

# Education Comes First

## Tiger Mothers, Chinese nationals and US schooling

One of the most controversial books this year, Amy Chua's *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (Penguin, 2011) is known for its portrayal of a strict mother who stresses academics and music above everything, including playdates, sports, and other extracurricular activities.

But little has been made of the common Chinese-Jewish family dynamic Chua describes early on in her memoir. According to Chua, this group “may sound exotic but actually forms a majority in certain circles, especially in university towns.”

In her case, she and her husband agree to teach their kids Mandarin and raise them Jewish. Later in her memoir, Chua briefly recounts when her eldest daughter, Sophia, has her Bat Mitzvah at their home. At that time, Chua's mother-in-law was suffering from leukemia and living with them. Holding the Bat Mitzvah at their home allows grandma Popo to attend. She passes away two weeks later.

It's not until her younger daughter Lulu gets ready for her own Bat Mitzvah that Chua discusses how she and her husband share in Lulu's Bat Mitzvah preparations. She writes “As with Sophia, we were being unconventional and having the Bat Mitzvah in our home. Jed handled the major responsibilities, but I was the one constantly haranguing Lulu to practice her haftorah portion—I was going to be a Chinese mother even when it came to Hebrew.” (page 199)

What makes Lulu's Bat Mitzvah even more unconventional is that Chua asks Lulu to perform “Hebrew Melody” on the violin at her Bat Mitzvah. And in true Tiger Mother fashion, Chua pushes Lulu to perfection. Tensions rise so high that Chua isn't sure Lulu will agree to play “Hebrew Melody” when she wakes up the morning of her Bat Mitzvah. Fortunately for Amy Chua, Lulu's bat mitzvah goes off without a hitch, but not without a tiger's share of tension.

As strict as Chua appears in *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, her original ideas about education and extracurricular activities stand in contrast to the intellectual elite in China 150 years ago.

In *Fortunate Sons: The 120 Chinese Boys Who Came to America, Went to School, and Revolutionized an Ancient Civilization* (WW Norton, 2011), Liel Leibovitz and Matthew Miller chronicle the changing views of education in China in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Their book opens with the annual Yale freshman-sophomore

football game in the fall of 1850. Freshman Yung Wing captures the ball toward the end of the game and runs like a typhoon, his long braided queue swaying as his Chinese robes fan in the wind. He kicks the ball for a field goal, seizing a victory and feels American for the first time.

As Leibovitz and Miller write in *Fortunate Sons*, recreational activities become important to university education back in nineteenth century American universities. And it's this aspect of their education that makes such an impression on Yung Wing, the first person from China to study in the US.

Yung Wing learns English in missionary schools in China before embarking on his university years at Yale. But he flunks calculus and barely passes Greek while at Yale. These subjects involve more critical thinking than simply reciting the Confucian classics.

After Yung Wing returns to China with an undergraduate degree from Yale, he struggles to find a place in the country he left behind as a teenager. Eventually he moves back to Connecticut to supervise a group of 120 Chinese male high school and university students in the late 1870s. The students sail to San Francisco, see firsthand how the Chinese built the transcontinental railroads, visit important historical cities, and then settle in to begin their studies on the east coast.

*Fortune Sons* tells the stories of these students and their overseer Yung Wing all while narrating the rapid changes in late-Qing and early-Republic China. As long as Yung Wing has support back in China, the study abroad program in the US is safe.

Sadly, the mission is aborted prematurely after the program's patron in China is stripped from his position of authority. Without another supporter and with increased anti-western sentiment during the Boxer Rebellion, the program comes to a sudden halt. All students must return to China, although one stays back in the US to marry a local woman. But among those who return to China, many land in top government, military, and industry jobs.

Leibovitz and Miller's book is fascinating in that it shows how a balanced education, including physical education and critical thinking, paved the way for modern China. And as Amy Chua learns at the end of her memoir, a well-rounded student is not such a bad thing after all. 🐯

