

Battle Hymn
of the Tiger Mother



AMY CHUA



PENGUIN BOOKS

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More praise for Amy Chua's
Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother

“*Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* hit the parenting hot button, but also a lot more, including people’s complicated feelings about ambition, intellectualism, high culture, the Ivy League, strong women, and America’s standing in a world where China is ascendant. Chua’s conviction that hard work leads to inner confidence is a resonant one.” —*Chicago Tribune*

“Readers will alternately gasp at and empathize with Chua’s struggles and aspirations, all the while enjoying her writing, which, like her kid-rearing philosophy, is brisk, lively, and no-holds-barred. This memoir raises intriguing, sometimes uncomfortable questions about love, pride, ambition, achievement, and self-worth that will resonate among success-obsessed parents. . . . Readers of all stripes will respond to [*Battle Hymn of the*] *Tiger Mother*.” —*The Washington Post*

“The cultural divide Chua so brilliantly captures is one we stand to witness more and more in our globalized age, after all; and what with Asia and Asian achievement looming ever larger in the American imagination, the issues inherent in *Battle Hymn [of the Tiger Mother]* are as important as they are entertaining. . . . I was riveted by this book.” —*The Boston Globe*

“American mothers and fathers are dying for permission to be a little tougher on their kids. . . . These parents have long wrestled with an internal conflict, coddling their kids’ egos to protect their psyches, even as they’ve suspected that that approach might stunt their achievement. [*Battle Hymn of the*] *Tiger Mother* resolves that contradiction. What it teaches is that kids might actually want to get ahead just as much as their moms and dads want them to—a message that relieves the guilt of achievement-driven parents, freeing them to let up on the self-esteem boosting and concentrate on the results.” —Po Bronson, *New York Magazine*

“Her writing is smart and lively.” —*Entertainment Weekly*

“The stakes are really high. A parent such as Chua who takes charge against an unrelenting culture of stupidity should be admired, not scorned. She should not be defending herself; instead, we should be taking notes.” —*The Christian Science Monitor*

“Chua’s mind-set and methods—bolstered by faith in Chinese family tradition—pose a useful challenge for an era haunted by a helicoptering ethos as hard to shake as it is to like. Here is an alternative to the queasy hypocrisy of typical hyperparents, buffeted by shifting expertise that leaves them anxious about overpressuring even as they push. Chua breaks through all that. She is a crusader invigorated by practicing what she preaches: the arduous work she believes necessary to do anything well, child rearing included. . . . But precisely because Chua slaves away as hard as her girls do, one thing her program is not is guilt-inducing. In the end, her ordeal with Lulu teaches Chua humility and proves her daughter’s very healthy autonomy—and inspires next to no

regrets.” —*Slate*

“Chua is unafraid of portraying herself in a less than flattering light, and this honesty serves her purposes well. . . . Chua’s candid family memoir offers valuable insight.”
—*BookPage*

“*Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* is the book we’ve all been waiting for—a candid, provocative, poignant, and vicarious journey through the Chinese American family culture. It will leave you breathless with its bluntness and emotion. Amy Chua is a Tiger Mother, a greatly gifted law professor, and, ultimately, an honest, loving woman with a lot to say.” —Tom Brokaw

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BATTLE HYMN OF THE TIGER MOTHER

Amy Chua is the John M. Duff Professor of Law at Yale Law School. Her first book, *World on Fire: How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability*, a *New York Times* bestseller, was selected by *The Economist* as one of the best books of 2003. Her second book, *Day of Empire: How Hyperpowers Rise to Global Dominance—and Why They Fall*, was a critically acclaimed *Foreign Affairs* bestseller. She lives with her husband, two daughters, and two Samoyeds in New Haven, Connecticut.

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Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A. • Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3 (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.) • Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England • Penguin Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd) • Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd) • Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi - 110 017, India • Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd) • Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

First published in the United States of America by The Penguin Press, a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc. 2011

This edition with a new afterword published in Penguin Books 2011

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Afterword © Amy Chua, 2011

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Portions of Chapter Four first appeared as "On Becoming American" in *Defining a Nation: Our America and the Sources of Its Strength*, edited by David Halberstam (National Geographic, 2003).

Photograph credits

Bachrach Photography: page 30

© Susan Bradley Photography: 166

Peter Z. Mahakian: 167, 216, 223

All other photographs from the author's family collection.

THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS HAS CATALOGED THE HARDCOVER EDITION AS FOLLOWS:

Chua, Amy.

Battle hymn of the tiger mother / Amy Chua.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-101-47545-4

1. Chua, Amy. 2. Mothers—United States—Biography. 3. Chinese American women—Biography. 4. Mothers and daughters—China. 5. Mothers and daughters—United States. I. Title.

HQ759.C59 2011

306.874'3092—dc22

[B] 2010029623

DESIGNED BY NICOLE LAROCHE

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For Sophia and Louisa

And for Katrin

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This is a story about a mother, two daughters, and two dogs. It's also about Mozart and Mendelssohn, the piano and the violin, and how we made it to Carnegie Hall.

This was *supposed* to be a story of how Chinese parents are better at raising kids than Western ones.

But instead, it's about a bitter clash of cultures, a fleeting taste of glory, and how I was humbled by a thirteen-year-old.

Part One

The Tiger, the living symbol of strength and power, generally inspires fear and respect.

The Chinese Mother

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. Here are some things my daughters, Sophia and Louisa, were never allowed to do:

- attend a sleepover
- have a playdate
- 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
- not play the piano or violin.

I'm using the term "Chinese mother" loosely. I recently met a supersuccessful white guy from South Dakota (you've seen him on television), and after comparing notes we decided that his working-class father had definitely been a Chinese mother. I know some Korean, Indian, Jamaican, Irish, and Ghanaian parents who qualify too. Conversely, I know some mothers of Chinese heritage, almost always born in the West, who are *not* Chinese mothers, by choice or otherwise.

I'm also using the term "Western parents" loosely. Western parents come in all varieties. In fact, I'll go out on a limb and say that Westerners are far more diverse in their parenting styles than the Chinese. Some Western parents are strict; others are lax. There are same-sex parents, Orthodox Jewish parents, single parents, ex-hippie parents, investment banker parents, and military parents. None of these "Western" parents necessarily see eye to eye, so when I use the term "Western parents," of course I'm not referring to all Western parents—just as "Chinese mother" doesn't refer to all Chinese mothers.

All the same, even when Western parents think they're being strict, they usually don't come close to being Chinese mothers. For example, my Western friends who consider themselves strict make their children practice their instruments thirty minutes every day. An hour at most. For a Chinese mother, the first hour is the easy part. It's hours two and three that get tough.

Despite our squeamishness about cultural stereotypes, there are tons of studies out

there showing marked and quantifiable differences between Chinese and Westerners when it comes to parenting. In one study of 50 Western American mothers and 48 Chinese immigrant mothers, almost 70% of the Western mothers said either that “stressing academic success is not good for children” or that “parents need to foster the idea that learning is fun.” By contrast, roughly 0% of the Chinese mothers felt the same way. Instead, the vast majority of the Chinese mothers said that they believe their children can be “the best” students, that “academic achievement reflects successful parenting,” and that if children did not excel at school then there was “a problem” and parents “were not doing their job.” Other studies indicate that compared to Western parents, Chinese parents spend approximately ten times as long every day drilling academic activities with their children. By contrast, Western kids are more likely to participate in sports teams.

This brings me to my final point. Some might think that the American sports parent is an analog to the Chinese mother. This is so wrong. Unlike your typical Western overscheduling soccer mom, 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 disagrees 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.

Sophia



Sophia

Sophia is my firstborn daughter. My husband, Jed, is Jewish, and I'm Chinese, which makes our children Chinese-Jewish-American, an ethnic group that may sound exotic but actually forms a majority in certain circles, especially in university towns.

Sophia's name in English means "wisdom," as does Si Hui, the Chinese name my mother gave her. From the moment Sophia was born, she displayed a rational temperament and exceptional powers of concentration. She got those qualities from her father. As an infant Sophia quickly slept through the night, and cried only if it achieved a purpose. I was struggling to write a law article at the time—I was on leave from my Wall Street law firm and desperate to get a teaching job so I wouldn't have to go back—and at two months Sophia understood this. Calm and contemplative, she basically slept, ate, and watched me have writer's block until she was a year old.

Sophia was intellectually precocious, and at eighteen months she knew the alphabet. Our pediatrician denied that this was neurologically possible, insisting that she was only mimicking sounds. To prove his point, he pulled out a big tricky chart, with the alphabet disguised as snakes and unicorns. The doctor looked at the chart, then at Sophia, and back at the chart. Cunningly, he pointed to a toad wearing a nightgown and a beret.

"Q," piped Sophia.

The doctor grunted. "No coaching," he said to me.

I was relieved when we got to the last letter: a hydra with lots of red tongues flapping around, which Sophia correctly identified as "I."

Sophia excelled in nursery school, particularly in math. While the other kids were learning to count from 1 to 10 the creative American way—with rods, beads, and

cones—I taught Sophia addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, fractions, and decimals the rote Chinese way. The hard part was displaying the right answer using the rods, beads, and cones.

The deal Jed and I struck when we got married was that our children would speak Mandarin Chinese and be raised Jewish. (I was brought up Catholic, but that was easy to give up. Catholicism has barely any roots in my family, but more of that later.) In retrospect, this was a funny deal, because I myself don't speak Mandarin—my native dialect is Hokkien Chinese—and Jed is not religious in the least. But the arrangement somehow worked. I hired a Chinese nanny to speak Mandarin constantly to Sophia, and we celebrated our first Hanukkah when Sophia was two months old.

As Sophia got older, it seemed like she got the best of both cultures. She was probing and questioning, from the Jewish side. And from me, the Chinese side, she got skills—lots of skills. I don't mean inborn skills or anything like that, just skills learned the diligent, disciplined, confidence-expanding Chinese way. By the time Sophia was three, she was reading Sartre, doing simple set theory, and could write one hundred Chinese characters. (Jed's translation: She recognized the words "No Exit," could draw two overlapping circles, and okay maybe on the Chinese characters.) As I watched American parents slathering praise on their kids for the lowest of tasks—drawing a squiggle or waving a stick—I came to see that Chinese parents have two things over their Western counterparts: (1) higher dreams for their children, and (2) higher regard for their children in the sense of knowing how much they can take.

Of course, I also wanted Sophia to benefit from the best aspects of American society. I did not want her to end up like one of those weird Asian automatons who feel so much pressure from their parents that they kill themselves after coming in second on the national civil service exam. I wanted her to be well rounded and to have hobbies and activities. Not just any activity, like "crafts," which can lead nowhere—or even worse, playing the drums, which leads to drugs—but rather a hobby that was meaningful and highly difficult with the potential for depth and virtuosity.

And that's where the piano came in.

In 1996, when she was three, Sophia got two new things: her first piano lesson, and a little sister.

3

Louisa



Louisa

There's a country music song that goes, "She's a wild one with an angel's face." That's my younger daughter, Lulu. When I think of her, I think of trying to tame a feral horse. Even when she was in utero she kicked so hard it left visible imprints on my stomach. Lulu's real name is Louisa, which means "famous warrior." I'm not sure how we called that one so early.

Lulu's Chinese name is Si Shan, which means "coral" and connotes delicacy. This fits Lulu too. From the day she was born, Lulu had a discriminating palate. She didn't like the infant formula I fed her, and she was so outraged by the soy milk alternative suggested by our pediatrician that she went on a hunger strike. But unlike Mahatma Gandhi, who was selfless and meditative while he starved himself, Lulu had colic and screamed and clawed violently for hours every night. Jed and I were in earplugs and tearing our hair out when fortunately our Chinese nanny Grace came to the rescue. She prepared a silken tofu braised in a light abalone and shiitake sauce with a cilantro garnish, which Lulu ended up quite liking.

It's hard to find the words to describe my relationship with Lulu. "All-out nuclear warfare" doesn't quite capture it. The irony is that Lulu and I are very much alike: She inherited my hot-tempered, viper-tongued, fast-forgiving personality.

Speaking of personalities, I don't believe in astrology—and I think people who do have serious problems—but the Chinese Zodiac describes Sophia and Lulu *perfectly*. Sophia was born in the Year of the Monkey, and Monkey people are curious, intellectual, and "generally can accomplish any given task. They appreciate difficult or challenging work as it stimulates them." By contrast, people born in the Year of the Boar are "willful" and "obstinate" and often "fly into a rage," although they "never

harbor a grudge,” being fundamentally honest and warmhearted. That’s Lulu exactly.

I was born in the Year of the Tiger. I don’t want to boast or anything, but Tiger people are noble, fearless, powerful, authoritative, and magnetic. They’re also supposed to be lucky. Beethoven and Sun Yat-sen were both Tigers.

I had my first face-off with Lulu when she was about three. It was a freezing winter afternoon in New Haven, Connecticut, one of the coldest days of the year. Jed was at work—he was a professor at Yale Law School—and Sophia was at kindergarten. I decided that it would be a perfect time to introduce Lulu to the piano. Excited about working together—with her brown curls, round eyes, and china doll face, Lulu was deceptively cute—I put her on the piano bench, on top of some comfortable pillows. I then demonstrated how to play a single note with a single finger, evenly, three times, and asked her to do the same. A small request, but Lulu refused, preferring instead to smash at many notes at the same time with two open palms. When I asked her to stop, she smashed harder and faster. When I tried to pull her away from the piano, she began yelling, crying, and kicking furiously.

Fifteen minutes later, she was still yelling, crying, and kicking, and I’d had it. Dodging her blows, I dragged the screeching demon to our back porch door, and threw it open.

The wind chill was twenty degrees, and my own face hurt from just a few seconds’ exposure to the icy air. But I was determined to raise an obedient Chinese child—in the West, obedience is associated with dogs and the caste system, but in Chinese culture, it is considered among the highest of virtues—if it killed me. “You can’t stay in the house if you don’t listen to Mommy,” I said sternly. “Now, are you ready to be a good girl? Or do you want to go outside?”

Lulu stepped outside. She faced me, defiant.

A dull dread began seeping through my body. Lulu was wearing only a sweater, a ruffled skirt, and tights. She had stopped crying. Indeed, she was eerily still.

“Okay good—you’ve decided to behave,” I said quickly. “You can come in now.”

Lulu shook her head.

“Don’t be silly, Lulu.” I was panicking. “It’s freezing. You’re going to get sick. Come in *now*.”

Lulu’s teeth were chattering, but she shook her head again. And right then I saw it all, as clear as day. I had underestimated Lulu, not understood what she was made of. She would sooner freeze to death than give in.

I had to change tactics immediately; I couldn’t win this one. Plus I might be locked up by Child Services. My mind racing, I reversed course, now begging, coddling, and bribing Lulu to come back into the house. When Jed and Sophia arrived home, they found Lulu contentedly soaking in a hot bath, dipping a brownie in a steaming cup of hot chocolate with marshmallows.

But Lulu had underestimated me too. I was just rearming. The battle lines were drawn, and she didn’t even know it.

The Chuas

My last name is Chua—Cài in Mandarin—and I love it. My family comes from southern China’s Fujian Province, which is famous for producing scholars and scientists. One of my direct ancestors on my father’s side, Chua Wu Neng, was the royal astronomer to Emperor Shen Zong of the Ming Dynasty, as well as a philosopher and poet. Obviously wide-ranging in his skills, Wu Neng was appointed by the emperor to be the chief of military staff in 1644, when China faced a Manchu invasion. My family’s most prized heirloom—in fact, our only heirloom—is a 2000-page treatise, handwritten by Wu Neng, interpreting the *I Ching*, or *Book of Changes*, one of the oldest of the classic Chinese texts. A leather-bound copy of Wu Neng’s treatise—with the character for “Chua” on the cover—now sits prominently on my living room coffee table.

All of my grandparents were born in Fujian, but at different points in the 1920s and 1930s they boarded boats for the Philippines, where there was said to be more opportunity. My mother’s father was a kind, mild-mannered schoolteacher who became a rice merchant to support his family. He was not religious and not particularly good at business. His wife, my grandmother, was a great beauty and devout Buddhist. Despite the antimaterialistic teachings of the Bodhisattva Guanyin, she always wished her husband were more successful.

My father’s father, a good-natured fish-paste merchant, was also not religious and not particularly good at business. His wife, my Dragon Lady grandmother, made a fortune after World War II by going into plastics, then investing her profits in gold bars and diamonds. After she became wealthy—securing an account to produce containers for Johnson & Johnson was key—she moved into a grand hacienda in one of Manila’s most prestigious neighborhoods. She and my uncles started buying up Tiffany glass, Mary Cassatts, Braques, and condos in Honolulu. They also converted to Protestantism and began using forks and spoons instead of chopsticks, to be more like Americans.

Born in China in 1936, my mother arrived in the Philippines with her family when she was two. During the Japanese occupation of the Philippines, she lost her infant brother, and I’ll never forget her description of Japanese soldiers holding her uncle’s jaws open, forcing water down his throat, and laughing about how he was going to burst like an overfilled balloon. When General Douglas MacArthur liberated the Philippines in 1945, my mother remembers running after American jeeps, cheering wildly, as U.S. troops tossed out free cans of Spam. After the war, my mother attended a Dominican high school, where she was converted to Catholicism. She eventually graduated from the University of Santo Tomas first in her class, *summa cum laude*, with a degree in chemical engineering.

My father was the one who wanted to immigrate to America. Brilliant at math, in love with astronomy and philosophy, he hated the grubbing, backstabbing world of his family's plastics business and defied every plan they had for him. Even as a boy, he was desperate to get to America, so it was a dream come true when the Massachusetts Institute of Technology accepted his application. He proposed to my mother in 1960, and later the same year my parents arrived in Boston, knowing not a soul in the country. With only their student scholarships to live on, they couldn't afford heat their first two winters, and wore blankets around to keep warm. My father got his Ph.D. in less than two years and became an assistant professor at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana.

Growing up in the Midwest, my three younger sisters and I always knew that we were different from everyone else. Mortifyingly, we brought Chinese food in thermoses to school; how I wished I could have a bologna sandwich like everyone else! We were required to speak Chinese at home—the punishment was one whack of the chopsticks for every English word accidentally uttered. We drilled math and piano every afternoon and were never allowed to sleep over at our friends' houses. Every evening when my father came home from work, I took off his shoes and socks and brought him his slippers. Our report cards had to be perfect; while our friends were rewarded for Bs, for us getting an A-minus was unthinkable. In eighth grade, I won second place in a history contest and brought my family to the awards ceremony. Somebody else had won the Kiwanis prize for best all-around student. Afterward, my father said to me: "Never, never disgrace me like that again."

When my friends hear these stories, they often imagine that I had a horrible childhood. But that's not true at all; I found strength and confidence in my peculiar family. We started off as outsiders together, and we discovered America together, becoming Americans in the process. I remember my father working until three in the morning every night, so driven he wouldn't even notice us entering the room. But I also remember how excited he was introducing us to tacos, sloppy joes, Dairy Queen, and all-you-can-eat buffets, not to mention sledding, skiing, crabbing, and camping. I remember a boy in grade school making slanty-eyed gestures at me, guffawing as he mimicked the way I pronounced *restaurant* (rest-OW-rant)—I vowed at that moment to rid myself of my Chinese accent. But I also remember Girl Scouts and hula hoops; roller skating and public libraries; winning a Daughters of the American Revolution essay contest; and the proud, momentous day my parents were naturalized.

In 1971, my father accepted an offer from the University of California at Berkeley, and we packed up and moved west. My father grew his hair and wore jackets with peace signs on them. Then he got interested in wine collecting and built himself a one-thousand-bottle cellar. As he became internationally known for his work on chaos theory, we began traveling around the world. I spent my junior year in high school studying in London, Munich, and Lausanne, and my father took us to the Arctic Circle.

But my father was also a Chinese patriarch. When it came time to apply to colleges, he declared that I was going to live at home and attend Berkeley (where I had already been accepted), and that was that—no visiting campuses and agonizing choices for me. Disobeying him, as he had disobeyed his family, I forged his signature and secretly applied to a school on the East Coast that I'd heard people talking about.