

American Rabbit Mom's Guide to Education, Parenting,



By Dr. Amy F. Chai 艾米· F. 蔡博士 著



美国兔妈——普通家庭学校的卓越教育







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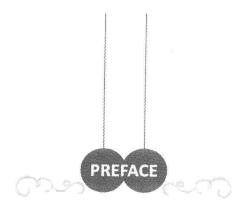
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This book began as one small book, but it has grown into a large book with a tripartite theme. I began thinking about the complex interactions of parenting, education, and societal values during a trip to Washington, D.C., as a U.S. Presidential Teacher in 2011. As a homeschooling parent, I at first felt a bit out of place at the round table discussions at the Department of Education. As the conversation heated up, I felt instead a kinship with fellow educators who cared deeply and who quietly rebelled against the absurd, Sisyphean nature of their labors. Unlike Camus's hero, we refuse to conclude that "all is well," and we plot revenge against the invisible forces that act upon our stony burden. We want kids to learn, we want parents to care, and we want society to stop dragging us back down the mountain.

When reporters called to ask about my teaching methods, it was not CNN on the line. Instead, it was World Journal, a Chinese language publication for North America. The World Journal, it seems, boasts a general readership that actually cares about education. In English language news, you are certain to read about the latest celebrity outrage, but you are unlikely to find anything serious about education. Asia and the United States both struggle to solve educational challenges, but it is only Asia that manages to produce a concerned and engaged society. Americans, though fully aware of their own paralysis, only manage to produce "la belle indifference."



The World Journal, June 29, 2011, proves that China is interested in education

As I was digesting the unsavory implications of living in a society that breeds so much educational apathy, Amy Chua came out with her controversial tome about Chinese parenting. With classic maternal ambivalence, she careens between opposing theses that cast her as both introspective self-critic and winking apologist for the authoritarian style of child rearing that she terms, "Tiger" parenting. It would be easy to criticize her, except for the fact that she mirrors the forgivable folly of all parents who grapple with love, pride, and desperate longing for their children. We are all grasping for purchase in the dark as we battle with the burgeoning forces of our own fear. With fight or with flight, we reflexively react to the uncertainty of our rapidly changing world.

My answer is this: "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear." I indulge my fancy to reproduce this quote not because I have obtained it, but because I see fear in both the indifference of the West and the intensity

of the East. We try too hard, or we pretend that we don't care, because we know that we can't control the future. But what are we striving for? The first thesis of this book is that we do well to strive for internal, spiritual values instead of external, material ones. The second thesis of this book is that we can learn to balance our tendency to lurch between "too much" and "not enough" in the parenting of our children. The third thesis of this book is that parents must be empowered to engage in the education of their own children. These three ideas are woven into the story of my own personal experience of homeschooling, but they are generalizable to the context of any educational choice.

I was born in the Year of the Rabbit. In Chinese culture, rabbits are considered to be calm and gentle, with excellent listening skills. But these mild mannered creatures are also ambitious, and they usually achieve their goals despite their quiet nature. I think that the metaphor of the rabbit is a great way to illustrate the idea of cross-cultural parenting. I have spent many years living between two cultures: the Chinese culture and the American culture. I have found that the philosophies of education and parenting are very different in the East and in the West. The Chinese "Tiger" culture has strengths and weaknesses. The American culture has strengths and weaknesses as well. A wise parent will examine both the good and the bad aspects of their own parenting style, and consider the possibility of change.

Chinese Tiger parents demand perfection, and a little bit of Tiger attitude is a good thing. Nobody wants to aim too low. But too much Tiger can cause anxiety and heartbreak. To long for perfection is admirable, but to demand it is harmful. American parents, on the other hand, nurture the unique character and abilities of their children. That attitude is critical for emotional health, but it is easy to allow a supportive attitude to degenerate into a permissive one. Too much permissiveness can cause a lack of discipline. That is where

East, West, Love, Learn

American Rabbit Mom's Guide to Education, Parenting, and Life

the Rabbit comes in.

A Rabbit Mom will listen carefully to the needs of her own children and avoid jumping on the cultural bandwagon. By choosing to apply useful ideas wherever she may find them, the Rabbit parent can avoid the pitfalls of cultural hegemony. A Rabbit may appear to be timid, but don't mistake hesitation for fear. Evaluating the options sometimes takes time. I know very well that there is no perfect parent, and there is no perfect education. Even so, there are many exciting opportunities to work towards a better future. I hope that you find something here that speaks to you and encourages you to step outside of your culture, your conventions, or your ideas of success. May every child be blessed.

-Amy Chai, 2014



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Learning at Home: A Growing Trend in American Education





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Chapter 1 East, West, Love, Learn

Education is simply the soul of a society as it passes from one generation to another.

—G. K. Chesterton

Parents from both Eastern and Western cultures need to stop and think about how we are preparing our kids for the future. We pass the soul of society to our children through education, and societies from around the globe will be interacting more and more as the next generation rises from our own. We parents must learn from each other to promote the very best for every child, from every culture, because our children will share the future together.

What Is Success?

Back in the 1960s, there was a popular board game called, "Life." It was an educational game, designed to teach children about the financial implications of everyday choices such as college, marriage, and having a family. I'm not sure if Milton Bradley intended for his game to be a darkly ironic social commentary, but if you have ever played the game of Life, you can't help but notice two significant truths: "Life" is primarily a game of chance; and whoever has the most money wins. You can play your heart out and still end up at the "Poor Farm" by the end of the game. A lucky spin will allow you to confiscate an opponent's salary and end up at "Millionaire Acres." This game of "Life" is a zero sum game, and the luckiest, wealthiest player wins

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it all. If this sounds familiar, it may be because this is exactly how we define "success" in our world today. We give honor and respect primarily to those who succeed in certain narrow pursuits, such as gaining fame (or notoriety) and fortune. In education, "success" means getting perfect 800s on SAT exams or getting accepted to a prestigious university. Everyone wants their own children to be successful.

A lot of ink has been spilled in debates about parenting styles and educational choices that lead to something called, "success." People want to know how to turn their children into "successful" adults. We have books claiming that French parents are superior and we have books claiming that Chinese parents are superior. We have parenting blogs where mothers of every stripe log in and engage in a circular firing squad, shooting down everyone who chose a parenting path that differs from their own. In our guilt-infested, hand-wringing slough of despond, we are all trying our best to produce children who will be universally applauded as "successful." Unfortunately, very little ink has been spilled on the topic of what success actually means. Until we can have a conversation about the nature of success, we will never have a productive discussion about parenting styles or educational choices.

What if our ideas about success are fundamentally flawed? What if we have so over-emphasized the goal over the process that we—in a no-holds-barred attempt to win the game of Life—have actually cheated ourselves out of the joy of living? I think I remember hearing my mother say, "It's not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game." That is so old school, isn't it? While we engage in internet flame wars over parenting styles, partisan bickering over school choice, and standardized test prep like blood sport, isn't it time for us to question everything?

This book is not a stealth attempt to convert you to my religion, push a

political agenda, or convince you to homeschool your children. I do not intend to insult anyone or to judge the choices that anyone has made. If you feel guilty or inadequate, don't. We are all in this together. Finally, I have no animosity towards public schools or teachers; on the contrary, I believe they are doing their best against impossible odds. I am a homeschooling mother, but this book is not for homeschoolers only. I believe that all parents and educators want the best for our children, but we don't always agree about what the best actually is. There are three main ideas that I hope you will consider as you read my story.

First, I believe that the values of our society have become distorted and irrational. They are distorted because we have come to view the external



Hannah practices with Donna Pidel, founder of Ballet Royale Institute of Maryland

trappings of physical beauty, prestige, and wealth as a sort of proxy for human worth. We call someone "successful" when they possess these external characteristics. This distorted view is irrational for two reasons. Firstly, it is not rational to admire someone for winning the genetic or financial lottery; that is like praising them for winning a game of chance. Secondly, I believe that a rational society should place a high value on the internal characteristics over which all individuals have some measure of control, such as honesty and compassion. Wealth and prestige

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are imperfect proxies at best for the content of a person's character. In fact, there is often no correlation at all. Of course my personal faith compels me to add that I believe that every person has intrinsic worth, no matter how flawed or "unsuccessful" they may appear. Whether or not you share that belief is up to you.

Second, I believe that our educational system has begun to focus on the creation of productive units of economic value instead of the creation of well-educated individual human beings. I feel very concerned when the conversation about education takes a turn towards economic theory. Economic strength, productivity, and a certain degree of uniformity are useful for civilization and governance, there can be no doubt about that. However, when we begin to see children as a product, or perhaps as a resource to be mined like rocks from a quarry, we fail. Our increasing attempts to reap profits from edu-business, to produce human widgets for the "global economy," and to enforce conformity are harming real children. I think that this defect is a direct result of the problem that I have already described—distorted societal values. When we see children as individuals with inherent value quite apart from their potential to become a truly fine widget, we begin to realize that one size does not, in fact, fit all.

Finally, I believe that the problems that we face in our educational system today are not caused by either bad teachers or a lack of educational funding. I believe that our educational problems are due to society itself. That means, in the words of Pogo, "We have met the enemy, and he is us." We are talking about policies such as "Race to the Top" and "Common Core," but these policies require kids to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps while their feet are super glued to the floor by a culture that doesn't respect or promote self-discipline. Kids need a society that values them for the content of their character. Kids need parents who share

the hard work of parenting. Kids need a society that doesn't celebrate selfishness and vanity. Kids need role models who value education and responsibility. We need to have a conversation about how we want our society to look, and that conversation probably should not include the vast majority of trend setters in the mass media today. Parents are influenced by our culture just as much as children are. That is why I don't blame individual parents for these problems, but rather society itself. We all share the blame together. I also share the blame, and I am forced to take a critical look at my own priorities. We parents can and must overcome the limitations of our culture.

I believe that success—in general—can be defined as fulfilling one's unique potential and becoming a person of character. Fulfillment of personal potential requires education, and becoming a person of character requires good parenting. I have done my best to work towards these goals through homeschooling. Along the way, I have become a student of culture. My family is a biracial family, with significant cross cultural differences in parenting philosophies. As we struggled to reconcile very different beliefs about education and parenting, we learned to try to find a balance between the extremes of Eastern and Western parenting styles. We did not always achieve that balance, but when we fail, we continue to learn.

I have also learned that our culture is not the only culture that struggles with parenting and educational issues. As China emerges to become an important global force, parents in that culture also struggle to find balance. They are looking at American educational models just as America has begun to look at Chinese educational models. Neither model is perfect. China also has narrowly defined criteria for success, involving impossibly high expectations and anxiety levels. Like the West, the East also plays to win the game with money and prestige. The truth is that neither culture has all the answers,

and both cultures are experiencing a lot of discontent as they educate their children for a rapidly changing future. They, like us, are looking for solutions. Children do not remain children for long, so it is up to us as parents to find a way to create our own solutions for our own children now. Although my own journey has been in the context of my personal faith and a decision to pursue education at home, I believe that all parents can benefit from examining their values, goals, and beliefs—and from thinking critically about the assumptions of the society around them.

Learning at Home: A Growing Trend in American Education

The first section of this book takes a look at why so many Americans have chosen to allow their children to learn at home. Beginning with the story of why I felt compelled to make a change to homeschooling, I hope to provide a picture for you of the diverse motivations that drive the movement and how those motivations often overlap. I will also address some of the differences in parenting philosophy and educational philosophy that affect our culture today.

East and West: Five Elements of Effective Education

The second section of this book combines elements of Eastern and Western parenting philosophies and applies them to the problem of education. In the first section, I described five harms that motivate parents to seek educational alternatives. In the second section, those five harms are turned around through balanced parenting in the home learning model. These five elements of effective education become positive motivators for homeschooling, overcoming the fear of harm. Eastern and Western ideas provide a framework for balancing "being the best" with "doing your best;" balancing uniformity with diversity; balancing duty with independence; balancing hard