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The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother

Amy Chua



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By BARBARA FINKELSTEIN
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As I write, there have been 200,000 Google entries about Amy Chua — and her book has only been out for a few weeks! After all that blather, why should you read one more take on Chua? Because — alone among commentators, it seems — Barbara Finkelstein did her homework. She not only read Chua's controversial new book, she went back and looked into her previous writing.

Writers eager to score points on Chua overlook one inconvenient fact: She's not a crackpot or an exploiter, she's a Professor of Law at Yale. Not a small credit in the yearbook of life. Her previous books are serious and learned. She's not someone you dismiss in a phrase.

So, whether you're a parent or not, you'll want to read on. Because, like Chua, Barbara Finkelstein says something surprising and provocative. The difference: Ms. Finkelstein says it better.

— JK
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Amy Chua sure has hit a lot of raw nerves. Her book's premise — that mothers need to practice gonzo parenting on their kids — has freaked people out about childrearing, education, class status, work, marriage, intermarriage and sex. On [The Wall Street Journal website](#), which triggered this national asthma attack by running an excerpt from the book called "Why Chinese Mothers are Superior," you'll even find an angry thread about immigration. What argument hasn't this woman provoked?

I never heard of Amy Chua until I saw the Journal piece. My bad. Turns out she is the author of two genuinely interesting books: "Day of Empire: How Hyperpowers Rise to Global Dominance" [To buy the book from Amazon, [click here](#). For the Kindle download, [click here](#).] and "Why They Fall and World on Fire: How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability." [To buy the book from Amazon, [click here](#). For the Kindle download, [click here](#).] As the titles attest, Chua is preoccupied with power, social ranking and money. She happens to write about them the way Malcolm Gladwell writes about tipping points and Stephen Dubner about freakonomics. Yes, she's that good.

Do you know why, for example, six of the seven billionaires in post-communist Russia are Jews? It's because these guys honed their capitalism skills in the Soviet black market and they produced stuff that the communist factories were too inept to make. Chua writes about all of this in "World on Fire." She has read widely in ancient and modern history and interviewed people who lived through the beginnings of Russian-style capitalism. This babe did her homework.

And then there's "The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother." [To buy the book from Amazon, [click here](#). For the Kindle download, [click here](#).] It's being marketed as an autobiography or a memoir, but what it really is is a reality TV show. So much of Chua's parenting manifesto — the shrieking, the threats, the punishments needed to harass kids into becoming top academic performers and musicians — is nothing more than Donald Trump bullying and shaming the apprentices who want to work for him. It hurts to watch, but you can't look away. It's weird that Chua, who despises crass "Western" pop culture, nonetheless has rushed out an exposé of her life so brazen that Dr. Phil would be speechless.

The critics are having a blast. They have called Chua a "wimp" (David Brooks), a narcissist (Janet Maslin) and the mother of all sexual basket cases (Susie Bright). Except for Elizabeth Kolbert's review in The New Yorker, less attention has gone to Amy Chua the writer. Hard to figure because the writing in "Tiger Mother" is so clichéd it's tough to take the ideas seriously. That's what you get when you let a committee — made up of your husband and children — edit your manuscript. And that might explain why Chua's two Samoyeds get as much or more airplay than Florence, her mother-in-law.

Some big brain in the Chua household might at least have edited out the howlers. Like this one about sibling rivalry: "There are all kinds of psychological disorders in the West that don't exist in Asia."

Puh-leaze.

If you want to know something about the deeply complex Chinese people, read anything by Eileen Chang. She was the brilliant author of [Love in a Fallen City](#), a short story collection replete with First Sisters, Second Sisters and Third Sisters who stab each other in the back and make each other miserable for generations. Chang's sibling characters make ours look like pikers.

Those of us who detest Amy Chua would fill Yankee Stadium.

But don't save me a seat because I actually think Chua is getting a raw deal. I do not believe for a second that she is crippling her daughters, turning them into intellectual automatons and consigning them to a life without orgasms. Chua is looking at an American cultural scene whose universities are starting to eliminate foreign language programs; whose libraries are curtailing the purchase of new books; whose high schools are producing students who rank 17th worldwide in reading and 31st in math. She reminds me of the tribal leader in [The Emerald Forest](#) who kidnaps a little American boy to save him from the fate of becoming one more happy, stupid, fat . . . Westerner.

Chua's parenting ideology is extreme, and this business of calling her kids "garbage" is off the hook. But she sees where the culture is heading and she doesn't want her kids to end up there.

They won't. Chua's girls already occupy an elite station in American life. They are part of a tiny educated cohort that plays classical music, speaks Mandarin and French, reads Socrates and knows what algorithms are for. Elites always have had a strict hand in shaping their children's education, and they know you cannot be original until you have done your homework.

In other words, when Darius of Persia needs a bridge built over the Bosphorus to cross into Europe, he doesn't choose a Coca-Cola-swilling, iPod-addicted, Jay Z-worshipping piece of garbage to do the job!

It's time to stop pitying Chua's privileged, loved daughters for practicing piano or violin five hours a day and doing two thousand math problems a night. They aren't suffering any disadvantage. It's only us poor benighted "Westerners" who won't accept, as Aristotle did, that "we are what we repeatedly do."

I guess we'd all better stop complaining that babies don't come with an instruction manual. They do now. Use as directed. But *caveat emptor*. Results may vary, as Chua herself came to see in the course of her gonzo mothering.

Guest Butler Barbara Finkelstein is the author of [Summer Long-a-coming](#) (Harper & Row, 308 pp). She is at work on "Repenting at Leisure," a novel of indeterminate length. Her last piece for HeadButler.com was a [defense of long books](#).

Bonus: Stephen Colbert spins Amy Chua's head.

The Colbert Report
Amy Chua

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