

On Chinese Family Education from “Tiger Mother” Phenomenon

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Abstract

This paper discusses Chinese family education through discussing the “tiger mother” phenomenon. The author firstly explains what the “tiger mother” education or “tiger mother” phenomenon is; then introduces the Chinese family education from its concepts, aims, methods and contents; analyzes the underlying reasons for the appearance of “Tiger Mother” phenomenon---combination of Chinese family education and the special American social background. At last, the paper offers some suggestions to Chinese parents on their education of their children.

Keywords: “Tiger Mother” phenomena; Chinese family education; suggestions

I. INTRODUCTION

In the modern society, people pay much attention to family education, which has become a hot topic. Family education is a kind of teaching by which parents and elder generation educate children or teenagers and even family members educate each other. Family education, a part of lifelong education, is the foundation and backbone of school education. A good orientation and high quality family education would not only bring a nation a promising future, but also lead children a happy life. It is closely related to tens of thousands of families’ vital benefits and urgent needs and has drawn people’s concern.

In 2011, the book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* written by Amy Chua, a Chinese American, attracted many people’s attention. In America, this educational method caused a stir in American educational field. Many people, accordingly, talked about it as well as Chinese family education. In China, great attention is

given to the book and specialists and scholars ponder deeply over Chinese family education and have different ideas on it.

Someone called “tiger mother” education a typical Chinese family pattern. Others disagreed and thought it was just a special case of Chinese family education and could not stand for the Chinese family education as a whole. Actually, the “tiger mother” education or phenomenon is the combination of Chinese family education with the concrete American condition.

Chinese family education has its merit in training children to be well-disciplined, while its demerit is that it might curb children’s individuality and creativity. This paper, by analyzing the “Tiger Mother” phenomenon, will attempt to explore some new ideas about Chinese family education. As we know, there are one thousand Hamlets in one thousand readers’ eyes. About family education, every family has its own answer. Whatever kind of culture it comes from, a successful family education must be based on the love for kids (Chua, 2011).

II. THE PHENOMEONON OF "TIGER MOTHER"

“Tiger Mother” is a hot term in recent years. In 2011, the book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* written by Amy Lynn Chua was published, which rapidly drew people’s attention. In this book which is an autobiography, the author talks about the family education mode she uses. She says she uses iron hand, which includes curse, menace, bribery and so on, so as to make her children walk on the way she chooses for them. She calls her daughters “rubbish”, requiring that they should get “A” on every subject except PE. She would not provide them with food if they could

not do well in the piano lesson or other courses. This kind of education method seems to be extremely strict. She even formulates “Ten Prohibitions”. The following things are what the sisters are never allowed to do:

- Attend a sleepover
- Have a play-date
- Be in a school play
- Complain about not be in a school play
- Watch TV or play computer games
- Choose their own extra-curricular activities
- Any grades lower than A
- Not be the No.1 students in every subject except PE and drama
- Play any instrument other than the piano or violin
- Not play violin or piano

To some degree, the family education of “Tiger Mother” is successful. Under such a strict, even cold-blooded educational way, by Chua’s account, her elder daughter, Sophia, played the piano, complied and excelled at Carnegie Hall when she was 14; the younger sister became the concertmaster of the class Yale Youth Orchestra at her 12-year-old. They have had no grades lower than “A” since they became students.

About the “Tiger Mother” Phenomenon, there are three primary standpoints. Firstly, many American scholars call it Chinese family education. They would just view it as another opportunity to hype so-called “China Threat”, such as what is expressed in an article entitled “Tiger Mothers, another Chinese phenomenon America fears”. Secondly, some Chinese scholars do not admit it and consider it as a kind of American family education. It is practically made by America, though it is superficially made by China (Zhang Jing, 2011). Thirdly, there is also another kind of view. Many people see “Tiger Mother” education just as a special case of Chinese family education. “I do not think ‘tiger mother’ phenomenon is the representative of Chinese family education, although something like it does exist in some Chinese families.”, Ruby Murray

Jones said, the principal of Hounslow, when she answered the question from BBC English about how she viewed “Tiger Mother” education.

Whether the “Tiger mother” education is typical Chinese family education or not? Or which kind of family education the “Tiger Mother” one belongs to? This is the question this paper would attempt to answer.

III. CHINESE FAMILY EDUCATION

Chinese family education is rich and profound, like the Chinese traditional culture, both of which are extensive and profound, starting far back and running a long, long course.

Whether the “Tiger Mother” phenomenon is Chinese family education or not? What is Chinese family education? This is the question we would try to answer briefly. In the following, this paper would analyze Chinese family education from its concepts, aims, methods and contents.

A. Concepts of Chinese Family Education

The family education concepts to family education are what roots to a tree. So the difference of educational concepts is the main reason for producing all kinds of family educations. A child is the center of a family. As it was deep-rooted in Chinese people’s mind that children can bring hopes and wishes to a family, they pay all their attention to their children.

Chinese parents have a great influence on children’s future, which is closely related to tens of thousands of families’ vital benefits and urgent needs. They lay all their hopes on their children. They often design a future for children, no matter children like it or not. They believe their choices are the best for children. Parents believe that a promising future means a good job, a good life, which is their largest expectation to children. And parents would like to do their utmost to provide children with a more favorable growing environment--for they believe that everything they have done is worthy if children could get a better future.

And during this process of giving, “high marks” is Chinese parents’ first concern and is

considered to be the only mission and goal for children on the path of development. At the same time, they ignore their children's other abilities, disrespect their children's imaginations and wishes.

B. Aim of Chinese Family Education

To make children become an outstanding personage is the aim of the Chinese parents. Their aim is to make their children be a "dragon" (In Chinese traditional culture, dragon is the symbol of power, nobility and honor, and is a symbol of good luck and success; in Chinese feudal society, dragon is the symbol of emperor.), which is called "wang zi cheng long (望子成龙) or wang nv cheng feng (望女成凤)" in China ("Long" is dragon and "feng" is phoenix, they are the symbolic image of emperorship in traditional society, which means that parents hope their children to be the best one and their children have greater achievements in their study, employments and careers.) For Chinese parents, the aim of education is to help children to be excellent and honorable. Chinese parents pay much attention to educating their children to be useful and capable; if not, parents would feel shameful and degrading.

To be honorable is a challenging aim. As the saying goes, "Scholars are at the pinnacle of social ranking". Then, to achieve the aim, parents care most about children's academic achievements. Chinese parents' preoccupation is that their children can concentrate their whole attention on study. Nowadays, being honorable means children's obligation to get high marks in study and be well-developed in dancing, music, piano and painting, which is against Chinese children's will and make them feel very tired and bored.

C. Ways of Chinese Family Education

The ways of a family education are of great importance. In one sense, the family education should show the relationship between parents and children. What parents do is to make children regard them as their friends indeed, making children think whether they are their own master.

The family education way in China is often no more than the mode of "teaching by holding his hand". Parents prefer to directly tell children results

instead of showing children the process. Parents would like to give children right answers, rather than to make them learn from failures. Over time, children will suffer from psychological dependence, ignoring the importance of self-exploration. And that's why most Chinese students lack creativity.

Most Chinese parents are strict and serious. As the old Chinese sayings go, "Strict masters produce outstanding students"; "Beating means love, and scolding means affection". Both of them suggest that parents should be strict with their children. In Chinese traditional culture, parents are educators instead of friends to children. In such culture, children are supposed to be obedient and are regarded as filial accordingly; otherwise, they would be labelled unfilial. What's more, Chinese parents pay more attention to children's school records other than their all-round development. It can be found from the following scenes easily: parents take their children to various kinds of lessons after school, which makes children miss their enjoyment of childhood.

D. Contents of Chinese Family Education

The contents of a family education can show the concepts, aim and ways of a family education. The contents of a family education are the real steps to educate a child.

The contents of Chinese family education can be divided into moral education, intellectual education, physical education and artistic education, among which intellectual education is the most important.

Moral education is the core of family education. Chinese parents usually tell children to be honest to their country, parents, friends, and almost all people; to be friendly, compassionate etc. All in all, parents would like to educate a child to be a person belonging to the society. The moral education is a way parents try to socialize their children.

The intellectual education is a part of education which parents attach great importance to. Parents almost do whatever they could to make certain that their children would immerse themselves in study. Therefore, Chinese students have been called the best learners. It's common that there are

many students with high marks enrolled in prestigious universities.

The artistic education is also an important part in Chinese education. Even in feudal society, when people thought “innocence is the virtue for women”, people still took it for granted that a graceful woman should be a master of poetry and painting.

The physical education is also an indispensable part in Chinese family education. As the saying goes, good health is the capital of revolution, which shows that Chinese people emphasize physical education. Especially in modern world, people focus more on it as they realize the importance of physical education.

Whether parents emphasize moral education or intellectual education or others, however, they may mostly forget to teach their children the ability to live and the spirit of adventure.

IV. THE REAL REASONS FOR THE APPEARANCE OF "TIGER MOTHER" PHENOMENON

From all the above, the “Tiger Mother” education would be something like the Chinese family education. In the USA, the publication of the book, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, led to intense reaction, people talked about it endlessly. Even the Wall Street Journal published an essay entitled *Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior?*

Nevertheless, whether Chua, as a Chinese American, can really be the prime example of success for the Chinese family education? If so, why not every Chinese child are as excellent as her daughters? Then there must be something lost, something important but not easy to see.

A. Superficially Made by China

As this paper has analyzed, in some sense, the “Tiger Mother” education is similar to Chinese family education, or is one kind of Chinese family education.

Firstly, about family educational concept, the “Tiger Mother” requires the sisters no grades lower than “A”. As a mother, she hopes her children

to have a bright future, therefore she draws up so many dos and don'ts to make sure that children would get “good” marks and be promising.

Secondly, about the educational aim, the aim for the “Tiger Mother” is to make her children be outstanding and excellent. She requests the sisters no grades lower than “A”, which may show others that her children are excellent. What's more, to achieve the requirements of the modern society, she also makes them learn to play the violin and piano every day.

Then, about the educational method, there is also something similar between the “tiger mother” education and Chinese family education. In her book, Chua tells that when Sophia came in second in a multiplication speed test at school, Chua made her do 20 practice tests every night for a week, supervising her with a stopwatch. This method is useful, after it Sophia is the No.1 every time. She chooses the life-road for her daughters, thinking it is the best way to success whereas children do not have rights to say “no”. In this way she is almost a Chinese mother.

Finally, As far as we can see, her intellectual education is successful. The “Tiger Mother”, Chua, may be successful in educating children, as both of her daughters get into prestigious universities.

Chua thinks getting high marks is the only measure of success, who makes the best choice for her daughters. As long as something is good for children, she would use compulsive means, neglecting children's wills. This makes her children do according to her wish. All those no doubt make “Tiger Mother” have something similar to Chinese mothers, but the “Tiger Mother” even goes farther. Ignoring children's wishes and self-esteems, she makes choices for them, asks for absolute obedience to disciplines, and interferes with children's business in her view.

In a sense, the “Tiger Mother” could be called autocratic. Is her education the transmission of Chinese traditional culture?

B. Made by America in its Bone

Could the education of a Chinese-American be called Chinese family education? Could an

education case in America represent Chinese family education? Are there some other reasons for it?

1) *The American Family Education*

Nowadays, it is common that many American educators condemn Chinese government and parents for they put too many burdens on children. Americans always proclaim that their education is to make their children have a happy and wonderful childhood. However, it is not the case.

As a stereotype, American children are lucky and have a happy childhood even have a happy life, who have enough freedom and their individuality would be fully respected, without the pressure to enter a better high school.

However, the opposite is actually true. American schools often have strict rules and regulations: students have a lot of homework, whose requirement is constantly changing, and the complex content is too difficult for students. What is worse, in America the examination and enrollment system of the 4-year-degree university is a big challenge, which makes students work hard, not daring to ignore every subject.

In addition, with the spring up of the new American elites and the continually widening gaps between the rich and the poor, the families of the elite society never slack off in educating children, and make strict demands on children. In order to occupy the high-end workstation, from their childhood, children are trained to be a perfect person, who must have these comprehensive qualities such as creativity, imagination, leadership, and artistic flavor, etc.

Parents do their best to lay a good foundation for their children's future so as to make them assume absolute superiority in education, to practice their leadership skills, to help them be in an invincible position in the future competition. Xue Yong, a scholar, in his book *How do the Americans Educate the Elites* mentioned: "in fact, the piano lessons are the process to shape the cultural tastes of the American future elites" (Xue, 2005:3).

2) *The American Social Reality*

America is a country composed of immigrants from different countries. To achieve

"American Dream" is the life goal for most of them, but to the Asian American their "American Dream" is to become the "Model Minority". The "Model Minority", in 1866, was firstly used to praise the hard work and discipline of the Asian Americans, since then "model minority" has been used to describe the successful Asian Americans.

The "model minorities" are Asian Americans who have done remarkably well in achieving "the American dream" of getting a good education, working at a good job, and earning a good living. The "model minority" is a bright, shining example of hard work and patience which should be followed by other minority groups. Being successful, being passive, being obedient and being loyal are the model of all the ethnic minorities in America and becoming the model is their American Dream.

To some extent, Ms. Chua's achievements are completely in line with the requirements of a "Model Minority".

Ms. Chua's father is the model of her and her sisters, as she is the model of her children. Ms. Chua was born in a typical immigrant family. Her father successfully became a part of the American society through his hard work and his own efforts. Her father set strict demands on her and her sisters. Strict parental discipline creates the basic atmosphere in this family.

Undoubtedly, the "Tiger Mother" is excellent from her early ages. In 1984, she graduated from the Harvard's economics department. In 1987, she held a Juris Doctor degree from Harvard Law School and then worked for the court in New York. In 2001, she was employed by the Yale Law School, being the youngest female professor of law there. The "Tiger Mother" is an example of the "model minority", whose American Dream comes true.

Nevertheless, is setting the "model minority" for the Asian American really what they want to be? No! Today the Asian Americans, who are called the "model minority", have to withstand more stress, make more efforts and obtain a higher degree compared with common people. The American society gives such a little room to the Asian

Americans that the Asian Americans, in the face of reality, have to work harder and value education more to change destiny by knowledge.

Many Asian American parents believe that their way to success is the best one, and then they force it on their children, pushing children forward. The “Tiger Mother” is one case in point. The family education pattern she adopted, which is a result under pressure to survive but not a part of the Chinese family education, shows the Asian Americans’ helplessness in the western world that are dominated by the white people.

The “Tiger Mother” has little in common with Chinese mothers. Once a famous returnee, Hong Huang, said what Ms. Chua had done like a dictator. There is no other Chinese mother like her as no one treats her child as she does. As a professor in law field, she may be self-glorified and narcissistic.

The “Tiger Mother” Chua’s education is based on the strict disciplines and accompanied with fight and condemnation, which does not belong to the education of the Chinese family education, but is really caused by the American reality.

V. SOME IDEAS FOR THE CHINESE EDUCATORS

Apparently, the “Tiger Mother”, Ms. Chua’s book has made a hit in American as well as in China. In China, educators and parents not only pay attention to the “Tiger Mother” family education, but also care about the prospective of Chinese family education.

What should Chinese family education be? What should the Chinese parents do? Here are some ideas.

Firstly, modernize family educational idea. Parents should change the home education concept, purpose, method and content, which demand the rejection of obsolete educational ideas and to keep pace with the times. Meanwhile, Chinese outstanding family educational tradition should be inherited. A modern family education is supposed to establish modern family educational mechanism, standardize family educational management, closely follow the development of knowledge economy and information

age, further open up the family educational mentality, and enhance the family opening consciousness.

Secondly, establish parents’ or guardians’ concept of law and democracy in education. Parents should deal with educational work in accordance with the law, enhancing family educational consciousness of democracy, respecting children and their willing. Democracy is important in family education as the really successful family education only comes from a democratic family. Parents should change the inappropriate style of educating a child in an oversimplified or even in a crude way or even in corporal punishment.

Thirdly, adopt scientific educational method. To enhance children’s self-respect, self-confidence and desire to do better, parents should adopt a family education of encouragement, guidance, and tolerance. Children raised in this kind of family education are more self-confident and socially communicative. Furthermore, parents should set up a new family educational idea, taking “to teach a child how to live” as the most important idea of family education. Besides, making full use of the advantage of love education is useful, which makes children more excellent both in study and personality. In developing personalization education, parents should keep in mind that every child is unique and adopt different family education ways.

Fourthly, start family education from childhood. Parents or guardians should perform this duty promptly. Parents should do the missionary work when the infant is young. Judging from its facial expression, parents know whether it is angry or happy, then give instructions. Children always are curious about things around and have a very strong learning capability, whose parents should correct and help him or her when he or she makes mistakes.

Fifthly, pay attention to training children’s aspiration to knowledge and cultivating their reading habit. Reading is the best way to get information and knowledge. As the saying goes, “where there is a will, there is a way”, children would learn as much as they could only when they want to learn and have interest in it.

The last but not the least, attach importance to teaching by personal example as well as verbal instruction. Parents are children's models, whose simple movement is usually more effective than inculcation of ten thousand of instructions.

VI. CONCLUSION

Family education is important and crucial to children, which should be recognized by parents, even all the family members. What's more, how to educate children is a lesson which should be learned by parents throughout their life.

This paper briefly explains what the family education is, what the Chinese family education is really like, simply analyzing the reasons for the phenomenon of the "tiger mother", and finally gives some ideas to Chinese parents.

The purpose to write this paper is to give some ideas to parents so that they could have their own ideas when they educate their children, who would be "excellent" and have a more bright future.

Throughout the whole family education, parents play an important role. Parents' goal is to cultivate all-around future elites who are healthy, happy, polite, refined, cooperative, curious, independent and confident. To achieve this goal, parents as well as educators rack their brains, putting forward many educational systems.

Nevertheless, there is not a "one size fits all" approach to educate all children since each individual has his own difference and uniqueness. Thousands of years ago, Confucius held the notion of teaching students according to their specific aptitude. As the "Tiger Mother" herself said in her book, every child is unique and parents should adopt different family education.

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