

# Interpretation of the Image of Tiger Mother under the Satire Model: A Case Study of Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother

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**Abstract:** The book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger mother* caught fire overnight across the United States, and has brought the term “tiger mother” to the forefront of everyone’s attention. Despite the fact that author Amy Chua’s children are successful and splendid, the alternative way of education depicted in her book, which not only restricts the freedom of her children but also gives them threats and suppression, has caused controversy. With the help of Virginia Satir’s family therapy theory, this article makes elaboration on Chua’s behavior and reveals that Chua communicates with her daughters in states of low self-esteem. In their communication process, Chua always adopts incongruent communication and plays the role of the blamer and the super-reasonable. And after profiling Chua according to the iceberg theory in the Satir model, it is found that she deliberately avoids emotional pain, stubbornly insists on what she thinks is right, and feels powerless about expectations falling short, and those are the deep causes of Chua’s behavior. A comprehensive interpretation of the central representative of Tiger parenting, Amy Chua, not only can reflect on the shortcomings of tiger parenting, but also can bring new enlightenment and thoughts about family education and help advance toward better family education.

**Keywords:** Satir, Satir model, Tiger mother, Iceberg theory, Family education.

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## 1. Introduction

With the publication of Amy Chua’s book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, the term “tiger mother” has penetrated into the public with great speed. In the book, author Amy Chua shares how she educates her daughters, leaving us to gasp in shock at her rearing style, while not only marveling at how brilliant her children are. The book describes in detail the conflicts and contradictions between Chua and her daughters, reflecting the inner world of a mother and her daughters, which extends to the resulting problem of family education. This article analyzes and interprets the image of tiger mother with the help of the Satir Model, and deconstructs Chua’s inner world, so as to consider a more reasonable and effective way of communication for family education.

## 2. Incongruent Communication and Tiger Mother

Congruent communication is a high self-esteem copying style. To communicate congruently means appreciating the uniqueness and equal dignity of self (Englander-Golden & Satir, 1990). However, individuals would develop survival coping patterns when in states of low self-esteem and imbalance. The defense mechanisms of people with low self-esteem are manifested in four main patterns: placating, blaming, being super-reasonable, and being irrelevant. And their verbal messages would conflict with their nonverbal ones, which is called incongruent communication (Satir, Banmen, Gomori, & Gerber, 1991). And tiger mother Chua adopts incongruent communication and takes the role of the

blamer and the super-reasonable.

### 2.1. The blamer

Blamers are often described as hostile, tyrannical, nagging, or violent. They relentlessly nitpick and shift the responsibility to others. Blamers are aware of their vulnerability but refuse to admit it, afraid of having their low self-esteem exposed. So they harass and accuse other people or circumstances to protect themselves. Such individuals anticipate not getting their needs met and have low self-worth and thus often activate fear in others by means of control and aggression, making themselves seemly powerful (Satir et al., 1991).

Verbal violence is not only a usual tactic of Chua, but also a common manifestation of the blaming behavior. Chua once called Sophia garbage when Sophia acted disrespectfully to her. Even if children’s mistakes are trivial, Chua still could become extremely furious. Sophia left the pantry door open causing the rise to be chewed up by dogs, and Chua accused her harshly, “I’m sick of you not listening—sick of it!” (Chua, 2001) Except that children do something wrong, if they do not bow to tiger mother’s wishes, they will also be scolded. Lulu didn’t want to play the violin at her Bat Mitzvah, and she yelled at her, “Do you want to be mediocre? Is that what you want?” (Chua, 2001)

Chua loves to sarcasm with her children. When Lulu told her friends that she practices the violin six hours a day, Chua sneered, “You shouldn’t have said six hours, Lulu—she’s going to get the wrong idea. It’s only six hours when you waste five of them.” (Chua, 2001) In addition, Chua is always

telling her daughters what to do and picking on them. Lulu sent her a birthday card, but she thought it was too sloppy and expressed that she did not like it. She didn't satisfy with her daughter's eulogies to Popo, so she said viciously, "This is awful. It has no insight. It has no depth. It's like a Hallmark card—which Popo hated. You are so selfish." (Chua, 2001)

Chua threatens children to activate fear in their minds to achieve the goal of making children obey her. When Lulu didn't want to practice the piano, she hauled Lulu's doll house to the car and told her she'd donate it to the Salvation Army. Also, one of the pet phrases Chua said to Sophia is "If the next time's not perfect, I'm going to take all your stuffed animals and burn them" (Chua, 2001).

Sometimes Chua's blaming behavior is more than just verbal violence. Lulu yelled and cried the first day she was introduced to the piano. To "calm her down", Chua threw her outside at twenty degrees.

Through the above examples, we can see that Chua uses a blaming communication stance with her daughters. As explained in the Satir Model, Chua's communication with her children puts her in a stressful situation, and her self-worth becomes low. She detects her vulnerable state, and the defense she chooses to protect herself is blaming.

## 2.2. The super-reasonable

The super-reasonable discounts the self or the other person and remains inhumanly objective. They withdraw from others and suffer loneliness, not allowing either themselves or others to focus on their feelings. As super-reasonable communicators, they speak and think as impeccably as possible, using complicated jargon, minute details, and lengthy descriptions. They derive pleasure from being academic chauvinists, never perturbed if listeners fail to understand. The super-reasonable handles conflict by citing research or other reasonable explanation to support the view. They don't think they can make mistakes and want to prove they are always right (Satir et al., 1991).

Chua's way of educating and conversing with her children illustrates the super-reasonable stance. When she supervises them practicing, Chua would always criticize her daughters for the music theory she has learned. She is more of a teacher or an expert than a mother. All she could think about is how to improve her daughters' skills, and all she could say is "your dynamics are all wrong," "start with less bow and lots of bow on the high A," (Chua, 2001) and so on.

In order to affirm and support her own views, Chua often deals with conflict in super-reasonable attitudes. It's hard for her to listen to children's inner feelings, and even harder for her to look at things from children's point of view, because she only values reason, not feelings. Chua's being super-reasonable is evident in her almost bizarre sense of principle. Forcing children to practice the piano and violin for hours a day is her daily routine. She agrees with the idea that not practicing will make it worse. Even while on holiday, Chua is reluctant to let her daughters miss the instrument practice. Once they took a holiday to Greece, the girls wanted to visit the Palace of Knossos, but Chua insisted that LuLu finish violin practice first. "When it was all over, Lulu was furious and tear-stained, Jed was tight-lipped, my parents were sleepy—and the Palace of Knossos was closed for the day." (Chua, 2001) When Lulu left in anger because she was judged and whacked by a famous violin teacher, Chua scolded her and hoped she could go back to take the rest of the lesson.

Although Chua also felt that the teacher was unfair, she believed that Lulu had to respect elders no matter what.

Chua's above communication stance shows us that she does not look into her inner feelings when she communicates with her children. She spouts her opinions and comments like an expert and focuses only on right and wrong, ignoring children's feelings. What she has done gives her daughters the idea that "mom doesn't love me", Chua also suffers from the loneliness and pain of not being understood by her daughters.

## 3. Tiger Mother's Personal Iceberg

The personal iceberg is one of the tools in the Satir model. Understanding the personal iceberg can deeply explore one's self and achieve better understanding and communication. Satir's iceberg theory is a metaphor that describes each individual self as an iceberg. The behavioral manifestations that can be observed by outsiders are the exposed tip of the iceberg, while the larger internal system that drives and motivates people to behave in this way lies beneath the surface of the iceberg. And this internal system includes feelings, perceptions, expectations, yearnings and self (Satir et al., 1991). Chua's behavior of being blaming and super-reasonable in front of her daughters is only the tip of her personal iceberg. It is when we dig into the larger internal system that lurks beneath her personal iceberg that we can have a comprehensive interpretation of her. Next, the article focuses on the other layers of Chua's personal iceberg hidden below the ice surface and dissects Chua's self.

### 3.1. Feelings

Chua was surprised to learn that Sophia felt bitter and hurt at age thirteen. In fact, Sofia is the eldest daughter, and she is under a lot of stress because everyone in the family has high hopes for her but no one to share her worries. Chua blamed herself for not being noticed her daughter's psychological problems, and we can learn from that Chua's feelings of sadness.

However, she chose to repress and avoid her feelings. Even though she felt unbearably sad in face of what happened to Sophia, she still didn't show her feelings and just let her go to practice the piano, without leaving a word of comfort. How we feel about our feelings indicates a decision or a judgment we have made about our feelings. When confronted with her sadness, Chua's decision of her feelings is avoidance and internalizing. She did not know how to deal with her daughter's inner scars, so she pretended to be calm and avoid talking about them.

### 3.2. Perceptions

Fearing the family decline, Chua is determined not to raise a soft, entitled child, never to let her family go to the end of the road. She expects her daughters to continue the family's brilliance. Therefore, she insists Sophia and Lulu do classical music and reckoned that it would motivate them to achieve goals that she couldn't reach. She demands perfect grades and wants her girls to excel. If her children fail, she assumes it's because they don't work hard enough.

Chua strongly identifies with Chinese parenting, she is firmly convinced that Chinese parenting is the most effective way to get children on the path to success. For instance, she agrees with the idea that only persistent practice can lead to excellence and asks her daughter to practice the piano and violin all day long. In order to make Sophia's performance

perfect, she spares no harsh words and gets even tougher when Sophia's eyes filled with tears. She doesn't think that harsh scolding of her children can cause any problems, which is one of the concepts of Chinese education as well. Traditional Chinese culture not only approves of parents using psychological aggression as a form of discipline to correct their children's misbehavior, but also believes to a certain extent that "to beat is to care and to scold is to love" (Chao, 1994; Simon, Wu, Lin, Gordon, & Conger, 2000). But her parenting style puts too much pressure on Sophia and makes Sophia often gnaw on the piano.

In Chua's opinion, the Chinese way of parenting is the only way to bring success to her daughter. She also believes that her daughters wouldn't be mediocre, and if not then try harder. Her severity comes from her faithful defense and earnest practice of the Chinese way of parenting.

### 3.3. Expectations

Chua deems the Chinese way of parenting as her Bible, where children are expected to be absolutely obedient to their parents, and she desperately hopes that she would receive obedience and respect from her children.

But her daughters, especially her second daughter Lulu, have a strong American Revolutionary spirit, which gives her a big headache. Merely because Lulu didn't want to try the caviar, Chua humiliated her as a mediocre and inferior barbarian. In fact, Chua doesn't really care if Lulu eats caviar or not, she cares that she has lost the right to ask her daughter to do a small thing. And Chua equates the obedience with the respect, considering her daughter's rebellion as a symbol of disrespect, that's why she could become so angry and upset after being rejected by her daughters. Faced with the gap between expectation and reality, she turns to blaming and scolding.

### 3.4. Yearnings

The level of yearning is each person's longing to be loved, accepted, validated, and confirmed. These yearnings to love oneself, to love others, and to be loved by others are universal (Satir et al., 1991).

Chua's extremely strict parenting style gradually alienates her from her children. She is not understood by her children, nor by her husband and her parents, everyone persuades her not to be so hard on her children. Standing in the educational position, Chua is very isolated. She has an inner desire to be close to her children, just like Western parents and their children. Sometimes she wants to give her children the relaxation and freedom that Western parents would give. And she also wants to say, "sure Lulu, we can skip a day of violin practice (Chua, 2001)" without being hated by children.

When Lulu cut her own hair, Chua was very angry, her first reaction was to scream hysterically and throw something at her. From the bottle of her heart, however, Chua wanted to hug her daughter tightly and cry uncontrollably. It can show that Chua was very eager to have a close relationship with her daughters. But she still maintained her sanity as a strict mother, hiding her emotions and telling her daughter to the hair salon tomorrow very calmly.

As she disapproves of the Western way of education, yet she wants a Western-style parent-child relationship with her daughters, we can see Chua wavering and repeatedly asking herself what she is doing this for throughout the book. She loves her daughter deeply and her yearning to get closer to her

daughters is obvious. She needs her daughter's respect, affirmation and love.

### 3.5. Self

As mentioned earlier, Chua wants to be close to her daughters and expects them to comply with her words. But her daughters have their own ideas and do not willing to defer to her. Chua's needs are not met and her sense of self-worth is low when she argues with her daughters for disobedience. She feels disrespected and powerless at not being able to control her daughters as easily as she used to.

But at first, Chua was not a compliant child. Instead of going to the university her father insisted she attend, she forged his signature and quietly applied to Harvard University, which made her father furious. Chua was a "rebel" when she was young just like her daughter. However, Chua sticks to the old path of her father's way of parenting while educating her own daughters, strictly following the Chinese educational culture she acknowledges, deliberately suppressing her daughters' inner expectations. She sets a series of draconian rules for her daughters, forcing them to follow. Chua's loss of self has a great deal to do with her family of origin. Satir believes that a person is inextricably linked to his family of origin, and that this link affects the person's whole life. Chua's parents disciplined her in such a same strict way that Chua lost her self-expectation and solemnly toed the line. "Never, never disgrace me like this again." (Chua, 2001) This is what Chua's father said to her after she got second place in the exam. Her father was also a rebellious child in the eyes of his parents, but he still chose to continue the parenting style of his parents. Researchers have suggested that the experience of harsh paternal discipline as a child leads individuals to be more likely to discipline their children harshly as adults through mechanisms such as imitation or observational learning (Muller, Hunter, & Stollak). With the intergenerational transfer of the way of education, children gradually lose themselves and grow up to be rigid adults.

Her insistence, one might even say stubbornness, on her personal education concept and the disillusionment with her expectations makes her feel lonely and impotent. The accumulation of such feelings propels her to become a blaming and super-reasonable tiger mother.

## 4. Conclusion

Chua's tiger parenting style is not an isolated case. Not only common in China, but tiger parenting is also popular in the "Circle of Confucius Culture". In today's era of educational anxiety, tiger parenting seems to be a breakthrough for parents who want to educate their children in such a way as to achieve quick success. But even Sophia and Lulu, who both went to Harvard University, are still deeply disturbed by tiger parenting. By using the Satir model to interpret the tiger mother and having recognized her low self-esteem, we can have a deeper understanding of today's family education and even school education. In order to melt the iceberg and let parents and children get along harmoniously, we must make use of the Satir model, tap into the self underneath the iceberg and communicate congruently. Let both sides feel love and respect, this is the most effective way to achieve children's success.

## 5. Author Contributions

This paper was jointly completed by Leixiang Shu, Yike

Xu, Gaotian Yu, Yihui Shu. Leixiang Shu. Everyone has made equal efforts in the research of this topic, and their contribution to the paper is average. It is hereby explained.

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