



The Mall

Mother Superior

How Chinese is the “Chinese mom”?

AMY CHUA’S *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, a memoir about raising children “the Chinese way,” has provoked, well, a reaction. An excerpt in *The Wall Street Journal* received more than 7,000 online comments; Facebook posts have reached the hundreds of thousands; and *The New York Times* alone ran five articles on the book in a single week, all thanks to only-half-facetious passages like this: “[T]he 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.” As Chua recounts calling one daughter “garbage” when she failed to pass muster, as well as hauling the other daughter’s dollhouse to the car, threatening to donate it “piece by piece” to the Salvation Army if she didn’t master a certain song on the piano, many of the comments are naturally about parenting; and certainly the question of whether Chua’s methods amount to child abuse is a hot button. So, too, is the question of how much discipline is good for a child, especially since Chua has apparent results to show for her wicked ways: straight-A report cards and her older daughter’s piano debut at Carnegie Hall, made while she was in the eighth grade.

Yet, for all the talk about self-esteem and mother love, a large part of the reaction is plain American insecurity. As *Business Insider*, an online magazine, proclaimed, “If the goal is efficiency, excel-

lence, and success, it would seem that this Chinese mother, at least, has most American mothers beat. And it’s not hard to extrapolate that superiority toward a future world in which China wins and Americans dream of glory days when we were hungry, committed, and self-disciplined, too.” Can we really extrapolate such a future world, though, from Chua’s book? Indeed, is “the Chinese way” it extols even, to begin with, Chinese?

A BIT OF CONTEXT: Chua is the American-born daughter of ethnic Chinese parents raised in the Philippines. As such, she is heir to all that has made Chinese culture what it is. This includes an enormous population; a shortage of arable land; the ever-present threats of famine, invasion, and chaos; a corresponding emphasis on hierarchy and control; and the centrality

of exams as a way to move one’s family up in the hierarchy and, in many cases, out of the jaws of misery and starvation. The traditional lore is full of stories about scholars whose families scraped and saved to support their studies, as well as scholars who successfully passed civil-service exams, attained official positions, and were then able to return their families’ help; academic achievement in China has never been academic. And, while the imperial exam system ended in 1905, the strong association of education with survival has endured. My own Chinese father, for example, was able to leave China during World War II as the result of an exam, and the National College Entrance Exam, the *gaokao*, dominates the lives of students in China today to a degree almost unimaginable in the United States. A highly driven, goal-oriented

Amy Chua recounts calling her daughter “garbage” when she failed to pass muster.



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approach to learning underlies Chua's "Chinese way" and must be taken into account by anyone trying to understand China today.

But, in the 1920s and 1930s, Chua's grandparents decamped from their native Fujian province for the Philippines, and this, too, has shaped Chua's Chinese-ness. Her family did find the greater opportunity they sought: Chua's grandmother made a fortune making packaging for Johnson & Johnson. Living, though—as many Chinese in Southeast Asia still do—at the apex of their society, the Chuas both enjoyed the fruits of their position and dealt constantly with an understandably hostile native underclass. Chua describes, in an earlier book, *World on Fire*, how her aunt was knifed by her chauffeur in her living room: "I could not understand my relatives' matter-of-fact, almost indifferent attitude," she writes of her family's reaction to the murder. "Why were they not more shocked that my aunt had been killed in cold blood, by people who worked for her, lived with her, saw her every day? ... When I pressed my uncle, he was short with me. 'That's the way things are here,' he said. 'This is the Philippines—not America.'" Chua goes on: "I will never forget the entry in the police report for [the chauffeur's] 'motive for murder.' The motive given was not robbery, despite the jewels and money [he] was said to have taken. Instead, for motive, there was just one word—'Revenge.'" Is it really hard to imagine that Chinese-ness as Chua understood it might be edged with vigilance? It could be that many a Chinese mother would refuse, as Chua does, to let her children go on sleepovers or participate in school plays. These things seem to me, though, to be speak insulation as much as discipline and to signal an interest not so much in finding a place in society as in eking out a spot at its top.

Chua's "Chinese way" seems to have been additionally colored by her parents' immigration in the 1960s to America. By her own account, her family was oriented to America while living in the Philippines: They "converted to Protestantism," she says, "and began using forks and spoons instead of chopsticks, to be more like Americans." Chua's father was, too, in his youth, an Americanophile par excellence. "[H]e hated the grubbing, backstabbing world of his family's plastics business," writes Chua. "Even as a boy, he was desperate to get to America. ... [I]t was a dream come true when

the Massachusetts Institute of Technology accepted his application." Attaining his Ph.D. in short order, he then stayed in the United States, moving with Chua's mother to Indiana to take an assistant professorship at Purdue University. Chua fondly recalls his excitement about "tacos, sloppy joes, Dairy Queen, and all-you-can-eat buffets, not to mention sledding, skiing, crabbing, and camping."



However, Chua also describes "a boy in grade school making slanty-eyed gestures at me, guffawing as he mimicked the way I pronounced restaurant (rest-OW-rant)," and recalls, "I vowed at that moment to rid myself of my Chinese accent." Chinese accent? As a Chinese-American of similar background who speaks English with a New York accent, I can't help but question whether the accent caused the taunts, or if it was the other way around. (And is it not striking that an American-born woman should count herself a "Chinese mother" to begin with?) It's true that Chua's parents were bent on holding onto their heritage: Chua remembers that she was "required to speak Chinese at home [suffering] ... one whack of the chopsticks for every English word accidentally uttered." Still, one has to wonder how welcome Chua's family felt in the Midwest and if the reality of America measured up to their dreams. Had they managed to find themselves an isolated minority in a foreign society once again? It seems at least plausible that Chua's Chinese-ness assumed an import it might not have in other circumstances.

But to return to the question: Can we extrapolate something about the future from Chua's "Chinese way"? Well, yes and no. Those who are spooked by the specter of the Chinese drive to succeed are probably right to be on alert: While not every Chinese is a striver, many are hungry in a way we Americans aren't and will go to lengths most Americans won't. And yet, in China, parenting is also changing. While in the countryside old habits die hard, some city mothers are becoming more permissive, according to journalists Huang Hung of *The Daily Beast* and Melinda Liu of *Newsweek*; and some parents are bemoaning the creativity-crushing pressures of the schools. (I myself remember vividly the military-like exercises my son did in a Chinese middle school in Beijing, as well as the godlike behavior of the teachers.) I wonder, too, by the way, whether some of the fantastically spoiled "little emperors" produced by China's one-child rule

ANTHONY RUSSO

will really prove the stuff of lean, mean world dominators.

It would be unfair to say that Amy Chua's Chinese-ness is not Chinese: Ethnic enclaves have been known to preserve a home culture in a far more pristine state than does the country of origin. But perhaps we should keep Chua's personal context in mind before extrapolating too much. Her "Chinese way" tells us at least as much about migration and identity and yes, America, as it does about China today.

GISH JEN

Gish Jen's most recent novel is WORLD AND TOWN.

Beyond Comparison

Sarah Palin and the blood libel.

ON FEBRUARY 13, 1903, a peasant in the Russian town of Dubossary found the body of a 14-year-old boy, Mikhail Rybachenko, in a garden by the Dniester River. Rybachenko had disappeared the Sunday before, after attending church with his grandparents. His corpse was strikingly thin and pale. The body bore multiple bruises and stab wounds; holes appeared by the main arteries. Quickly, a rumor spread that someone had systematically drained his blood. Rybachenko had supposedly last been seen entering a Jewish shop, and an explanation began to circulate: A Christian girl had heard her Jewish employers say that they needed Christian blood to make the matzo for Passover.

The medical examiner disputed these reports—but, since he was Jewish, many did not believe him. The authorities interrogated 30 witnesses, including the Christian woman (who denied that she had heard her employers say anything about blood and matzo). A Christian medical examiner carried out a second autopsy and agreed with his Jewish colleague that the killing had not been a ritual murder. Yet the theory didn't subside. In fact, it spread, after being picked up by the local newspaper, *Bessarabets*, and the *Novoe vremia* of St. Petersburg. Then a Christian housemaid who worked for a Jewish family in Kishinev died, apparently from poisoning herself, and rumor claimed her as a second victim. On Easter Sunday, a two-day pogrom began. Many Jews were killed, many more were injured. For decades to come, Kishinev would symbolize the "blood libel" and the harm it did to innocent Jews.

In recent weeks, the phrase "blood libel" has found its way to the center

of our political debate, thanks to Sarah Palin. When pundits criticized Palin and other conservatives for creating a climate of hatred that helped to explain the Tucson shootings, she responded in a Web video: "Especially within hours of a tragedy unfolding, journalists and pundits should not manufacture a blood libel that serves only to incite the very hatred and violence they purport to condemn."

Palin has been widely denounced for using this historical comparison to exaggerate the attacks against her. And it is true that the metaphor she chose made for an inaccurate description of recent events. But, as a historian, I don't just worry about people using history to misdescribe the present. I also worry about the damage that such metaphors can do to the history itself.

THE BELIEF THAT Jews murdered Christian boys appeared as early as the twelfth century, when the Jews of Norwich were accused of murdering a tanner named William (later regarded as a saint). The Benedictine Thomas of Monmouth, who wrote a life of William, described it as a ritual killing. In addition to eyewitness testimony by Christians, he cited the supposed words of a Jew named Theobald who had converted to Christianity: "He verily told us that in the ancient writings of his fathers it was written that the Jews, without the shedding of human blood, could neither obtain their freedom, nor could they ever return to their fatherland. Hence it was laid down by them in ancient times that every year they must sacrifice a Christian in some part of the world to the Most High God in scorn and contempt of Christ, that so they might avenge their sufferings on Him; inasmuch as it was because of Christ's death that they had been shut out from their own country, and were in exile as slaves in a foreign land."

The pattern was set: Jews had admitted that their religion required them to kill Christians, or so Christian authorities claimed. By 1475, when the Jews of Trent were indicted for murdering a Christian boy named Simon, their interrogators knew a great deal about the Passover ritual and tortured the accused to make them confess that they needed Christian blood. From Norwich to Trent to Kishinev and beyond, the collective fantasy crystallized, found believers, and did its work. It rested—when it rested on anything—on Christian rumors, Jewish testimony extorted by torture, and statements like

that of Theobald, the origin of which is not clear.

Still, if the exact origins of these slanders are uncertain, the intentions with which Christians uttered them are not. The blood libel—usually called the blood accusation in older historical and reference works—gave those who hated Jews a reason for their feelings. Accepting it as fact allowed everyone from members of mobs to monastic hagiographers to portray Jews as enemies of the human race and the Christian religion.

Palin was not the only one to use the phrase during the national debate over the Tucson shootings. Writing in *The Wall Street Journal*, Glenn Reynolds accused left-wing pundits of committing a blood libel when they claimed that right-wing pundits were in some way responsible for the killings. Meanwhile, *The Washington Times* defended Palin for employing the phrase, and, hurling all its comparisons into one basket, even described the attack on her as part of an "ongoing pogrom against conservative thinkers." It's a little hard to see what the editorial writers had in mind: Conservatives challenged by the left retain their civil rights, their property, and their absolute right to free speech, which they are exercising vigorously in every forum available. Nor has anyone attempted to indict them for carrying out ritual killings.

In 1946, George Orwell wrote: "When one watches some tired hack on the platform mechanically repeating the familiar phrases—bestial atrocities, iron heel, bloodstained tyranny, free peoples of the world, stand shoulder to shoulder—one often has a curious feeling that one is not watching a live human being but some kind of dummy: a feeling which suddenly becomes stronger at moments when the

light catches the speaker's spectacles and turns them into blank discs which seem to have no eyes behind them. And this is not altogether fanciful. A speaker who uses that kind of phraseology has gone some distance toward turning himself into a machine."

Used in its proper sense, "blood libel" evokes real history, the fantasies that caused the suffering and death of real, innocent people. If it is applied to the noise of political debate, it will become an empty slogan. And the ghosts who wander the streets of Europe and the former Pale of Settlement, of Syria and Iran, will be left without a name for what they endured.

ANTHONY GRAFTON

