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# Roaring Tigers, Anxious Choppers

By Nancy Gibbs

The Asian tiger mom that Amy Chua portrays in her new book may seem like just one more species in the genus Extreme Parent — the counterpart to the hovering American *Parents helicopterus* or the Scandinavian Curling Parents, who frantically rush ahead of their children, sweeping their paths clear of the tiniest obstacles.

The common characteristics include an obsession with a child's success, a reflex to treat kids as extensions or reflections of oneself and patterns of conduct that impartial observers might class as insane if not criminal, if not both. In Chua's case, this famously includes prohibiting grades lower than an A, TV, playdates and sleepovers, and warning her pianist child that "if the next time's not PERFECT, I'm going to TAKE ALL YOUR STUFFED ANIMALS AND BURN THEM." In the case of the classic Western helicopter parent, it starts with Baby Einstein and reward charts for toilet training, and it never really ends, which is why colleges have to devote so many resources to teaching parents how to leave their kids alone.

But it is the differences between the Tigers and the Choppers that help explain the furor Chua has caused, at least in the U.S. Tigers fixate on success, defined as achievement in precision-oriented fields like music and math; Choppers are obsessed with failure and preventing it at all costs. Tigers operate in a culture of discipline; Choppers, in a culture of fear. Tigers view children as tough, able to take the abuse; Choppers view them as precious, to be raised under glass. Their fury at a bad grade is more likely to land on the teacher than on the child.

And if Chua appears to sentence her children to slave labor, Western parents enshrine their children and crave their friendship. "The thing that impresses me most about America," observed Edward, Duke of Windsor, who knew something about indulgence, "is the way parents obey their children." There is something bracing about Chua's apparent indifference to her daughters' hostility, especially for parents who have learned that even if you let your teenagers spend 50 hours a week on Facebook, they'll still find reasons to hate you. (My favorite title of a parenting book: *Get Out of My Life, but First Could You Drive Me and Cheryl to the Mall?*)

The reactions to Chua's book, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, have ranged from praise for her honesty to scorn for her "extreme, rigid and authoritarian approach," as one critic put it. But in less hysterical precincts, she elicits a more conflicted response. First reaction: My God, she's crazy. Second reaction: Maybe she's right. I suspect one reason the book has touched such a nerve is a suspicion among the Choppers that an excessive fear of failure guarantees it — that if you don't let your kids get clobbered now and then by a tough teacher, they'll never have the resilience to thrive as adults in a competitive economy.

Twenty-first century parenting already seemed like a gladiatorial contest, its battles fought in playgrounds, at book clubs and especially online, with the rise of parenting websites where parents — O.K., mainly moms — claw and bite. You let your toddler have Froot Loops? You quit karate lessons? Western parents may exalt freedom and self-expression, but in many ZIP codes, parenting is a highly conformist activity, with protocols every bit as strict as Chua's. Commenters spank the moms who appear insufficiently committed to breast feeding ("You literally make me shudder," reads one response on UrbanBaby.com).

Some of Chua's critics sound just as smug when they declare that the Tigers' "inside-the-box thinking is why Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Michael Dell and/or a cure for cancer will never come from China." Too much discipline, they argue, makes for submissiveness and lack of imagination, because imagination by its nature is subversive; it colors outside the lines. Likewise, invention, the creation of something utterly new, violates the authority of the present and the tyranny of tradition.

But this much derision, I suspect, reflects some doubts. Western families have no monopoly on happiness, and those of the helicopter variety at least do not exactly encourage wild individuality in their children. Trust your instincts, Dr. Spock advised back in 1946; but that involves a leap of faith that many modern parents find terrifying. Helicopter parents are great believers in expertise: read enough books, consult enough professionals, and you can crack the parenting code. Chua's daughters are, by all accounts, girls any parent would be proud of. But maybe the real appeal is her tone of certainty in discussing something so confounding as child rearing — as if it's a puzzle to be solved rather than a picture to be painted, and there's no way to know what it will look like until it's done.