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From Tiger Mom to Panda Parent

Peter H. Huang*

In January 2011, Yale Law School professor Amy Chua¹ burst into public consciousness and international prominence with the publication of her parenting memoir, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*.² Much of the media and popular culture furor centered around just a few controversial excerpts from her book that appeared in her January 8, 2011 *Wall Street Journal* article, “Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior.”³ Many of those critical and negative visceral reactions do not apply to her book’s overall perspectives about parenting. This brief response to Chua’s book complements a much longer and related article that is also in part a response to Chua’s book.⁴

Chua’s book is not a parenting guide, despite her abovementioned article provocatively suggesting otherwise. Instead, Chua’s book details her personal journey and transformation from a tiger mom to what I call a panda parent. By the phrase “panda parent,” I mean a parent who combines elements of what Chua terms a “Chinese mother” and a “Western parent.”⁵ Chua portrays her husband in her book as a “Western parent” who questions authority and provides a balance and countervailing force to what Chua calls her “Chinese mothering.”

By the phrase “Chinese mothering” Chua means a set of related parenting activities, beliefs, mindsets, models and philosophies. Chua refers to “studies that indicate that compared to Western parents, Chinese parents spend approximately ten times as long every day drilling academic activities with their children.”⁶ Chua notes that Chinese parents believe “that nothing is fun until you’re good at it. To get good at anything you have to work, and children on their own never want to work, which is why it is crucial to override their preferences.”⁷ Chua states: “there are three big differences between the Chinese and Western parental mind-sets.”⁸

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1. Amy Chua, John M. Duff, Jr. Professor of Law, Yale Law School, <http://www.law.yale.edu/faculty/ACHua.htm>.

2. AMY CHUA, *BATTLE HYMN OF THE TIGER MOTHER* (reprt. ed. 2011) [hereinafter CHUA, *BATTLE HYMN*].

3. Amy Chua, *Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior*, *WALL ST. J.*, Jan. 8, 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704111504576059713528698754.html> [hereinafter Chua, *Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior*].

4. Peter H. Huang, *Tiger Cub Strikes Back: Memoirs of an Ex-Child Prodigy About Legal Education and Parenting*, 1 *BRIT. J. AM. LEGAL STUD.* 297 (2012).

5. CHUA, *BATTLE HYMN*, *supra* note 2 at 4.

6. *Id.* at 5.

7. Chua, *Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior*, *supra* note 3.

8. *Id.*

The first is that: “Western parents are concerned about their children’s psyches. Chinese parents aren’t. They assume strength, not fragility, and as a result they behave very differently.”⁹ The second is that: “Chinese parents believe that their kids owe them everything. . . . Chinese children must spend their lives repaying their parents by obeying them and making them proud. By contrast, I don’t think most Westerners have the same view of children being permanently indebted to their parents.”¹⁰ The third is that: “Chinese parents believe that they know what is best for their children and therefore override all of their children’s own desires and preferences.”¹¹ Chua observes that: “It’s not that Chinese parents don’t care about their children. Just the opposite. They would give up anything for their children. It’s an entirely different parenting model. . . . All decent parents want to do what’s best for their children. The Chinese just have a totally different idea of how to do that.”¹² Chua lucidly sums up the differences between Chinese and Western parenting:

Western parents try to respect their children’s individuality, encouraging them to pursue their true passions, supporting their choices, and providing positive reinforcement and a nurturing environment. By contrast, the Chinese believe that the best way to protect their children is by preparing them for the future, letting them see what they’re capable of, and arming them with skills, work habits and inner confidence that no one can ever take away.¹³

Although Chua points out that not all “Chinese mothers” are Chinese and not all mothers of Chinese heritage are “Chinese mothers,”¹⁴ there is obviously a danger of ethnic and racial essentialism in extrapolating from Chua’s personal experiences to statements about Asian Pacific Americans generally and those of Chinese heritage particularly.

Asian Americans are stereotyped as being competent yet unsociable,¹⁵ as are Asian immigrants.¹⁶ A competent-but-not-warm stereotype of Asians elicits fear and envy that in turn can lead to discrimination, prejudice and *schadenfreude* (a word from German that means enjoyment or pleasure from the misfortune or suffering of others) towards Asians.¹⁷ Chua’s book with its emphasis on how she raised her

9. *Id.*

10. *Id.*

11. *Id.*

12. *Id.*

13. *Id.*

14. *Id.*

15. Monica H. Lin, Virginia S. Y. Kwan, Anna Cheung & Susan T. Fiske, *Stereotype Content Model Explains Prejudice for an Envied Outgroup: Scale of Anti-Asian American Stereotypes*, 31 *PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. BULL.* 34, 38 (2005).

16. Tiane L. Lee & Susan T. Fiske, *Not an Outgroup, Not Yet an Ingroup: Immigrants in the Stereotype Content Model*, 30 *INT’L J. INTERCULTURAL REL.* 751, 754, 758-62 (2006).

17. Lin, *supra* note 15, at 35-36. See also Mina Cikara & Susan T. Fiske, *Stereotypes and Schadenfreude: Affective and Physiological Markers of Pleasure at Outgroup Misfortunes*, 3 *SOC. PSYCHOL. & PERSONALITY SCI.* 63 (2012); Amy J. C. Cuddy, Susan T. Fiske & Peter Glick, *The BIAS Map: Behaviors From Intergroup Affect*

two daughters to achieve success academically and in playing the violin or piano reinforces the stereotype of Asians being highly competent. Her book's tales about not permitting her daughters to have play dates, attend sleepovers and participate in school plays can reinforce the stereotype of Asians lacking in and not valuing socially desirable interpersonal skills.

Thus, Chua's book can reinforce a competent-yet-unsociable stereotype of Asians that has been shown to elicit fear and envy. A noted social psychologist, Susan Fiske, cogently observes that "[e]nvy is harm waiting to happen."¹⁸ Fiske also notes that unfortunately, "science and history suggest that people will nurture and act on their prejudices in the worst ways when these people are put under stress, pressured by peers or receive approval from authority figures to do so."¹⁹ As examples, Fiske notes elsewhere that: "entrepreneurial outsiders turned into victims include the Koreans in the Los Angeles riots of the 1990s, the Chinese in Indonesia, the Indians in East Africa. . . All were integrated into their host societies but were targeted for mass violence under social breakdown."²⁰ A more recent example of an expression of anti-Asian sentiment is the Duke Kappa Sigma fraternity advertising and holding a "Racist Rager" party mocking Asians.²¹ Fortunately, Fiske's research demonstrates that envy can be mitigated by counter-stereotypic evidence or empathy.²² Chua's book and its resulting massive press coverage may help non-Asians to see Asians as individuals. Parents of all ethnicities and races are likely to empathize with Chua's very personal and self-deprecating tales of her struggles in being a tiger mom. The fact that Chua transformed from a stereotypically Chinese tiger mom into a counter-stereotypical panda parent might mitigate envy towards Asians.

Recent theoretical and experimental research by economists and psychologists indicates that people's decision-making, judgment and social cognition are shaped by interactions amongst internal identity affiliations, external cultural norms and stereotypes, and environmental and situational identity primes. Identity economics models, pioneered by 2001 economics Nobel Laureate George Akerlof²³ and economist Rachel Kranton, demonstrate how people's identities, or their senses of themselves, influence their economic decisions and outcomes.²⁴ A

and Stereotypes, 92 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 631 (2007).

18. Susan T. Fiske, *Envy Up, Scorn Down: How Comparison Divides Us*, 65 AM. PSYCHOLOGIST 698, 703 (2010) [hereinafter Fiske, *Envy Up*].

19. Susan T. Fiske, *Are We Born Racist?*, in ARE WE BORN RACIST?: NEW INSIGHTS FROM NEUROSCIENCE AND POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY 7, 15 (Jason Marsh, Rodolfo Mendoza-Denton & Jeremy Adam Smith eds., 2010) [hereinafter Fiske, *Are We Born Racist?*].

20. SUSAN T. FISKE, *ENVY UP, SCORN DOWN: HOW STATUS DIVIDES US* 55 (2011).

21. Jerry Kang, *Duke's Anti-Asian "Racist Rager,"* JERRYKANG, (Feb. 7, 2013), <http://jerrykang.net/2013/02/07/dukes-anti-asian-racist-rager/>.

22. Fiske, *Envy Up*, *supra* note 18, at 703.

23. *The Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel 2001*, NOBELPRIZE.ORG (July 16, 2012), http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/economics/laureates/2001/.

24. GEORGE A. AKERLOF & RACHEL E. KRANTON, *IDENTITY ECONOMICS: HOW OUR IDENTITIES SHAPE OUR WORK, WAGES, AND WELL-BEING* (2010); George A. Akerlof & Rachel E. Kranton, *Economics and Identity*, 115 Q. J. ECON. 715 (2000).

recent experiment demonstrated that Asian Americans chose options that exhibit more patient intertemporal preferences when their Asian ethnicity was made salient by priming.²⁵ In another experiment, Chinese American subjects made individualistic (i.e., non-cooperative and unique) choices to a larger degree when their American identity was primed.²⁶ These theoretical models and experimental findings imply that how Asian Americans perceive themselves affects their behavior and in so doing, also their economic and financial outcomes. It is an open empirical question whether hearing about, discussing and reading Chua's book primes more the Asian ethnicity or American identity of Asian Americans.

In the afterword of the paperback version of Chua's book, she parodies her book tour interviews and states that her book does not address the model minority stereotype.²⁷ While Chua is correct, her book nonetheless may reinforce already existing perceptions that Asian Americans are so-called model minorities.²⁸ The model minority myth that Asian Americans are academically successful, especially in mathematics and the "hard" sciences, has a number of potentially troubling educational implications, including but not limited to many Asian Americans herding themselves into mathematics and science courses and majors regardless of whether such paths are personally appropriate and fulfilling.²⁹ Chua's book may also exacerbate the already demanding expectations of some tiger moms and could alter educational and career choices of the children of such tiger moms. The stereotype that Asian Americans are better at mathematics and science than humanities or the arts may drive stereotypical tiger moms to push their kids to attend business school, medical school or graduate programs in mathematics and science instead of law school. As Asian American law professor Frank Wu points out,

[W]e need to have Asian Americans who are skilled as advocates. They ensure that we continue to make progress toward our ideals. Asian Americans increasingly are able to enter domains such as law that had virtually no Asian faces only a generation ago. In the process, Asian American individuals and communities become more fully formed.³⁰

I already discuss at some length elsewhere how tiger parenting is like the dominant form of American non-clinical legal education in terms of emphasizing

25. Daniel J. Benjamin, James J. Choi & A. Joshua Strickland, *Social Identity and Preferences*, 100 AM. ECON. REV. 1913, 1915-18 (2010).

26. Robyn A. LeBoeuf, Eldar Shafir & Julia Belyavsky Bayuk, *The Conflicting Choices of Alternating Selves*, 111 ORG. BEHAV. & HUM. DECISION PROCESSES 48, 51-52 (2010).

27. CHUA, *BATTLE HYMN*, *supra* note 2, at 233.

28. Brandon Yoo, *Unraveling the Model Minority Myth of Asian American Students*, EDUCATION.COM, <http://www.education.com/reference/article/unraveling-minority-myth-asian-students/> (last visited August 15, 2012) ("The [model minority] stereotype suggests that Asian Americans are more academically, economically, and socially successful than any other racial minority groups.").

29. Nathaniel A. Victoria, A+ *Does Not Mean All Asians: The Model Minority Myth and Implications for Higher Education*, 28 VT. CONNECTION 80 (2007).

30. Frank H. Wu, *Parental Expectations*, NAT'L L.J., Nov. 3, 2008, <http://www.law.com/jsp/nlj/PubArticleNLJ.jsp?id=1202425698916> (last visited August 15, 2012).

analytical reasoning, authority, hierarchy and precedent.³¹ Being a successful advocate also involves creativity, emotional intelligence, mindfulness, social intelligence, and stress management. These are skills that can be taught and learned. But neither tiger parenting nor the dominant form of American non-clinical legal education focuses on developing these skills.

A key to countering the model minority myth is to disaggregate the many subgroups that are conflated and lumped together in the phrase: Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders and Native Hawaiians.³² These subgroups include individuals who do not conform to the dominant stereotypes of the model minority myth. Stereotypes constrain the opportunities of those who are stereotyped and reduce their incentives to develop and invest in any types of skills that are inconsistent with those stereotypes. Thus, stereotypes limit how both others and those who are stereotyped see themselves. Those limitations in perspectives in turn alter the behavior, choices, interactions and judgments of people. Those alterations ultimately impact individual and social well-being in the sense of people's subjective life satisfaction and such objective indicators as economic, employment, financial, health and medical outcomes.

I conclude this reflection by recounting Amy Chua's generous and kind reply³³ to an e-mail request for advice I sent her when I was invited by the Office of Multicultural Affairs at Syracuse University to be their commemorative speaker for Asian Pacific American Heritage Month this year.³⁴ I do so because this episode indicates how much of the individual who is Amy Chua does not come through in her book. That she provided a helpful and prompt reply was not surprising. What might be surprising to those who only read her *Wall Street Journal* article instead of her book is her sense of humor, self-deprecation, and irony. Even those who read her book may be surprised to learn these two things. First, Amy Chua realizes that her daughters grew up being raised by panda parents instead of a tiger mom. Second, her defiantly self-incriminating and charmingly zany book is a celebration of rebellion in terms of its sheer existence, its emphasis on the perspectives of her daughters, and its being authored by an individual who is not behaving as a model minority would!

31. Huang, *supra* note 4. See also Emily Calhoun, *Thinking Like a Lawyer*, 34 J. LEGAL. EDUC. 507 (1984).

32. See generally *Forging the Future: The Role of New Research, Data, & Policies for Asian-Americans, Native Hawaiians & Pacific Islanders*, 9 AAPI NEXUS J.: ASIAN AM. & PAC. ISLANDERS POL'Y, PRAC. & COMMUNITY i (2011), available at http://www.aasc.ucla.edu/aascpress/nexus9_1_2_full.pdf.

33. Email from Professor Amy Chua, John M. Duff, Jr. Professor of Law, Yale Law School, to author (Feb. 3, 2012, 6:37 AM MST) (on file with author).

34. Jill Ouikahilo, *University Commemorates Asian Pacific American Heritage in April*, SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY NEWS, April 4, 2012, <http://www.syr.edu/news/articles/2012/asian-american-heritage-04-12.html>.