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Tiger Moms: Is Tough Parenting Really the Answer?

It was the "Little White Donkey" incident that pushed many readers over the edge. That's the name of the piano tune that Amy Chua, Yale law professor and self-described "tiger mother," forced her 7-year-old daughter Lulu to practice for hours on end — "right through dinner into the night," with no breaks for water or even the bathroom, until at last Lulu learned to play the piece.

For other readers, it was Chua calling her older daughter Sophia "garbage" after the girl behaved disrespectfully — the same thing Chua had been called as a child by her strict Chinese father. ([See a TIME Q&A with Amy Chua.](#))

And, oh, yes, for some readers it was the card that young Lulu made for her mother's birthday. "I don't want this," Chua announced, adding that she expected to receive a drawing that Lulu had "put some thought and effort into." Throwing the card back at her daughter, she told her, "I deserve better than this. So *I reject this.*"

Even before *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, Chua's proudly politically incorrect account of raising her children "the Chinese way," arrived in bookstores Jan. 11, her parenting methods were the incredulous, indignant talk of every playground, supermarket and coffee shop. A prepublication excerpt in the *Wall Street Journal* (titled "Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior") started the ferocious buzz; the online version has been read more than 1 million times and attracted more than 7,000 comments so far. When Chua appeared Jan. 11 on the *Today* show, the usually sunny host Meredith Vieira could hardly contain her contempt as she read aloud a sample of viewer comments: "She's a monster"; "The way she raised her kids is outrageous"; "Where is the love, the acceptance?"

Chua, a petite 48-year-old who carries off a short-skirted wardrobe that could easily be worn by her daughters (now 15 and 18), gave as good as she got. "To be perfectly honest, I know that a lot of Asian parents are secretly shocked and horrified by many aspects of Western parenting," including "how much time Westerners allow their kids to waste — hours on Facebook and computer games — and in some ways, how poorly they prepare them for the future," she told Vieira with a toss of her long hair. "It's a tough world out there." ([See Nancy Gibbs' take on the challenges of parenting.](#))

Chua's reports from the trenches of authoritarian parenthood are indeed disconcerting, even shocking, in

their candid admission of maternal ruthlessness. Her book is a *Mommie Dearest* for the age of the memoir, when we tell tales on ourselves instead of our relatives. But there's something else behind the intense reaction to *Tiger Mother*, which has shot to the top of best-seller lists even as it's been denounced on the airwaves and the Internet. Though Chua was born and raised in the U.S., her invocation of what she describes as traditional "Chinese parenting" has hit hard at a national sore spot: our fears about losing ground to China and other rising powers and about adequately preparing our children to survive in the global economy. Her stories of never accepting a grade lower than an A, of insisting on hours of math and spelling drills and piano and violin practice each day (weekends and vacations included), of not allowing playdates or sleepovers or television or computer games or even school plays, for goodness' sake, have left many readers outraged but also defensive. The tiger mother's cubs are being raised to rule the world, the book clearly implies, while the offspring of "weak-willed," "indulgent" Westerners are growing up ill equipped to compete in a fierce global marketplace.

One of those permissive American parents is Chua's husband, Jed Rubenfeld (also a professor at Yale Law School). He makes the occasional cameo appearance in *Tiger Mother*, cast as the tenderhearted foil to Chua's merciless taskmaster. When Rubenfeld protested Chua's harangues over "The Little White Donkey," for instance, Chua informed him that his older daughter Sophia could play the piece when she was Lulu's age. Sophia and Lulu are different people, Rubenfeld remonstrated reasonably. "Oh, no, not this," Chua shot back, adopting a mocking tone: "Everyone is special in their special own way. Even losers are special in their own special way."

With a stroke of her razor-sharp pen, Chua has set a whole nation of parents to wondering: Are we the losers she's talking about?

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Americans have ample reason to wonder these days, starting with our distinctly loserish economy. Though experts have declared that the recent recession is now over, economic growth in the third quarter of 2010 was an anemic 2.6%, and many economists say unemployment will continue to hover above 9%. Part of the reason? Jobs outsourced to countries like Brazil, India and China. Our housing values have declined, our retirement and college funds have taken a beating, and we're too concerned with paying our monthly bills to save much, even if we had the will to change our ingrained consumerist ways. Meanwhile, in China, the economy is steaming along at more than 10% annual growth, and the country is running a \$252.4 billion trade surplus with the U.S. China's government is pumping its new wealth right back into the country, building high-speed rail lines and opening new factories.

If our economy suffers by comparison with China's, so does our system of primary and secondary education. That became clear in December, when the latest test results from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) were released. American students were mired in the middle: 17th in reading, 23rd in

science and 31st in math — 17th overall. For the first time since PISA began its rankings in 2000, students in Shanghai took the test — and they blew everyone else away, achieving a decisive first place in all three categories. When asked to account for the results, education experts produced a starkly simple explanation: Chinese students work harder, with more focus, for longer hours than American students do. It's true that students in boomtown Shanghai aren't representative of those in all of China, but when it comes to metrics like test scores, symbolism matters. Speaking on education in December, a sober President Obama noted that the U.S. has arrived at a "Sputnik moment": the humbling realization that another country is pulling ahead in a contest we'd become used to winning. ([See more on the global debate about parenting, identity and family.](#))

Such anxious ruminations seem to haunt much of our national commentary these days, even in the unlikeliest of contexts. When the National Football League postponed a Philadelphia Eagles game in advance of the late-December blizzard on the East Coast, outgoing Pennsylvania governor Ed Rendell was left fuming: "We've become a nation of wusses," he declared on a radio program. "The Chinese are kicking our butt in everything. If this was in China, do you think the Chinese would have called off the game? People would have been marching down to the stadium. They would have walked, and they would have been doing calculus on the way down."

These national identity crises are nothing new. During the mid-20th century, we kept a jealous eye on the Soviets, obsessively monitoring their stores of missiles, their ranks of cosmonauts and even their teams of gymnasts, using these as an index of our own success (not to mention the prospects for our survival). In the 1980s, we fretted that Japan was besting us with its technological wizardry and clever product design — the iPod of the '80s was the Sony Walkman — and its investors' acquisitions of American name-brand companies and prime parcels of real estate.

Now the Soviet Union has dissolved into problem-plagued Russia, and our rivalry with the Japanese has faded as another one has taken its place: last year, China surpassed Japan as the world's second largest economy. The U.S. is still No. 1 — but for how long? We're rapidly reaching the limit on how much money the federal government can borrow — and our single biggest creditor is China. How long, for that matter, can the beleaguered U.S. education system keep pace with a rapidly evolving and increasingly demanding global marketplace? Chinese students already have a longer school year than American pupils — and U.S. kids spend more time sitting in front of the TV than in the classroom. ([See five things the U.S. can learn from China.](#))

The document that finally focused the nation's attention on these crucial questions was not a blue-ribbon study or a hefty government report, but a slender book that sprang from one mother's despair over her daughter's teenage rebellion.

Amy Chua lives in New Haven, Conn., in an imposing mock-Tudor mansion — complete with gargoyles — that was built in the 1920s for a vaudeville impresario. The woman who descends the winding stone stairway and opens the studded wooden door, however, is wearing a sweatshirt, jeans and a friendly smile.

As we take a seat in Chua's living room, the laughter of her older daughter Sophia and her boyfriend (yes, she's allowed to have a boyfriend) floats down from the second floor, and the fluffy white dog that Chua tried, and failed, to discipline stretches comfortably on the rug. (Disclosure: This reporter also lives in New Haven and has heard Chua regale friends with parenting stories.) ([Comment on this story.](#))

The first thing Chua wants you to know is that she is not a monster. "Everything I do as a mother builds on a foundation of love and compassion," she says. Love and compassion, plus punishingly high expectations: this is how Chua herself was raised. Though her parents are ethnically Chinese, they lived for many years in the Philippines and immigrated to America two years before Chua was born. Chua and her three younger sisters were required to speak Chinese at home; for each word of English they uttered, they received a whack with a pair of chopsticks. On the girls' report cards, only A's were acceptable. When Chua took her father to an awards assembly at which she received second prize, he was furious. "Never, ever disgrace me like that again," he told her.

[See TIME's special report on 11 education activists for 2011.](#)

[See the top 10 TV moms June Cleaver would hate.](#)

Some react to an exceedingly strict household by becoming permissive parents, but not Chua. When she had children of her own, she resolved to raise them the same way. "I see my upbringing as a great success story," she says. "By disciplining me, my parents inculcated self-discipline. And by restricting my choices as a child, they gave me so many choices in my life as an adult. Because of what they did then, I get to do the work I love now." Chua's path to her profession was not a straight one — she tried out the premed track and a major in economics before settling on law school — but it was made possible, she says, by the work ethic her parents instilled.

All the same, Chua recognizes that her parents' attitudes were shaped by experiences very different from her own. Her mother and father endured severe hardship under the Japanese occupation of the Philippines; later they had to make their way in a new country and a new language. For them, security and stability were paramount. "They didn't think about children's happiness," Chua says. "They thought about preparing us for the future." But Chua says her children's happiness is her primary goal; her intense focus on achievement is simply, she says, "the vehicle" to help them find, as she has, genuine fulfillment in a life's work. ([See the latest figures on American motherhood.](#))

The second thing Chua wants you to know is that the hard-core parenting she set out to do didn't work — not completely, anyway. "When my children were young, I was very cocky," Chua acknowledges. "I thought I could maintain total control. And in fact my first child, Sophia, was very compliant." Then came Lulu.

From the beginning, Chua's second daughter was nothing like her obedient sister. As a fetus, she kicked — hard. As an infant, she screamed for hours every night. And as a budding teenager she refused to get with her mother's academic and extracurricular program. In particular, the two fought epic battles over violin

practice: " 'all-out nuclear warfare' doesn't quite capture it," Chua writes. Finally, after a screaming, glass-smashing, very public showdown, the tiger mother admitted defeat: "Lulu," she said, "you win. It's over. We're giving up the violin." Not long after, Chua typed the first words of her memoir — not as an exercise in maternal bravado but as an earnest attempt to understand her daughters, her parents and herself.

That was a year and a half ago. Today, Chua has worked out some surprising compromises with her children. Sophia can go out on dates and must practice the piano for an hour and a half each day instead of as many as six hours. Lulu is allowed to pursue her passion for tennis. (Her mother's daughter, she's become quite good at the sport, making the high school varsity team — "the only junior high school kid to do so," as Chua can't help pointing out.) And Chua says she doesn't want to script her children's futures. "I really don't have any particular career path in mind for Sophia and Lulu, as long as they feel passionate about it and give it their best." As her girls prepare to launch themselves into their own lives — Sophia goes off to college next fall — Chua says she wouldn't change much about the way she raised them. Perhaps more surprising, her daughters say they intend to be strict parents one day too — though they plan to permit more time with friends, even the occasional sleepover. ([See Bill Powell's take on his family's tiger-mom experience.](#))

Most surprising of all to Chua's detractors may be the fact that many elements of her approach are supported by research in psychology and cognitive science. Take, for example, her assertion that American parents go too far in insulating their children from discomfort and distress. Chinese parents, by contrast, she writes, "assume strength, not fragility, and as a result they behave very differently." In the 2008 book *A Nation of Wimps*, author Hara Estroff Marano, editor-at-large of *Psychology Today* magazine, marshals evidence that shows Chua is correct. "Research demonstrates that children who are protected from grappling with difficult tasks don't develop what psychologists call 'mastery experiences,'" Marano explains. "Kids who have this well-earned sense of mastery are more optimistic and decisive; they've learned that they're capable of overcoming adversity and achieving goals." Children who have never had to test their abilities, says Marano, grow into "emotionally brittle" young adults who are more vulnerable to anxiety and depression.

Another parenting practice with which Chua takes issue is Americans' habit, as she puts it, of "slathering praise on their kids for the lowest of tasks — drawing a squiggle or waving a stick." Westerners often laud their children as "talented" or "gifted," she says, while Asian parents highlight the importance of hard work. And in fact, research performed by Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck has found that the way parents offer approval affects the way children perform, even the way they feel about themselves. ([Comment on this story.](#))

Dweck has conducted studies with hundreds of students, mostly early adolescents, in which experimenters gave the subjects a set of difficult problems from an IQ test. Afterward, some of the young people were praised for their ability: "You must be smart at this." Others were praised for their effort: "You must have worked really hard." The kids who were complimented on their intelligence were much more likely to turn down the opportunity to do a challenging new task that they could learn from. "They didn't want to do

anything that could expose their deficiencies and call into question their talent," Dweck says. Ninety percent of the kids who were praised for their hard work, however, were eager to take on the demanding new exercise.

[See "The Only Child: Debunking the Myths."](#)

[See a study showing that the children of lesbians may do better than their peers.](#)

One more way in which the tiger mother's approach differs from that of her Western counterparts: her willingness to drill, baby, drill. When Sophia came in second on a multiplication speed test at school, Chua made her do 20 practice tests every night for a week, clocking her with a stopwatch. "Tenacious practice, practice, practice is crucial for excellence; rote repetition is underrated in America," she writes. In this, Chua is right, says Daniel Willingham, a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia. "It's virtually impossible to become proficient at a mental task without extensive practice," he notes.

What's more, Willingham says, "if you repeat the same task again and again, it will eventually become automatic. Your brain will literally change so that you can complete the task without thinking about it." Once this happens, the brain has made mental space for higher-order operations: for interpreting literary works, say, and not simply decoding their words; for exploring the emotional content of a piece of music, and not just playing the notes. Brain scans of experimental subjects who are asked to execute a sequence of movements, for example, show that as the sequence is repeated, the parts of the brain associated with motor skills become less active, allowing brain activity to shift to the areas associated with higher-level thinking and reflection. ([See "China Beats Out Finland for Top Marks in Education."](#))

Cognitive neuroscience, in other words, confirms the wisdom of what the tiger mother knew all along. "What Chinese parents understand," says Chua, "is that nothing is fun until you're good at it." That may be an overstatement — but if being good at reading or math or music permits a greater degree of engagement and expressiveness, that would seem to be a very desirable thing.

All that said, however, psychologists universally decry the use of threats and name calling — verbal weapons frequently deployed by Chua — as harmful to children's individual development and to the parent-child relationship. So just what does she have to say about the notorious episodes recounted in her book?

About "The Little White Donkey": she was perhaps too severe in enforcing long hours of practice, Chua says now. Still, she says, it was important for Sophia and Lulu to learn what they were capable of. "It might sound harsh, but kids really shouldn't be able to take the easy way out," she explains. "If a child has the experience, even once, of successfully doing something she didn't think she could do, that lesson will stick with her for the rest of her life." Recently, Chua says, Lulu told her that during a math test at school that day she had looked at a question and drawn a blank. "Lulu said, 'Then I heard your annoying voice in my head, saying, 'Keep thinking! I know you can do this' — and the answer just came to me!' " ([See pictures of a Mandarin school in Minneapolis.](#))

On calling Sophia "garbage": "There are some things I did that I regret and wish I could change, and that's one of them," Chua says. But, she notes, her father used similar language with her, "and I knew it was because he thought well of me and was sure I could do better." Chua's parents are now in their 70s, and she says she feels nothing but love and respect for them: "We're a very tight family, all three generations of us, and I think that's because I was shown a firm hand and my kids were shown a firm hand."

And Lulu's birthday card? Chua stands by that one. "My girls know the difference between working hard on something and dashing something off," she says firmly. "They know that I treasure the drawings and poems they put effort into." ([Comment on this story.](#))

More than anything, it's Chua's maternal confidence — her striking lack of ambivalence about her choices as a parent — that has inspired both ire and awe among the many who have read her words. Since her book's publication, she says, e-mail messages have poured in from around the globe, some of them angry and even threatening but many of them wistful or grateful. "A lot of people have written to say that they wished their parents had pushed them when they were younger, that they think they could have done more with their lives," Chua recounts. "Other people have said that after reading my book they finally understand their parents and why they did what they did. One man wrote that he sent his mother flowers and a note of thanks, and she called him up, weeping."

[See "Parenting: The Case for Keeping Out."](#)

[See the long-term effects of spanking.](#)

So should we all be following Chua's example? She wrote a memoir, not a manual. She does make it clear, however, that Chinese mothers don't have to be Chinese: "I know some Korean, Indian, Jamaican, Irish and Ghanaian parents who qualify too," she writes. The tiger-mother approach isn't an ethnicity but a philosophy: expect the best from your children, and don't settle for anything less.

Among those who are decidedly not following Chua's lead are many parents and educators in China. For educated urban Chinese parents, the trend is away from the strict traditional model and toward a more relaxed American style. Chinese authorities, meanwhile, are increasingly dissatisfied with the country's public education system, which has long been based on rote learning and memorization. They are looking to the West for inspiration — not least because they know they must produce more creative and innovative graduates to power the high-end economy they want to develop. The lesson here: depending on where you stand, there may always be an approach to child rearing that looks more appealing than the one you've got. ([See TIME's special report on what makes a school great.](#))

Marano doesn't see us whistling Chua's battle hymn just yet. "Kids can grow and thrive under a wide variety of parenting styles," she says. "But American parenting, at its best, combines ambitious expectations and a loving environment with a respect for each child's individual differences and a flexibility in parental roles

and behavior. You can set high standards in your household and help your children meet them without resorting to the extreme measures Chua writes about." Western parents have their own highly effective strategies for promoting learning, such as free play — something Chua never mentions. On a national scale, the U.S. economy may be taking a hit, but it has far from collapsed. American secondary education may be in crisis, but its higher education is the envy of the world — especially China. We have not stopped inventing and innovating, in Silicon Valley or in Detroit.

There's no doubt that Chua's methods are extreme (though her stories, she hints, may have been slightly exaggerated for effect). But her account, arriving just after those unnervingly high test scores from Shanghai, has created a rare opportunity. Sometimes it takes a dramatic intervention to get our attention. After the 1957 launch of Sputnik, America did rise to the Soviets' challenge: less than a year later, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act, which invested billions of dollars in the U.S. education system. Within five years, John Glenn was orbiting Earth, and less than a decade after that, we put a man on the moon.

Clare Boothe Luce, the American playwright, Congresswoman and ambassador, called the beeps emitted by Sputnik as it sailed through space "an intercontinental outer-space raspberry," a jeer at the notion that America had some "gilt-edged guarantee of national superiority." Think of *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* as a well-timed taunt aimed at our own complacent sense of superiority, our belief that America will always come out on top. That won't be the case unless we make it so. We can get caught up in the provocative details of Chua's book (did she really threaten to burn her daughter's stuffed animals?), or we can use her larger point as an impetus to push ourselves forward, the way our countrymen often have in the past. ([Read about parent-student day at a Shanghai school.](#))

For though Chua hails the virtues of "the Chinese way," the story she tells is quintessentially American. It's the tale of an immigrant striver, determined to make a better life for himself and his family in a nation where such dreams are still possible. "I remember my father working every night until 3 in the morning; I remember him wearing the same pair of shoes for eight years," Chua says. "Knowing the sacrifices he and my mother made for us made me want to uphold the family name, to make my parents proud." ([Comment on this story.](#))


Hard work, persistence, no patience for excuses: whether Chinese or American, that sounds like a prescription for success with which it's very difficult to argue.

Paul's latest book is *Origins: How the Nine Months Before Birth Shape the Rest of Our Lives.*

The original version of this story, published in the Jan. 31, 2011, issue of TIME, incorrectly stated that President Obama's "Sputnik moment" education speech in December was given "in response" to international test results showing American students faring much worse than their Chinese peers.

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