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BATTLE HYMN OF THE TIGER MOTHER: DIRECT CONFLICT BETWEEN CHINESE AND WESTERN STYLES OF EDUCTION

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*(*Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother *(Penguin, 2011), by Amy Chua, a law professor at Yale, detailed what the author called a "Chinese way" of approaching child rearing—basically putting pressure on children to achieve success in school, to strive to achieve their full potential, and to avoid nonsensical distractions, all geared toward assuring the children success in life. The author showed little patience for coddling children or catering to their whims: it was the parents' duty to raise the children properly, and this did not always involve doing what the children wanted done. Some home schooling mothers of my acquaintance had read at least the newspaper article referred to in the document below, and approved of the general spirit of the thing, if not its apparent excessive harshness. Others of their acquaintance approved of it hook, line, and sinker. On the other hand, many other parents—including Chinese parents, whether in China or abroad—were appalled. And, I've heard, Amy Chua's own mother even said that this was not how Amy herself was raised. The document below is a review of the book by a source inside China. The author is taken with the fact that after so many decades in which the American way of education was taken as the world norm, it was interesting to see that now the possible superiority of the Chinese approach was being bruited. The author does accept that much of what Miss Chua describes as the Chinese way is accurate, but also argues that in China itself this pressure on children to do well in school and at other activities their parents approve of can have bad psychological effects. He seems to conclude that it is more important that children—and human beings in general—be happy than that they be successful.)*

On 8 January 2011 the *Wall Street Journal* published excerpts from *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* under the title "Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior." It was reprinted in a great number of American media outlets, stirring up a large-scale discussion. A Chinese translation of that book came out very quickly.

The first reason that this book so quickly became a matter of controversy in both China and the west has to do with the author, Amy Chua (蔡美兒, Cai Meier), and her background and status. She is 48 years old this year. Her ancestors come from Fujian province in China. Her father is a graduate of MIT and is now a chair professor at the University of California at Berkeley. Amy Chua graduated from Harvard in 1984 with highest honors and from the Harvard Law

School in 1987 with honors. She was a managing editor of the *Harvard Law Review* and is today a renowned scholar in the American legal field. Her husband, Jed Rubenfeld, is an American Jew and, like her, a professor at the Yale Law School.

The couple have two daughters. The elder, Sophia, is 18, and the younger, Lulu, 14. They have both won numerous prizes in various musical competitions. In her Introduction to her book, Amy Chua says, "This is the story of one mother, two daughters, and two dogs. It's also about Mozart and Mendelssohn, a piano and a violin, and how we came to play in Carnegie Hall. Or, I should say, it is how a Chinese-style parent achieves better results in educating her children than a western-style parent." At the same time, the author admits, it is the story of a "fierce conflict between different cultures."

Amy Chua: Chinese-Style Educational Concepts Win All-Around Victory

The cover of Amy Chua's book clearly emphasizes two terms: "Chinese" and "Western." But to talk of China and the West naturally requires some definitions. In her book Amy Chua says she is using the term "Chinese mother" in "a very broad sense." Her intention is to distinguish the "Chinese mother" and a "Western mother" as concepts. In terms of how education is conducted in the home, the "Chinese mother" can be similar to certain Korean, Indian, Jamaican, Irish, or Ghanaian parents. And many mothers of Chinese heritage, especially those born in the west, cannot be considered "Chinese mothers." There are also all sorts and kinds of "western parents" and they can't all be lumped together. Therefore, Amy Chua's two concepts, strictly speaking, should be called "Chinese-style mother" and "western-style parents" in order better to represent her meaning. This is, precisely, a conflict between eastern and western theories of education. The author's position is that in this conflict the Chinese theories win an all-around victory. It can be said that over the past century American theories of education have been widely communicated and have become relatively well understood; so if anyone concludes Chinese methods are better it is something very startling, a huge stone thrown into a placid lake.

The book discusses many "Chinese-style" educational principles. It seems a Chinese-style mother lays down a great number of rules for her children, similar to the various "forbiddens" that Chinese often talk about. So: it is forbidden not to come home at night; it is forbidden to have boy friends; it is forbidden to go to school dances; it's forbidden to complain about not being allowed to go to school dances; it's forbidden to watch TV or to play video games; it's forbidden to select your own extracurricular activities; it's forbidden to get a grade lower than A; in classes other than physical education or drama it is forbidden to rank lower than first; it's forbidden to study any musical instrument other

than piano or violin. The author thinks that high standards such as these and strict demands are the only way to raise successful daughters. No doubt this is a successful model of “Chinese-style” educational principles.

The source of the author’s educational concepts and principles derives from a notion that Chinese-style home education is superior in very way to western-style home education. There are three differences between the two: First, Western parents pay a great deal of attention to the child’s self-esteem, that is to say, to the child’s psychology. The Chinese-style parent is not like that. He pays more attention to the child’s studies, and believes that the child’s success depends on tight supervision. Second, the Chinese-style parent demands absolute obedience from his children and takes pride in their obedience. But the western-style parent believes that children are children and parents are parents. The parent cannot do everything for the child; the child must take some responsibility for himself and not throw everything onto the parents. Third, the Chinese-style parent believes that he always knows better than the child himself what is good for the child and therefore will impose his own tastes upon the child. The western-style parent is not like that. This conceptual struggle shows why the Chinese-style household education more easily leads to successful children.

After being introduced to the *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, some people get the feeling that this book is only a story of how one mother raises her daughters. But the book makes references to a broader struggle, drawing detailed implications from the author’s experience in educating her children. So why have the author’s methods been so unacceptable to American society, and why has the book had the kind of response it has had in China?

For example, once the older daughter, Sophia, was very disrespectful to her mother. In a loud voice the mother reviled her as “garbage.” As far as the author is concerned, this is not a good thing, but neither is it objectionable. But when she mentioned this incident at a party, she was immediately upbraided by all the guests. One guest even shed tears for the daughter and left the party in indignation.

For example, once for the author’s birthday the daughters casually made something from folded paper and gave it to her as a present. This did not meet her standards. She said she works hard for them every single day and spends several months deciding on proper birthday presents for them. Now when it’s her turn, this is how they treat her. She should get a better present than that. So the daughters then got her a better present, and the incident was considered past.

For example, on a cold winter’s day Amy Chua was having trouble making her younger daughter Lulu practice the piano. The girl refused to cooperate. She wanted to teach her daughter to be obedient and to follow her mother’s orders. She said, “If you’re not going to obey your mommy, you can’t stay in this house. Are you ready to be a good girl, or do you want to go outdoors?” The child did not listen to her, but left the house. She was not dressed for the cold!

Objectively speaking, the third example is rather extreme, and in a western country like America people find it hard to take. Therefore, even the author had to admit that when she saw her daughter do that she had to change her tactics. She coaxed her daughter to come back into the house; otherwise she would have frozen to death and the mother herself would have gone to jail.

The "Battle Hymn" of the Tiger Mother, or the Tiger Mother's "Dirge"?

Perhaps Amy Chua had not guessed how quickly she would find herself surrounded by enemies on all sides. In a very short space following the publication of *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother,* Amy Chua received several thousand e-mails, including some death threats. The majority could not accept her educational theories or her behavior. She was called a "monster," a "mad woman." These negative evaluations came not only from the United States and western societies, but also from the Overseas Chinese communities in the United States and the west and even from the China mainland. Amy Chua tried to explain herself many times and even gave interviews to reporters. All of her replies seemed to be self-justifications; and even her own daughters stood forth to justify their mother.

Amy Chua's self-justification was that her book was only a memoir, not a guide to education. She also said that the title that captured the attention of the world, "Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior," was not chosen by her and that she did not believe that Chinese mothers were superior. There is no set style for household education and it is hard to say what kind is best. She said that in the book there are many different places where she decided not to follow the strict style of "Chinese-style" education, especially after the children's 13th birthdays. She also said that if she could do it over again, there are some things she would do differently. She said, too, that she did not believe that her own style was appropriate for everyone, nor did she say that hers was the best way to raise children. When they saw their mother's troubles, Amy Chua's daughters could not but come to her defense. Sophia published an open letter to her mother in the New York *Post*. She said, Ever since your book was published you have been the target of criticism. "But many people do not understand your sense of humor. They think you were serious in writing those things. Naturally they also believe that Lulu and I were oppressed by our wicked mother. That is absolutely not the way it was."

This, however, did not win people over. An article in *The New York Times* said that in reading *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother,* it is very hard to find any jokes.

To put it briefly, the focus of criticism and doubts, whether in America or China, has been on the process of how to educate children, and especially over whether the child's success is more important than his happiness. Amy Chua

accepts the Chinese-style concept that the child should study and so obtain success. As she sees it, no child is willing to study—so what should one do? It depends on supervision and compulsion from the parent. Therefore, on these matters there should be no attention paid to the child's preferences and feelings. But this kind of outlook will without a doubt be rejected in the west. This is because happiness is seen as what people should strive for and as their ultimate end. On 9 February an English reporter said to Amy Chua that the most glaring omission from her book was the word "happiness." You talk a lot about how successful your children have been, and also about their firmness of will, so forth and so on, but you don't say whether they themselves are happy or not. Amy Chua responded: "If you force me to choose between happiness and success, then I'd have to say that happiness comes in second." The reporter found this very shocking and he replied, "Really? I find this hard to believe."

Very many people in the Overseas Chinese community in the United States criticized Amy Chua's theories and methods. Some Overseas Chinese even began a movement to boycott *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. Some said, I really find it hard to believe that the author is American-born and bred; I find it even harder to believe that that is really the way she raises her children. On the mainland we have also seen many similar criticisms and doubts. Lots of people have said that if our household education is really bemired in such concepts and methods, this is no battle hymn of a Chinese mother, but a dirge, an elegy, a song of mourning.

Harvard vs. Yale: How Should Parents Evaluate Their Children

Indeed, before Amy Chua's interview with the English reporter, the Davos World Economic Forum had organized an interesting party featuring a discussion between Amy Chua and Lawrence Summers, former President of Harvard University.

Summers's words at that gathering are worth our pondering. Even though he considers himself a stern person who makes strict demands on his children, he said that if his children were to read *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* they would feel very sad. He pointed out that creativity is an important quality in evaluating education. He joked that the A students at Harvard become professors, while the C students become wealthy businessmen. He raised the question: Which two Harvard students in the past 25 years have done the most to change the world? Everyone knows the answer: without a doubt they are [Bill] Gates and [Mark] Zuckerburg. Neither one of them was able to graduate from Harvard. Summers said that he was afraid these tiger mothers would find it very difficult to help their children find self-fulfilling work after they left Harvard. He went on to say that there is a second question that deserves thought. "Childhood takes up one quarter of our lives. That is a very long period. It's very important that they be happy during those 18 years."

How frank these words are! Indeed, the other matters we can put aside for the time being. If we peel away all happiness from one whole fourth of the child's life for the sake of future success, aren't we doing something wrong? This is something that we need to think deeply about.

Superficially, the following issues should quickly give rise to debate about this book. First of all, the book concerns household education, a topic that everyone, whether in China or abroad, is interested in. Second, the stories concerning child-rearing in this book have a great deal of Chinese flavor, and these are issues over which specialists in education in China and America have very different perspectives. But this book strongly affirms the correctness of what it considers to be the Chinese style. There is no doubt that those who sing the counterpoint will attract the most attention. Also the author, Amy Chua, is a famous professor at a famous school. She is also an Overseas Chinese: and all of this is bound to attract attention. Finally, the publisher encouraged a lot of hype about the book. According to *The New York Times*, the author finished the book in only eight weeks, with the publisher paying several hundred thousand dollars as an advance. In the face of the tide of criticism the author revealed that the title of the newspaper article, "Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior," did not come from her.

But to get to the heart of things, in my opinion there is one theme in the flood of criticism that did not attract much attention: this is the first time that a famous professor at a famous American school has publicly sung the praises of Chinese-style household education. As I see it, this accounts for the book's enormous influence and for the ardor of the discussion. Also, the author in describing how she raised her two children directly uses the terms "Chinese-style parents" and "Western-style parents," drawing a contrast not only between China and America but also between China and the West.

Everyone knows that ever since the closing years of the 19th century far-sighted Chinese have proposed Western-style education as the prescription for the ills of Chinese society. This is probably the first instance in contemporary times in which the Chinese style has been proclaimed superior to that of the west. If we ignore this, we will find it difficult to understand why this book has aroused such a response in both China and America.

Chinese and American Education: The Flames of Battle Have Not Yet Been Extinguished

In considering education, household education is prior to education in school and also prior to education in society. There is no question of its importance. As the ancient Chinese said, "If the child is not taught, that is the father's fault." This shows one aspect of the importance of household education. The greatest unintended consequence of the "butterfly effect" raised by the *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* was the increased attention to household education by America

and China and by eastern and western society. Each was moved to reflect more deeply on its own style of education and on the major influence that this has on the raising of children. On this, there is nothing to be deplored in the great argument the book has provoked. This big debate has also brought some enlightenment to China's current educational reforms.

First, the book is concerned with household education, not education as a whole. If we seek truth from facts, Amy Chua's approach has a greater mass base in China. In this society of ours, there are too many parents who act like that, who to a greater or lesser degree pay attention only to the child's success and not to the child's feelings. Similarly, the notion that the child must never be permitted to lose the race is closely linked to Amy Chua's ideas of success. We must not forget that the environment Amy Chua lives in is America. There people consider her methods to be improper and mistaken; it is a very lax social environment. But her ways do not necessarily point to how to change things in China.

Second, a parent concerned with household education must pay attention to the child's studies but at the same time must give even more attention to the child's psychology and self-respect. In our country, the focus on education to the neglect of the child's psychology produces problems, even tragedies. There is more than one case of this. At the same time, we still need to be aware that these concepts of household education can be passed from generation to generation. Amy Chua is a classic example. Although her daughters stand by their mother, they may be forgetting how they felt when they were little and how much pain and sorrow there was for both their mother and themselves. In a restaurant, when the family was visiting Moscow, one of the girls shouted, "I hate my life! I hate myself!" This makes people feel sad. Psychology teaches that incidents of this sort leave their traces on a person's soul. Even less should we forget that although Amy Chua's daughters have done outstandingly in school, they are only 18 and 14 years old. A long future lies ahead for them. It will take a long time before we know whether their mother's methods were unproblematic and left no scars.

Third, a special characteristic of household education is that everyone in the world has experienced it, and so everyone has the right to speak about it and to draw out his own theories based on his own experience. But we must never forget that the child's healthy upbringing is always the most important goal. Although there are some who believe that with the advent of the single-child family the "Tiger Mother" style of education has been blown away like smoke in the wind—so people will no longer be so harshly strict with their children—I believe that this kind of strictness is built into our family structure and that this is an unarguable fact. If that kind of concept persists, sooner or later the "Tiger Mother" mentality will become a tragedy, an elegy, a dirge for Chinese mothers. In fact, a child's happiness is far more important than his future success. Also, who is able to say that if one makes a child happy that that child will not enjoy

future success.

Fourthly, that Amy Chua's book should cause such a reaction and bring about a discussion of household education in both China and America is not unrelated to the special characteristics of families in each society. Amy Chua's father graduated from a famous school and is himself a famous professor. It is he who brought up his daughter. It was under her father's nurture that she became a Harvard graduate and by her own efforts she became a professor at Yale. This seems to show that Amy Chua herself was able smoothly to navigate her father's Chinese-style upbringing. From the outside, it would seem that those who want to argue against this have nothing to say. Indeed, it is hard to say anything at all in the face of success. But what we must not forget that in both China and the west, with their different concepts of child-raising, there are many instances of success and it is not persuasive to make generalizations about what is good and bad from individual examples. In the fierce competition and pressures in 21st century China, we may perhaps have much to learn about how to cultivate, nurture, and raise our next generation.

The controversy the *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* has occasioned will not vanish in a day and it is very hard to see who will finally win on this smokeless battlefield. For parents, the question of how to raise children and cultivate effective forces for the country and the society in the 21st century is something that society as a whole and all those concerned with education should give deep thought to.

Xin Hua Wenzhai, 5 July 2011