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# The Trouble With Tiger Culture

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Cultural narcissism is as old as, well, culture. The only way in which my cultural superiority can be established objectively, outside my own vanity, is to settle on a specific task and then test my culture against competitors. As an individual, I'm objectively good on the guitar and shockingly bad at tennis and calculus. I'm also pretty good at imagining that guitar skills are somehow "higher" than tennis and calculus—which is patently stupid but speaks to the boundless nature of self-aggrandizement. The point is, we always have to frame value questions of higher and lower, better and worse, and such framing is usually fraught with subtle bias and agenda. What we mean by superior and inferior is relative to the frame of success that we're using. And how would we frame objective measures for testing the superiority of one culture over another?

There have always been elites and barbarians, and while the most famous and insidious hierarchies have been racially conceived, other criteria, like language, environment, and religion, have served to carve people into taxonomies of us and them. The last major kerfuffle over this was when Stephen Jay Gould, Howard Gardner, and others debunked the IQ craze of the 1990s (exemplified by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray's *The Bell Curve*). The issue of framing was crucial there because a brilliant test-taker doesn't make a brilliant musician, athlete, social adept, or survivalist. The contextual frame dictates the values of superior and inferior, but that doesn't make excellence relative in the sense that it's whatever we say it is. Rather, it makes excellence contingent on a specific environment or social

reality. Gills are great in water but fail on land. Grief counselors need virtuoso empathic skills, and high-speed-train designers require superb engineering acumen.

We're already hearing more about cultural superiority, as the hullabaloo-hungry media feast on *The Triple Package: How Three Unlikely Traits Explain the Rise and Fall of Cultural Groups in America*, a new book from Penguin Press by the "tiger mother" Amy Chua and her husband, Jed Rubenfeld, both law professors at Yale. A review in *Time* magazine denounces the book as evidence of "the new racism." In our current globalized cosmopolitan context, we are concerned with making our children competitively successful, and our poor U.S. test scores—together with the undeniable rise of China and India—have made Americans anxious about the next generation. But what does it mean for one culture to be more successful than another?

The liberal tradition of the past century (since the ascendance of Franz Boas inspired modern anthropology) eschews all hierarchy talk about culture—understandably paying penance for several centuries of colonial ethnocentrism. According to most contemporary cultural anthropologists (still dominantly Boasian), the question of cultural superiority is a harebrained and pernicious idea of yesteryear. But that's academe's view, not the general public's.

Chua and Rubenfeld's new book gives voice to something that nonacademics ruminate about incessantly. It will not do for scholars to dismiss every lay discussion of cultural hierarchy as untutored folk prejudice. People are trying to articulate and understand striking disparities between cultural groups, and they seek a language to do so.

These days, only the simplest minds would argue that cultural superiority is innate, racial, or genetic, but the idea that specific social habits and psychological tendencies create ascendancy is, at the least, compelling and worthy of investigation. It is no trivial matter, for example, that fire-starting (culturally transmitted and sustained) helped some early human populations outcompete other groups. There's no gene for fire-starting, and some paleoarchaeologists argue that our ancestors gained and lost this cultural skill many times before it locked in around 300,000 years ago. A

cultural skill like fire-starting opens the door to better nutrition, defense, and warmth, to safer childhoods, and to technological development. But such cultural success is precarious, and without proper nurturing the fire can go out, with all advantage lost.

What was true then is true now. Specific cultural traditions (transmitted horizontally across group members and vertically down through generations) may predispose groups to success and failure. Such cultural transmission is not based on genetics, or race, or some metaphysical essence. Moreover, one culture's set of successful practices can be adopted by another culture—the traditions are mutable and promiscuous because they are learned habits. For Chua and Rubinfeld, three traits make Jews, Indians, Chinese, Iranians, Lebanese, Nigerians, Cuban exiles, and Mormons more successful than other cultures. According to the authors, all these cultures have a good cocktail of these three ingredients: “superiority complex,” “insecurity motivation,” and “impulse control.”

I'll let other pundits dissect the value of those specific ingredients. Instead, I will offer some perspective as a person who lives in two of the relevant cultures—one gaining ground (Chinese) and one slipping (American gentile). I want to praise the excellence of the cultural groups that are “winning” in Chua's sense, but also consider the sad costs of all that brilliant overachieving.

The new conversation will have China at its center. Chinaphobia is starting to pick up steam. China's exploding economy, expanding military, and growing international prestige frighten Americans. We see our own influence starting to wane abroad and feel the sting of fading prosperity at home. But it might be “tiger mothers” and their progeny that most intimidate American families day to day.

Chinese kids seem hardened for battle by tough-love boot-camp childhoods, whereas our kids are just fat and good at PlayStation and Xbox. There is some evidence that colleges have begun to reverse-discriminate against Asian students in order to keep them from flooding the best programs. Asian kids, the fear seems to be, will dominate the best schools, then the best jobs, and then, and then. ...

My son is a half-Chinese (his mother is from Shanghai) and half-American mutt (I'm a pastiche of Chua and Rubenfeld's "unsuccessful" groups). My son and I understand the tiger mother well. You think Amy Chua is frightening? You ain't seen nothin'. Chua's not even from China; she was born and raised in Illinois. My wife is from the mainland—she grew up during the tail end of the Cultural Revolution. Believe me when I tell you that the discipline, dedication, and maniacal sense of competition is even more intense in mainland-born Chinese of that generation. They weren't just pushing piano lessons and skipping play dates—they were doing all that and smelting their own metal, apportioning rationed food and clothing, denouncing the bourgeois pigs, and trying to survive the centrally planned economy.

Like other Chinese kids, my son has excelled: black belt in kung fu, award-winning pianist, math whiz, and so on. I'd like to take credit for it, but my main role is just enforcing the intense regimen that his mother lays out for us. Many Americans are shocked by the way Asians excel at math and engineering, and secretly wonder about a math gene or some engineering enzyme in the blood. But like almost everything else in ethnic groups, the answer is not biological. The parents just force math, science, and engineering on their kids. The Asian child is not consulted by the tiger parents about what the child wants to study, nor is there an attempt to discern what the child might be naturally good at. That inquiry would be akin to asking the leg of a chair if it wanted to pursue a different function. The happiness of the leg is not the goal. The functioning of the chair (the family, in my little analogy) is the real goal of life.

Why are Chinese people so hard on their kids? It's because the Chinese do not really believe in childhood. They do not see childhood as a special and magical time, as Westerners do. Childhood, for Westerners, is a precious and delicate stage of innocent exploration that must be protected, sustained, and extended as far as possible—before the cruel realities of adulthood make their inevitable demands.

Westerners see childhood as the Freudian stage of narcissism, a paradise governed by the pleasure principle. As you become a tween and then a teen, Westerners expect your pleasure principle to be replaced by the reality principle—you have to transition from irresponsible princess to

responsible citizen. Chinese, on the other hand, tend to see childhood quite differently. For them, childhood is the training ground for adulthood. Being born into a tiger family is like being drafted into the military. Boot camp starts as soon as you can walk. If the child doesn't like this life of endless academic drilling and discipline, well, ... so what? Childhood is not for the child. It's for the adult that the child will eventually become, and also for the aging parents who will eventually collect on the parenting debt.

Most Westerners I know think they are overflowing with filial piety. But Asian filial piety is at a whole different level. Maybe if you're Jewish, you know what I'm talking about. Marriages between Chinese and Jews are common, in part because some of the family cultural ties are similarly binding and dominant. I'm neither Chinese nor Jewish (I'm Dutch American), but I recognize their common tribalism, and I respect it. And I submit that it's this intense family devotion that also helps make the immigrant groups on Chua's and Rubinfeld's list so successful.

Here's how filial piety affects the Chinese psyche. When you are a child, you are not living for yourself, you are training for your future self. And when you're an adult, you're not living for yourself, either, because now you're a parent and you're living for your child and your elderly parent. And when you're an elderly parent—just when you'd think you could relax and put your feet up—it's back to work because now you're living for your grandchild. Then you die.

Of course, many cultures are devoted to family, but that doesn't explain why the Chinese are so good at the most challenging academic disciplines. I suspect that those disciplines are forced on the child for two reasons. One is simply "no pain, no gain." If hard work builds character and skill, then just go for the hardest academic fields you can find. This is a longstanding Confucian precept: Intense effort and discipline open every door. Unlike the more hippie Daoist tradition of Chinese culture—which teaches that one should just "let it be" naturally (Wu wei)—the Confucian model prefers to meddle with and improve upon nature through study, learning, and virtuous action.

Confucianism asserts that knowledge is the mastery of wisdom and skills already laid down by traditions of excellence. It is not personal insight, originality, or creativity. This, I suspect, is partly why Asians shine at Western classical music but not jazz improvisation. Finding personal truths inside yourself is a part of the mystical tradition of China, but Confucius wasn't buying that stuff. "I once spent a whole day and night in meditation," Confucius admitted. "I wish instead that I had spent this time in study." He thought that books and teachers were better than meditation and gurus. Chinese people are still profoundly influenced by the Confucian veneration of academic work.

The second major reason that Chinese parents make their kids study math and engineering is that they are not as dangerous as the humanities. Political upheavals create major problems for students and experts of the humanities because ideological education and re-education work better with blank slates than with intractable historians and philosophers. In countries where leaders were trying to start society over from Year Zero, you could be persecuted for having traditional knowledge.

When your whole culture is built on study, as Confucian cultures are, but knowledge has become politically dangerous, then you protect your children by pushing the ideologically neutral disciplines. Math, engineering, and science are always useful. Marxists, capitalists, theocrats, democracy proponents, even dictators all need bridges, buildings, and information highways.

I've been suggesting, then, my own shortlist of Chinese fire-starters—Confucian reverence for education, filial piety, truncated childhoods—and the benefits of these cultural traditions. But there's a downside.

Chinese people will frequently refer to themselves as the "Jews of Asia." This is said with great pride, and while it trades on all kinds of stereotypes, it's meant to point out that both groups flourish in whatever country to which they immigrate, that both have impressive pecuniary know-how, that both emphasize schooling, and that both have intense family bonds.

But for all their successful cultural similarities, there is an important difference, to my mind, that makes Jewish culture “superior.” Simply put: Where are the Chinese Marx Brothers? The Chinese Three Stooges?

Chinese culture is serious. It rarely cracks a smile. It rarely makes fun of itself. It loses face easily. It doesn't know how to relax and enjoy life. It is strong and determined but highly inflexible. Don't get me wrong, there is Chinese humor, but it consists mostly of wordplay. Apart from the rare “*mo lei tau*” (nonsense) films of Hong Kong, most Chinese humor is semantic. Mandarin allows for linguistic twists of homophones and homonyms that amuse native speakers and befuddle foreigners, but there's nothing like Jewish humor, which acts like a cultural pressure-relief valve. From the slapstick of the Stooges and Marx Brothers to the self-deprecating existential quandaries of Woody Allen and Larry David, Jewish humor calls us to remember the absurdity of life—it gives a breather between the strife and struggle for excellence, and reminds us to enjoy. It forms a cultural counterweight to balance the intensity of constant work—and this counterweight of absurdity is not just Jewish but permeates gentile humor, too (witness Monty Python). Playfulness and humor act like siestas that are intrinsically rewarding but also refresh us for further labors.

When Chinese garment workers immigrated to the little Italian town of Prato, in Tuscany, they radically increased the speed and volume of textile production in the region. They also ate and slept in their workplaces, where they often labored for 18 hours a day. The Chinese did not share in the indigenous Italian tradition of siesta culture—taking off work for several hours in the afternoon to eat, rest, and enjoy family. Yes, Chinese productivity outstripped the local Italians, but something precious was lost. Profits went up, but humanity did not.

Give me siesta life any day, not because I'm lazy but because life is more than work. I am more than my job. We are all more than our jobs. Worker productivity is not the best measure of human success, and the goal of education is not to create the highest-wage managers.

As Chua and Rubenfeld argue, successful cultures are good at “impulse control.” They don't spend but save. They don't philander, or drink too much, or give up on things quickly because they might be difficult. I'm sure

they're correct about this, but notice how easy it is to keep applying the brake even when you've acquired healthy discipline. It's a short step, even for a whole culture, to move from highly disciplined to neurotically masochistic. If happiness is always deferred, then life becomes asceticism.

In their chapter "Impulse Control," Chua and Rubenfeld acknowledge the downside of too much self-denial, offering caricatures like David Blaine (masochistic entertainer) and Kafka's fictional hunger artist. But they beg the question when they follow these useless caricatures with the assertion that Chinese culture possesses just the right amount of that impulse-control ingredient. This Goldilocks theory (not too much, not too little) is vacuous, unless we consider the issue from a purely economic standpoint.

The tiger program of education adopts a specific frame of success. It defines excellence in narrow terms of profitability, productivity, and—in a word—power. If we accept this frame as significant (and I do), then the tiger program is highly effective as a means to that end.

But that frame is also insufficient. According to Chua and Rubenfeld, African-Americans don't rise to the charmed list of successful cultures because (among other things) the civil-rights narrative portrayed them as victims instead of believers in their own "superiority." That's an interesting point, and—together with institutional racism—it may even be crucial to explaining economic dearth. But if we're talking about cultural superiority in general, it might be pointed out that it was black folks who created blues, jazz, rock 'n' roll, hip-hop, much of 20th-century fashion, and so on.

If a set of cultural traits can be adaptive, they can also be deleterious. Cultural traditions, like fundamentalism, that treat science as evil or deceptive may ultimately sink their own members in the sea of competition. So too, the inflexibility of the tiger program undoes some of its own goals. Flexibility requires one to let go of plans and flow with changes—adapting in real time. That is not a virtue in the tiger program. And when it happens in real life, it unhinges people raised on a strict diet of intensive formatted structure.



Along with the wonderful desire for excellence that the tiger program instills in kids, there is another troubling dimension as well. Chinese parents unwittingly plant in their kids the feeling that they are never good enough. It's the opposite problem of American parenting, which overcoddles and affirms everything our kids do. American kids make up for their lack of skills with boundless self-esteem. That makes them fragile when failures eventually come along. Chinese kids are tough, and modest about their own copious skills, but they also never feel entirely accepted, acknowledged, or esteemed. In fact, one reason that Christianity seems to be exploding in China is because it offers the privately soothing balm that you are somebody, and that Jesus loves you—even if you were undistinguished and unremarkable in school and career, the public arenas of success.

Ironically, Chua and Rubenfeld laugh off the esteem problem of tiger parenting with some Jewish-mother jokes (“Is it so hard to pick up a phone?”). Why, they ask, does the Jewish mother in the stereotype want her kid to feel awful? “In part,” they explain, “because she wants him to worry about her; in part because she wants to be needed. At the same time, however, the message is that a child should always feel he’s doing something to make his mother unhappy—or to put it another way, that nothing he does is ever enough.” But QED; this proves my point that such pressure is endurable because a cultural tradition of self-reflective humor lightens the load, yet in another cultural matrix, such pressure may contribute to higher rates of mental pathology.

Chua and Rubenfeld include a chapter about the “underside” of their success paradigm, nodding awareness of several of the dangers I’ve mentioned. But their argument is that money is the one thing that can eventually buy your way out of the rat-race crucible of the triple package, so its benefits will eventually outweigh its risks. The slacker in me wants to just skip the trial by fire and start the lotus-eating right now.

But there’s an important point here—largely undeveloped by Chua and Rubenfeld—that could strengthen their argument. Human happiness (or at least eudaemonia) seems to result primarily from actualizing potential, and if you were always a couch potato, then you wouldn’t have much built-up potential—that is, you wouldn’t have many skills—to work with. Instead of

that interesting argument, they proffer the weaker justification for a tiger-immigrant childhood: You can finally have freedom when you're older and successful, because you never had any freedom or approval when you were younger. However, an equally important reason you can finally have some freedom is that you moved to America, where there's a strong cultural tradition of repurposing your life whenever you want, independent of what your parents have forced upon you.

I have not raised all this to be disparaging. I love Chinese culture and American culture. Nor have I raised these problems to suggest that all notions of cultural superiority are incoherent. I agree, in principle, that cultures can be evaluated and judged in terms of their adaptive components.

My point is that such inquiry must be done carefully, patiently, with an eye to value frames, and preferably by participant observers. This more careful comparative analysis will not reveal a ladder of higher and lower cultures, I suspect, but a mosaic of adaptive and maladaptive traits. Like my own son, who's a mix of genetic and cultural lineages, we all might be able to forge a new educational culture from the best fire-starters around the world.

Then again, all this cultural framing may be beyond the reach of rational design. You don't have to be a Marxist to see that economics pushes culture, and the next generation of wealthy Chinese may not be as hungry for success as the previous population. The children of doctors, lawyers, and CEOs often become aesthetes. Some mainland Chinese kids are even starting to study art (gasp!) instead of engineering. So the struggle for success may require one set of cultural tools, but life after economic success may require a different set altogether.

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