

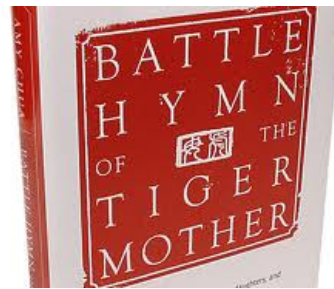
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The Misplaced Aims of the Tiger Mother

*We can learn a great deal by reading *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, but we cannot read the book without being both impressed and grieved.*

Tuesday, March 29, 2011

Are Chinese mothers superior? Amy Chua clearly believes so, and her argument has just as clearly caught the attention of the American public. Chua's book, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, has made *The New York Times* bestseller list for the past ten weeks. This mom struck a raw nerve.



Chua, the John M. Duff Professor of Law at Yale Law School, fired her first shot with a column published in the *Wall Street Journal* entitled, “Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior.” It was a shot heard around the world — especially by other moms. The uproar followed immediately — and no wonder. Chua accused Western mothers of being lax and undemanding, and therefore producing underachieving children.

She began her column with these incendiary lines: “A lot of people wonder how Chinese parents raise such stereotypically successful kids. They wonder what these parents do to produce so many math whizzes and music prodigies, what it’s like inside the family, and whether they could do it too. Well, I can tell them, because I’ve done it.”

Yes, she has done it, and her daughters Sophia and Louisa were pushed into remarkable levels of personal achievement. They have been soloists on piano and violin with international orchestras, performed at Carnegie Hall, and boasted incredible academic achievements. They are beautiful and poised young women, and Chua and her husband, Jed Rubenfeld, are justifiably proud.

In her book, Chua begins by describing just how radical the Tiger Mother approach really is. With language calculated to reach the nerves of reading mothers, Chua announced that her daughters had never been on a sleepover, acted in a school play, gone on a playdate, watched television, played a video game, or received any grade lower than an A. They had also never been allowed to be anything less than the top student in anything other than gym and drama. And she means every word of this. What she presents is nothing less than a monomaniacal approach to mothering that is intended to produce superior progeny — and that means superior in terms of academic and artistic achievement.

Amy Chua is a graduate of Harvard College and the Harvard Law School, where she was, of course, an editor of the *Harvard Law Review*. She is married to another professor at the Yale Law School, who is a graduate of Princeton University and the Harvard Law School, and who also studied drama at the Julliard School in New York City. The experience in drama, by the way, did not impress Amy Chua’s parents, who thought it lacking in seriousness. Amy Chua’s father and mother were immigrants to the United States, and her father is an internationally recognized scientist and professor at the University of California, Berkeley. There is no secret about the kind of achievement Amy Chua is looking for in her daughters.

She minces no words in contrasting the Chinese style of mothering with the Western style, which she sees as hopelessly indulgent and disastrously unlikely to produce offspring of which Asian parents would be proud.

She writes:

The fact is that Chinese parents can do things that would seem unimaginable—even legally actionable—to Westerners. Chinese mothers can say to their daughters, “Hey fatty—lose some weight.” By contrast, Western parents have to tiptoe around the issue, talking in terms of “health” and never ever mentioning the f-word, and their kids still end up in therapy for eating disorders and negative self-image. (I also once heard a Western father toast his adult daughter by calling her “beautiful and incredibly competent.” She later told me that made her feel like garbage.)

Chinese parents can order their kids to get straight As. Western parents can only ask their kids to try their best. Chinese parents can say, “You’re lazy. All your classmates are getting ahead of you.” By contrast, Western parents have to struggle with their own conflicted feelings about achievement, and try to persuade themselves that they’re not disappointed about how their kids turned out.

There is a lot more to the *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. The book offers important insights into cultural differences and how these differences work their way out in parenting styles. She also writes honestly, if rather too candidly, about her struggles with her younger daughter. The book is a celebration of Amy Chua and her daughters. The rest of the world is only a stage for their achievements — and the achievements are truly impressive.

There are some real insights to be found in the book. Chua’s observations about Western styles of parenting hit home, especially when she points to the fact that many American parents only want their children to be happy — without any clear concern for what should make for happiness. Western parents care too much about the opinions of their children and often appear to be more concerned with gaining the approval of their children rather than their children earning the approval of their parents. She is certainly right about the parenting myths spawned by American entertainment and popular culture.

Yes, the children of American parents are often lazy and lacking in commitment. Amy Chua is right to argue that no one enjoys anything until sufficient practice has produced proficiency. As for the opinions of offspring, Chua reports, “My parents didn’t give me any choices, and never asked for my opinion on anything.” She seems to be making up for that now.

Most Western parents might see a strain of cruelty in Amy Chua’s mothering. She says awful things to her daughters and once threw a hand-made birthday card back to a daughter because it was not good enough. The account is riveting and stomach-churning.

Is she right? Is the Tiger Mother mode of parenting really superior? What should Christian parents think of this?

In one sense, statistics tell the story — or part of the story. There can be no question that Asian styles of parenting often produce remarkable high achievement in their children. Just look to the disproportionately high numbers of Asian students at the top universities and in the top ranks of their professions.

There can also be no doubt that Christians should share many of Amy Chua’s concerns about the dominant style of American parenting. The Bible makes parental authority a matter of clear concern and priority, and the discipline and nurture of children are clear biblical mandates to parents. Christian parents reading *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* will share many of Amy Chua’s complaints and concerns.

Nevertheless, there is a huge problem with her approach. The problem is not that it does not work, if the goal is to produce remarkable children who achieve the highest levels of worldly success. The problem is her aims.

All that seems to matter to Amy Chua is that her daughters gain entry into one of the world’s top universities, make a name for themselves in their chosen (very serious) profession, and marry someone of equal achievement. Now, there must be more to her concern, but, if so, these larger concerns do not appear in her book. Nor does it appear that other concerns can have much of a place in the lives of her daughters. There is no spiritual or moral concern expressed in the book.

Her concern with achievement is stunningly one-dimensional. Amy Chua claims that Chinese parents have “higher dreams for their children.” But those dreams are academic, professional, and artistic. There is little concern for anything that might happen outside of the Ivy League or Carnegie Hall.

Lawrence Summers, who was one of the youngest tenured faculty in the history of Harvard University, and was later president of the university and Secretary of the Treasury, responded to Amy Chua's arguments with the admonition that the highest achievers at the university were often not the highest achievers in later life. Achievement is just not so predictable. Furthermore, high achievement in terms of academic and professional status is no promise of happiness or fulfillment.

The Christian response reaches to even deeper levels of concern. A life lived in service to Christ on the mission field would be considered an embarrassment. The heroic service of a mother in the home is displaced by professional status. Parenting for deployment in the Kingdom of Christ is not even on the screen and would not qualify as a serious concern. The Christian worldview honors achievement and the stewardship of gifts, but not at the expense of faithfulness to Christ. Achievement, as the world sees it, may at times be a stumbling block to Christian faithfulness.

We can learn a great deal by reading *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, but we cannot read the book without being both impressed and grieved. The problem is not the seriousness with which Amy Chua takes her mothering task, but with her goals. There is much opportunity for reflection and thought in reading her book. There is a great deal to learn by observing the misplaced aims of the Tiger Mother.

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler.

Amy Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2011).

Amy Chua, "[Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior](#)," *The Wall Street Journal*, Saturday, January 8, 2011.

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