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Catching a Tiger by its Tail:
A Deconstruction of the Tiger Mother Stereotype

It was not until 2011, when Amy Chua's memoir *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* was published, that the term "tiger mother" became widely recognized. This expression has since been used to describe a distinctive style of parenting that is frequently questioned for its harsh, authoritative methods and practices. Juang affirms this idea, stating: "*Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* drew a tremendous amount of media attention that thrust Asian American parents into the limelight, their parenting debated and contested throughout the media and on social network sites" (1). It is no surprise that Chua's memoir generated significant dispute over this particular method of raising children, called tiger parenting and stereotypically utilized by Asian American families, based on her recollections and descriptions of her two daughters' upbringing under her watchful eye.

Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother describes in great detail Chua's endeavors to drive Sophia and Lulu to succeed academically and musically. Interestingly enough, "to date, there has not been [much of] a concerted effort by scholars of parenting in Asian American families to address the important questions raised in Chua's book and the heated debates on the existence and impact of tiger parenting" (Juang 1). This research paper aims to look beyond the myth of the tiger mother and dispel the stereotypical notions of aggressive, controlling parenting within Asian American families. Specifically this will be accomplished by defining what a tiger mother is and subsequently providing evidence that overturns the stereotype of the tiger mother, such as

the fact that other factors also aid in assuring a child's academic success besides their upbringing by their parents and that children brought up according to tiger parenting often exhibit developmental issues emotionally and socially.

TIGER MOTHER: DEFINITION

Before proving how and why the tiger mother stereotype is not a model parenting method as many people believe, it is important to provide a concrete definition of what exactly a "tiger mother" is and what characteristics she embodies. This paper will uphold the definition of the tiger mother that is presented and explained in Amy Chua's memoir *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, as this work provided the base from which the stereotype became popularized.

According to Chua, tiger mothers are generally of Asian American descent and are harsh, controlling, and hold their children to extremely high standards in order to produce impressive, extraordinary results. Juang expands upon this idea, holding that tiger mothers "are highly controlling and authoritarian, denying their children free time, play dates, and extracurricular activities in order to drive them to high levels of success at any cost, in sharp contrast to the softer and more forgiving Western parenting style" (2). Chua's children, Sophia and Lulu, are not allowed to: "attend a sleepover, have a play date, 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 #1 student in every subject except gym and drama, play any instrument other than the piano or violin, [and] not play the piano or violin" (Chua 3-4). Furthermore, in accordance with these ideas, Chua affirms that "the Chinese mother believes that (1) schoolwork always comes first; (2) an A-minus is a bad grade; (3) your children must be two years ahead of their classmates in math; (4) you must never compliment your children in public; (5) if your child ever agrees with a teacher or coach, you must always take the

side of the teacher or coach; (6) the only activities your children should be permitted to do are those in which they can eventually win a medal; and (7) that medal must be gold” (Chua 5). It is evident that for tiger mothers, educational superiority and distinguished musical success playing violin or piano are of utmost importance – perhaps even more so than the child’s social and emotional well-being. This method of child rearing may sound extreme and unfeasible, but Asian American women like Amy Chua who exhibit these traits truly do believe that they are setting up their kids for high levels of achievement in all areas of life.

Tiger mothers are so dedicated to achieving superior results from their children that they are ready and willing to employ any method necessary to achieve perfection. Chua demonstrates this unfaltering commitment to Sophia and Lulu’s success in her memoir. Corrigan asserts that Chua made “sure they practiced at least three hours a day even on vacations, when she would call ahead to arrange access to pianos for Sophia in hotel lobby bars and basement storage rooms.” In one particularly striking instance described in *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, Chua is so determined to make her daughter Lulu succeed in playing a particular violin piece, entitled “The Little White Donkey,” that she degrades and threatens her excessively. Chua recounts that she “hauled Lulu’s dollhouse to the car and told her I’d donate it to the Salvation Army piece by piece if she didn’t have ‘The Little White Donkey’ perfect by the next day. [...] I threatened her with no lunch, no dinner, no Christmas or Hanukkah presents, no birthday parties for two, three, four years. [...] I told her to stop being lazy, cowardly, self-indulgent, and pathetic” (61). In the end, Lulu succeeded, but only after not being allowed to get up from practicing. She worked through dinner and was not allowed to get up for water or to go to the bathroom. This is just one instance in Chua’s memoir that demonstrates how controlling,

demanding, harsh, and tough tiger mothers are in order to achieve the results and success that they desire from their children.

Readers also see a mom exhibiting tiger mother characteristics in the graphic novel entitled *The Shadow Hero*. The protagonist, Hank, does not have big dreams for his future – he simply intends to take over and manage the family grocery store after his father retires. Hank’s mother, however, has different ideas. She is fascinated with super heroes, and decides that Hank’s future needs to be more glamorous and that he should become the first Asian American superhero. Cheang affirms, “his mother is a typical (almost stereotypical) tiger mom who pushes her lavish dreams of having a superhero son onto Hank.” She sews him a costume, creates a new super hero name for him, and tries every method possible to evoke super hero powers from him. In fact, “Hank Chu’s mom is the main reason that he became a superhero. No, really” (Cheang). In the panels featured below, Hank’s mother is depicted giving him his first costume which displays his new name, “Golden Man of Bravery,” proudly and prominently sewn into the fabric (Yang 38).



It is evident that the tiger mother stereotype is wide reaching across a variety of mediums in popular culture today, as seen in Amy Chua's memoir *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* as well as Gene Luen Yang's graphic novel *The Shadow Hero*. However, after conducting further research centering on the topic of the tiger mother and analyzing the data that was gathered, it is clear that many of the ideas surrounding the tiger mother stereotype are misconceptions. In many ways, the tiger mother stereotype is just that – a stereotype – and often Asian American children are successful due to a combination of factors and do not thrive in all areas of their lives, as is typically believed of kids brought up according to the tiger mother parenting model.

OVERTURNING THE STEREOTYPE

It is undisputed that children that are raised by moms who exhibit tiger mother characteristics perform at a high level of educational excellence and surpass many of their peers intellectually and/or musically. However, contrary to mainstream belief, the academic and musical success of Asian American children brought up by tiger mothers is not solely due to their upbringing. This disproves the commonly held stereotype surrounding tiger mothers. According to a study by Amy Hsin and Yu Xie, which followed more than 5,200 Asian American and white students from two separate, large datasets as they progressed from kindergarten into high school, the social and cultural environment in which Asian American children were raised also greatly impacted their ability to perform at a higher level educationally and intellectually. Hsin and Xie found that “work ethic [...] accounted for almost all of the grade gap between Asian American and white students. And that was driven by two factors, both of which have more to do with social and cultural factors rather than racial ones” (Park). Asian American students were given access to social support systems and took advantage of these opportunities that were offered to them, thus translating their efforts into success. Park

asserts that in the communities in which many Asian American children who participated in the study were raised, “families are surrounded by ways to enhance education – from word-of-mouth advice about the best school districts to resources [...] or after-school classes. The tiger mom argument neglects these social resources and forces that sustain and reinforce work ethic.”

Therefore, this study performed by Hsin and Xie turns the tiger mother stereotype on its head; it is not just because of strict, controlling mothers that Asian American children have been able to succeed at such a high level in the classroom. Rather, the social and cultural atmosphere in the communities in which they were raised allowed Asian American children to take advantage of a myriad of diverse social support systems that further enabled them to perform at a superior level in their academics. Tiger mothers should not be given sole credit for the educational and musical prowess of their children, clearly.

An additional case for usurping the traditional tiger mother stereotype derives from the fact that many children raised according to this model are impacted negatively with regard to their social and emotional development. Tiger parenting “leads to high-achieving and resilient children,” but at what price is this educational and/or musical success achieved? Juang affirms, “aspects of tiger parenting (overly high academic expectations and pressure to succeed, lack of open parent-child communication, overly strict rules) may result in Asian American adolescents who do well in school but who are not well adjusted socially and emotionally.” (4) In the study mentioned above that was conducted by Hsin and Xie, Asian American students tended to develop more self-image problems and were more likely to have conflicted relationships with their parents than the Caucasian student participants (Park). Negative relationships with their parents and self-image problems are not the only consequences resulting from tiger parenting for Asian American children, however.

Depression and low self-esteem have also been found to be direct results from children being raised according to the harsh, controlling methods employed by tiger mothers. Qing Zhou, an assistant professor of psychology at UC Berkeley, has collected findings that coincide with these ideas from her research, affirming that children raised by authoritative parents, such as those who utilize tiger parenting, “are showing maladaptive outcomes, such as depression, anxiety, and poor social skills” (Anwar). This is due largely to the fact that tiger parents set “enormously high and unreasonable expectations” for their children, resulting in negative cognitive effects from these overly demanding goals (Anwar). Clearly, the tiger mother stereotype of producing children who are successful in all aspects of their lives is a falsehood. It has been shown through numerous research studies that not only does tiger parenting result in emotional and social development issues for children, but also that Asian American kids’ academic success is not a direct result of solely a tiger mother’s controlling, strict rules and actions, thus debunking the tiger mother stereotype.

CONCLUSION

The research presented in this paper serves to look beyond the myth of the tiger mother and dispel the stereotypical notions of aggressive, controlling parenting within Asian American families. After setting out a specific definition of what a tiger mother is and what traits she embodies with regard to child raising, the stereotype of the tiger mother was overturned and shown to be a myth by analyzing research on the topic of tiger parenting. While it was discovered that in many instances, tiger parenting leads Asian-American children to perform better academically and musically than those who are not raised by tiger mothers, this success could not be solely attributed to being raised according to this parenting model but was also the result of the social and cultural environment that the child was brought up in. Furthermore, the

success of tiger mothers' children comes at a price, and the children do not achieve superior success in all aspects of their lives. The majority of children brought up according to this parenting model have social and psychological issues, demonstrating that developmental issues are often present in these kids.

Research on the implications of tiger parenting for children is just in its primary phases, since the stereotype of the tiger mother just recently emerged in 2011 after the publication of Amy Chua's memoir *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. It will be interesting to see what conclusions further analysis and research yield, but it is predictable that the tiger mother stereotype will continue to be overturned and proven a myth that is the figment of popular culture's imagination.

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