

**CONFUCIANISM AND ITS IMPACT  
ON TALENT DEVELOPMENT: A  
REVIEW AND DISCUSSION OF KEY  
THEMES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF  
TALENT ARISING FROM CHUA, A.  
(2011) *BATTLE HYMN OF THE TIGER  
MOTHER*. NEW YORK: PENGUIN.**

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*Jeff MacRaid*

**Introduction**

*Learn to know and not born to know.*

This Confucian belief underlies the Chinese perspective on maximising an individual's intelligence (Chan, 2007, p.43). Chinese believe that about 30% of an individual's intelligence is accounted for by what one is born with, and the other 70% depends upon learning. According to Chan, the common belief in the West is that the reverse (about 80% heredity) is true (Jensen, 1981, cited in Chan, 2007, p.42). Amy Chua's memoir explains her efforts to maximise her children's 'other 70%'.

Chua is a mother of two, wife of a Yale Law School professor, author of three books, and Yale Law School professor herself. She is the daughter of Chinese immigrant parents, both of whom experienced hard work and sacrifice before prospering in the United States of America. Both of Chua's parents achieved tertiary qualifications, with her father earning his PhD in less than two years (Chua, 2011, p.16). Thus, Chua's children have been born into a family with a significant academic heritage, and have a mother with apparent Chinese ideals of family and education. This heritage results in very high expectations being placed on both children (Chua, 2011, p.5).

Although written as a memoir, this book provides an insightful and provocative basis for comparing Confucian notions of giftedness and talent development with contemporary Western society's views on the topic. Observations in this book are based on one family's experiences in American society, so it was never intended to form an academic reference on the underlying subject matter. Whilst Chua's references to Western culture are limited to a solely American perspective, her 'Chinese' values imply the perspectives of a Confucian mindset. In a modern context, aspects of this mindset must also be extended out from China to include Hong Kong,

South Korea, Japan and Singapore (Chan, 2007, pp.35–36).

This review will compare excerpts and themes from Chua's memoir with Confucian and current Western perspectives on the same issues. The themes to be addressed are:

1. The goal of talent development
2. Achieving talent development through deliberate practice
3. The role of parents, family and other influential people in talent development
4. Talent development as a family legacy
5. The role of stress in fostering talent development

**Theme 1: The goal of talent development**

*The Tiger Mother's perspective*

Finding a suitable piano teacher for Chua's daughter proves to be a revealing exercise. Chua (2011, p.26) explained her selection criteria as follows:

As the eldest daughter of Chinese immigrants, I don't have time to improvise or make up my own rules. I have a family name to uphold, aging parents to make proud. I like clear goals, and clear ways of measuring success.

Developing a child's talent in any domain is seen as a Chinese parent's duty. For Chua, this goal is intrinsically connected with the honour of her family name and is a demonstration of her respect for her own parents. She also sees it as the way she can powerfully teach her children the intrinsic link between how hard they push themselves and their abilities to succeed (Chua, 2011, p.29). Throughout the book Chua's life choices and attitudes demonstrate the sacrificial investments of time, money and effort required for achievement and to maximise talent development.

*Confucian perspectives*

Confucian values have both helped and hindered the development of talent for the Chinese (Chan, 2007, p.57). The Chinese think that everybody is gifted in some way, provided that they are hardworking and obedient to their parents and teachers (Chan, 2007, p.43). Parental instructions or wisdom are to be followed regardless of whether they are agreeable to the children or not (Chan, 2007, p.39). Within a Confucian mindset, the development of intelligence or talent comes through hard work and obedience to parents, and

is available to everyone. However, such a mindset is said to have hindered the creative aspects of talent development in the Chinese people (Chan, 2007, p.39). Children are not given opportunities to voice opinions or to carry out free, independent or original thinking because the Confucian philosophy emphasises harmony and conservatism (Chan, 2007, pp.47, 49)

### ***Current Western theories***

Western descriptions of intelligence differ from Confucian characteristics. According to Chan (2007, p.39), Western parents include the ability to think, reason and see relationships, observed through *solving problems, understanding with meaning, and identifying connections* respectively, when they describe their children's intelligence. Many theories and models of giftedness have been developed and applied to Western educational contexts in recent decades. However, there is still a lack of universal agreement on the validity or applicability of each model, in stark contrast to the Confucian model's two-thousand-year heritage. Outlining and comparing the ways in which each of these models describes the goals of talent development in detail is beyond the scope of this paper. However, four models and how they define the goal of talent development are briefly outlined here.

#### ***1. Renzulli's Three Ring Conception of Giftedness and Operation Houndstooth***

Giftedness is described in two forms: schoolhouse giftedness and creative, productive giftedness. Schoolhouse gifted learners are equivalent to Confucian learners, being excellent consumers of knowledge and producing high scores on tests. Above average ability, creativity and task commitment form three clusters of traits in the Three Ring Conception of Giftedness. Interaction between all three is required to produce creative, productive giftedness. Such learners are excellent producers of knowledge, which is one of Renzulli's goals for talent development. The Houndstooth model underlies the Three Ring Conception, adding six elements of positive psychology, to promote a social concern within the development of individuals with creative, productive giftedness, so that the talented individual is motivated to contribute novel ideas to help society (Renzulli, 2003, pp.76-79, 83; Kaufman & Sternberg, 2007, p.389.)

#### ***2. Gardner's Multiple Intelligences***

Eight distinct intelligences have been identified. Each can apply to different domains of learning, and in different combinations. The model identifies 'an individual's proclivities and capabilities in a number of spheres' (Von Karolyi, Ramos-Ford & Gardner, 2003, p.101). The goal is to be able to transfer learning from a given situation into a novel one. Multiple intelligences allow students to participate in learning from different starting points, evaluated using different assessment tasks, to encourage either the refining of areas of talent, or the development of less-natural areas, to reinforce these as well. (Von Karolyi, Ramos-Ford & Gardner, 2003, pp.101, 111.)

#### ***3. Gagné's Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT)***

The goal of the DMGT model is to develop Natural Abilities, belonging to any of six domains, into Competencies, in any of nine fields. Aspects of Chance, along with Environmental and Intrapersonal Catalysts, have an impact on the intervening Developmental Processes (Gagné, 2008, pp.2-4.)

#### ***4. Sternberg's Wisdom, Intelligence and Creativity Synthesised (WICS)***

Wisdom, Intelligence and Creativity need to be synthesised to form giftedness. The goal of giftedness is to produce actions that are relevant to the common good (Kaufman & Sternberg, 2007, pp.394-396.)

Talent development in individuals is generally more responsive to observed potential in Western understandings. Confucian understandings begin with the expectation of abilities in all, which they seek to foster in individuals.

### **Theme 2: Achieving talent development through deliberate practice**

#### ***The Tiger Mother's perspective: The Virtuous Circle***

'What Chinese parents understand is that nothing is fun until you're good at it. To get good at anything you have to work, which is why it is crucial to override (children's) preferences' (Chua, 2011, p.29). Chua goes on to describe the work of deliberate practice through the concept of a *Virtuous Circle*:

Excellence comes from tenacious practice.

Praise, admiration and satisfaction are the

results of excellence.

These build confidence and enjoyment, which enable the child to then practice longer on tasks with greater complexity, until they achieve excellence, and the cycle continues.

Chua (2011, p.26) applies this philosophy to the Suzuki method of teaching piano: 'Kids who practice hard get assigned new songs each week, whereas kids who don't practice get stuck on the same song ... which is why the Suzuki system is known for producing child prodigies.' There is a continual thesis throughout the book, which inextricably links high levels of hard work to achieving success, giftedness or prodigious behaviours.

### ***Confucian perspectives***

As indicated by the view that 70% of intelligence depends on learning (Chan, 2007, p.43), Chinese people also believe that perseverance and industriousness are able to compensate for incompetence. Confucian students exert tremendous efforts working towards their aspirations (Chan, 2007, p.46). Results generated by the 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) attest to this (Loveless, 2011, p.7). The PISA study compared the academic performances of 15-year-old students, from 65 nations, in three subject areas: reading, science and mathematics. In all three subjects, the Confucian nations of Shanghai-China, South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong-China, and Japan outscored the United States (Loveless, 2011, p.8). Moreover, on a world scale, the United States was far below the top-scoring nations, scoring only slightly above average in reading and science and below average in mathematics. In mathematics, Shanghai-China's scale score of 600 was 113 points (approximately 23%) higher than the United States' score of 487 (Loveless, 2011, p.8). According to the criteria of the PISA study, the Confucian countries outperformed the Western standards of education.

### ***Western perspectives and implications for educators***

According to Ericsson, Krampe and Tesch-Römer (1993, p.363), many characteristics of outstanding performance, once believed to reflect innate talent, are actually the result of intense practice, extended for a minimum of 10 years. Ericsson & Williams (2007, p.119) claim that, in a wide variety of activities including musical

performance, extended exposure and targeted, solitary practice are necessary to develop 'complex representations that are specific to the domain of expertise'. By these criteria, the Tiger Mother has served her children's musical development extremely well: they both achieved accolades and milestones that attest to this. These findings were repeated with children who possess high abilities (Winner, 2000, p.154), science students in Korea (Kim, Shim & Hull, 2009, p.110), and professional scientists who achieved more success and accolades than their equally intelligent colleagues (Winner, 2000, p.154). Physiological evidence supporting the benefits of deliberate practice has been observed in the degree of myelination of different brain areas (Bengtson et al., cited in Ericsson & Williams, 2007, p.119). By deliberate practice, skills and knowledge required to perform a task are stored in long-term memory, which benefits the brain by allowing it to 'circumvent the limits of short-term memory capacity and serial reaction time' (Ericsson & Williams, 2007, p.119).

### **Theme 3: The role of parents, family and other influential people in talent development**

#### ***The Tiger Mother's perspective***

Be modest, be humble, be simple. ... Never complain or make excuses. If something seems unfair at school, just prove yourself by working twice as hard and being twice as good (Chua, 2011, p.24).

These were the words of the author's parents to her, and they represented a family culture which she was determined to replicate for her own children. This culture would reflect what Chua saw as the superiority of Chinese parenting, over Western parenting, in two ways:

They have higher dreams for their children, and

They know the limits of the pressure their children can take, which shows higher regard for their children (Chua, 2011, p.8).

Chua was aware of the potential difficulties with Chinese parenting before they first arose with her daughter, Lulu. She knew that 'Chinese' parenting did not always work smoothly. Due to conflict, her own father left home at a young age and remained estranged from the rest of his family (Chua, 2011, p.212). She had her own painful experiences of Chinese parenting as well. Her father's response to attending her eighth-grade history award presentation, in which she gained

second place, caused her shame she would never forget. 'Never, never disgrace me like that again', was his response to her after that occasion (Chua, 2011, pp.16–17).

### ***Confucian perspectives***

Principles that undergird Confucian society include: 'obedience, harmonious relationship, holistic approach, the well-being of people, collectivism, conformity, compliance, and the specific ranking of people' (Chan, 2007, p.47). Confucian parents are characterised by the application of rigid disciplinary control over their children's behaviour (Chan, 2007, p.47). In addition, both parents feel strong obligations to the responsibilities for the education of their children (Chan, 2007, p.48). Praise for children is reserved for their obedience and conformity to parental expectations. The instructions or words of wisdom from parents are expected to be followed regardless of how agreeable they are to the children.

### ***Western perspectives***

Western perceptions of the abilities to think, reason, and see relationships, as evidence of intelligence contrast with the Chinese focus on obedience to parents (Chan, 2007, p.39). It can be argued, therefore, that Confucian understandings hinder the development of the intelligence, from a Western perspective.

From either perspective, evidence shows that the role of families in developing talents is more important than that of schools (Winner, 1996, p.12; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2001, para.2). The values and attitudes parents display demonstrate what they prize. Successful parents also show that success requires hard work, sustained over long periods of time (Olszewski-Kubilius, 2001, para.4). It is therefore necessary for parents of children, gifted or otherwise, to be actively involved in the development of their talents, for their potential to be allowed to fully develop (Winner, 1996, p.9; Wu, 2008, p. 100). Strictness of disciplinary measures and parental attitudes are more customary in Confucian culture, but were found to have a negative effect on the development of intelligence and giftedness in Western learners, and inhibited the growth of their creativity (Chan, 2007, p.48).

Research also shows that when children are told of their talents by their parents, the most likely results include increased motivation and self-confidence. When working toward long-term

goals, messages of affirmation help to 'protect young performers against doubts about eventual success during the ups and downs of the extended preparation' (Ericsson, Krampe & Tesch-Römer, 1993, p.399).

### **Theme 4: Talent development as a family legacy**

#### ***The Tiger Mother's perspective***

Chua asserts that children born into middle-class wealth, unlike herself or her parents, feel that they are entitled to their individual rights and become much more likely to disobey their parents. Hardship for the author's parents' generation demanded the development of resilience for their survival and success. Fearful that the comforts of middle-class life could affect the work ethic and achievements of the following generation, Chua was determined not to let the standards be lowered for her daughters (Chua, 2011, p.24).

Classical music, to the author, was a key to avoiding such generational decline. She viewed it as a way for her children to achieve something she hadn't, in a way that could point them towards the high cultural tradition of her ancient ancestors (Chua, 2011, pp.22–23). However, classical music also became the context in which the decline she feared became apparent. Chua (2011, p.170) explained:

Lulu started talking back to me and openly disobeying me in front of my parents when they visited. This might not sound like a big deal to Westerners, but in our household it was like desecrating a temple. In fact, it was so out of the realm of the acceptable that no one knew what to do.

From Chua's perspective, the battles with Lulu were not solely about the violin or her academic prowess. They were also about family pride, and instilling the life skills that would secure a positive future for her daughter, so the stakes were high. Failure was not an option, although ultimately, when the conflict with her daughter intensified, she had to concede that she could love and nurture her child's development through avenues other than the violin.

#### ***Confucian perspectives***

Traditionally, Chinese also believe that 'it is shameful to be regarded as less bright, less competent or less useful than others' (Chan, 2007, p.54). Shame extends to a person's family

and beyond, so the consequences of bringing shame are severe, such that the person may need to retreat from public life for a period of time (Chan, 2007, p.54). Shame is powerful because of its impact on a person's honour, known as their *face*. 'Having *face* for a person is as essential as having bark is for a tree' (Chan, 2007, p.55). A talented child, however, can bring *face* to the parents, because they will feel that they have produced something precious to society. Therefore, the talented legacy is a truly high ideal in Confucian philosophy.

### ***Western perspectives***

Such is the broad range of Western responses to giftedness, that some parents may deny their children's giftedness, whilst others may exaggerate it. Davis, Rimm and Siegle (2011, p.421) note that there is a propensity, among parents of Western children who have been identified as gifted, to yield to their children's wishes. Children with an advanced grasp of language and reasoning skills can be consulted on issues beyond their level of life-experience and overindulged, resulting in them acquiring an inappropriate sense of power. Such power without wisdom, and the corresponding sense of entitlement, leads to the development of poor social skills and the potential for formidable conflicts with their parents (Davis, Rimm & Siegle, 2011, p.421). Giftedness in the West can also lead to negative attention from other parents, teachers, siblings and peers. For gifted children to hide their talents is more common, as it allows them to work less and fit in better with their peers. However, for children forging their own sense of identity, to have to hide or ignore their gifts and abilities can also lead to identity issues which can be detrimental to their mental health (Davis, Rimm & Siegle, 2011, pp.421, 422, 430, 444).

It could therefore be said that the legacy of talent development appears to be a more highly valued aspect of Confucian culture than its Western counterpart. Western culture's means of developing talent appear to be more individualised, whereas the Confucian individual shares some ownership of their achievements with their family and culture. However, the Confucian conception of talent places little value on creativity, such that what is being valued is significantly different in each case.

## **Theme 5: The role of stress in fostering talent development**

### ***The Tiger Mother's perspective***

Chua's parenting style involved deprivation of freedoms and adherence to oppressive practice regimens (Chua, 2011, p.5). Her view was that positive affirmation is found in achieving success and overcoming obstacles (Chua, 2011, p.29). She saw her role as being the relentless critic and driving force which pushed her children to try harder than they thought possible. Such training necessarily involved stressful situations for her daughters. However, Chua wanted to instil in them the lifelong understanding that they have amazing reserves of energy and ability, which they can draw upon with effort. Such effort involves personal cost, but results in success and achievement, which far outweigh that achieved by their peers with 'Western' standards of discipline, study and affirmation (Chua, 2011, pp.29–30).

### ***Confucian perspectives***

Much of the Confucian educational system places heavy burdens on the individual learner. Chinese people believe that it is shameful to be regarded as less bright, less competent or less useful than others (Chan, 2007, p.54). The Confucian system does not allow failure as an option. Its conception dates back 2000 years, where it was purposed, exclusively, for the selection and placement of children within an educational hierarchy, rather than for their guidance and counselling (Chan, 2007, p.49). In addition, Chinese parents are characterised by their dominating roles in decision making, demanding strict compliance with regulations from their children and applying rigid disciplinary control measures over their behaviour (Chan, 2007, p.47). Hence a culture of high achievement is driven by the overwhelming belief of parents in their children's abilities coupled with an ever-present fear of the shameful experience of loss of 'face', in the eyes of one's parents, or of damage to the family's 'face' in the eyes of society. Such motivators place significant levels of stress on the learner.

### ***Western perspectives***

The Yerkes-Dodson Law describes optimal levels of stress for productivity (Davis, Rimm & Siegle, 2011, p.423). Too little stress results in boredom or disengagement with tasks; too much stress becomes emotionally disturbing and overwhelming. Therefore, stress is seen as an

essential element of success, as is the development of skills to manage stress effectively. There is the potential for many types of stress to arise from learning and social contexts. These types of stress need to be managed through discussion and counselling, or the teaching of skills to manage them. Conversely to Confucian culture, one of the recommended responses to stressful situations can be to perceive them with humour, or include exercise and recreation into regular routines (Davis, Rimm & Siegle, 2011, p.423). Western culture features confusion about how to manage stress, because a context that is very stressful for one person may be only moderately so for another (Olszewski-Kubilius, 2001, para.10). In spite of its potential to promote achievement, competition can also hinder achievement when students become overly fearful of or overwhelmed by learning tasks and contexts (Davis, Rimm & Siegle, 2011, pp.422–423). It is understood that stressors are required to motivate achievement, but they can also overwhelm and stifle it. Western parents are more cautious than Confucian parents about placing stress on their children. From either perspective, the ability to manage one's own learning environment is essential to future learning and success.

### Conclusion

Confucianism developed over 2000 years ago, in the philosophical and feudal systems in place during the times of the Chinese emperors (Chan, 2007, p.35). The idea that giftedness is to be found in one group of outstanding people came from that context (Chan, 2007, p.43). One can justifiably marvel at the foresight and wisdom that have formed the basis of this 2000-year heritage. Academic results and familial pride are deeply entwined with the Confucian heritage, and Confucian countries are currently producing very high quality scholars, when ranked against the rest of the world in student and professional achievements (Loveless, 2011, p.7; Kim, Shim & Hull, 2009, p.110; Winner, 2000, p.154). However, aspects of Confucianism which deprive children of opportunities to voice opinions or think independently can hinder children's development of creative aspects of intelligence (Chan, 2007, p.39).

For educators and parents, Chua's book presents strongly held perspectives on numerous issues regarding a Confucian understanding of talent development within the home. Insights can be

gained regarding ways to support and encourage students and parents in their respective roles. Principles of deliberate practice, belief in a child's ability and the priority of developing their resilience are all powerfully presented in this memoir. Despite, at times, her overstated and provocative methods, Chua's (2011, foreword) own self-deprecating words help to summarise some of the difficulties involved in the role of successfully parenting or educating children within these two diverse cultural contexts:

This was *supposed* to be a story of how Chinese parents are better at raising kids than Western ones. But instead, it's about a bitter clash of cultures, a fleeting taste of glory, and how I was humbled by a thirteen year old.

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*[Jeff MacRaidl is an Australian primary teacher who currently teaches in an international school in Taiwan. He is also undertaking Master of Education studies, majoring in Gifted Education, through the University of New England. Jeff has been teaching for 12 years, the last 5 of which have been in international schools in Asia. Much of his interest in the Confucian perspectives on education in general, and on giftedness in particular, arise from this context.]*

*Address for correspondence:*

Email: Jeff MacRaidl <[jmacraidl@gmail.com](mailto:jmacraidl@gmail.com)>