cavanaugh (this issue) found that parental monitoring and support were positively associated with achievement motivation and self-esteem among Hmong adolescents. Moreover, Kim et al. (this issue) found that a supportive parenting profile (high positive and low negative), which was most common, was associated with the best developmental outcomes, followed by easy-going parenting (low on positive and negative), tiger parenting (high on positive and negative), and harsh parenting (low on positive and high on negative). Contrary to what Chua suggested, tiger parenting did not result in better educational attainment;

rather, it was associated with lower GPA and levels of perceived pressure that was as high as that associated with harsh parenting. Furthermore, tiger parenting was associated with lower sense of family obligation and higher levels of depressive symptoms and alienation. Contrary to the notion of an achievement/adjustment paradox in which Asian American youth may demonstrate high levels of educational attainment, but poorer emotional adjustment (Qin, 2008), Kim et al. found achievement and adjustment went hand in hand. Regardless of the parenting profile, academic achievement was always associated with emotional wellness; whereas low academic achievement was associated with low levels of adjustments. These prospective findings provide strong evidence refuting Chua's claims that restriction of autonomy and hostile control promote achievement and adjustment.

Chua acknowledges that all decent parents want to do what is best for their children, but have vastly different ideas about what is best. She argues that tiger parenting is rooted in her faith that her children can rise to challenge. In the face of subpar performance the solution is to 'excoriate, punish, shame' and then pursue supplemental study/practice until performance meets standards. In contrast, Chua criticizes Western parents as being too anxious about their children's self-esteem so that they "constantly try to reassure their children about how good they are notwithstanding a mediocre performance" (p. 52). She argues that, "there's nothing better for building confidence than learning something you thought you couldn't" (p. 62). Instead, she sees Western parents as respecting their children's individuality and providing positive reinforcement as children pursue activities, suited to their talents and interests. As with the rest of Chua's claims, aspects of this mantra hold water empirically. From Hong, Chiu, Dweck, Lin, and Wan's (1999) seminal work, we know that instilling an incremental view of intelligence or ability promotes child persistence and achievement, which can indeed grow a sense of self-efficacy. Likewise, there is support for the notion that Asian and Asian American parents endorse greater mean levels of parental behavioral and psychological control than European American parents (Kelley & Tseng, 1992; Wu et al., 2002). And indeed, there is some data suggesting cultural variation in the associations between parental control and child developmental outcomes (Kornadt, 1991; Olsen et al., 2002). Yet the trouble with the tiger mother portrait is that it takes sound tenets regarding motivation and the importance of cultural context to the extreme resulting in *reductio ad absurdum*, which can have the unfortunate effect of leading people to reject otherwise important principles of cultural relativism and diversity. The excellent data provided in this special issue bring us back on sound footing to better understand Asian and Asian American family process.

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Received January 7, 2013

Revision received January 15, 2013

Accepted January 18, 2013 ■

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