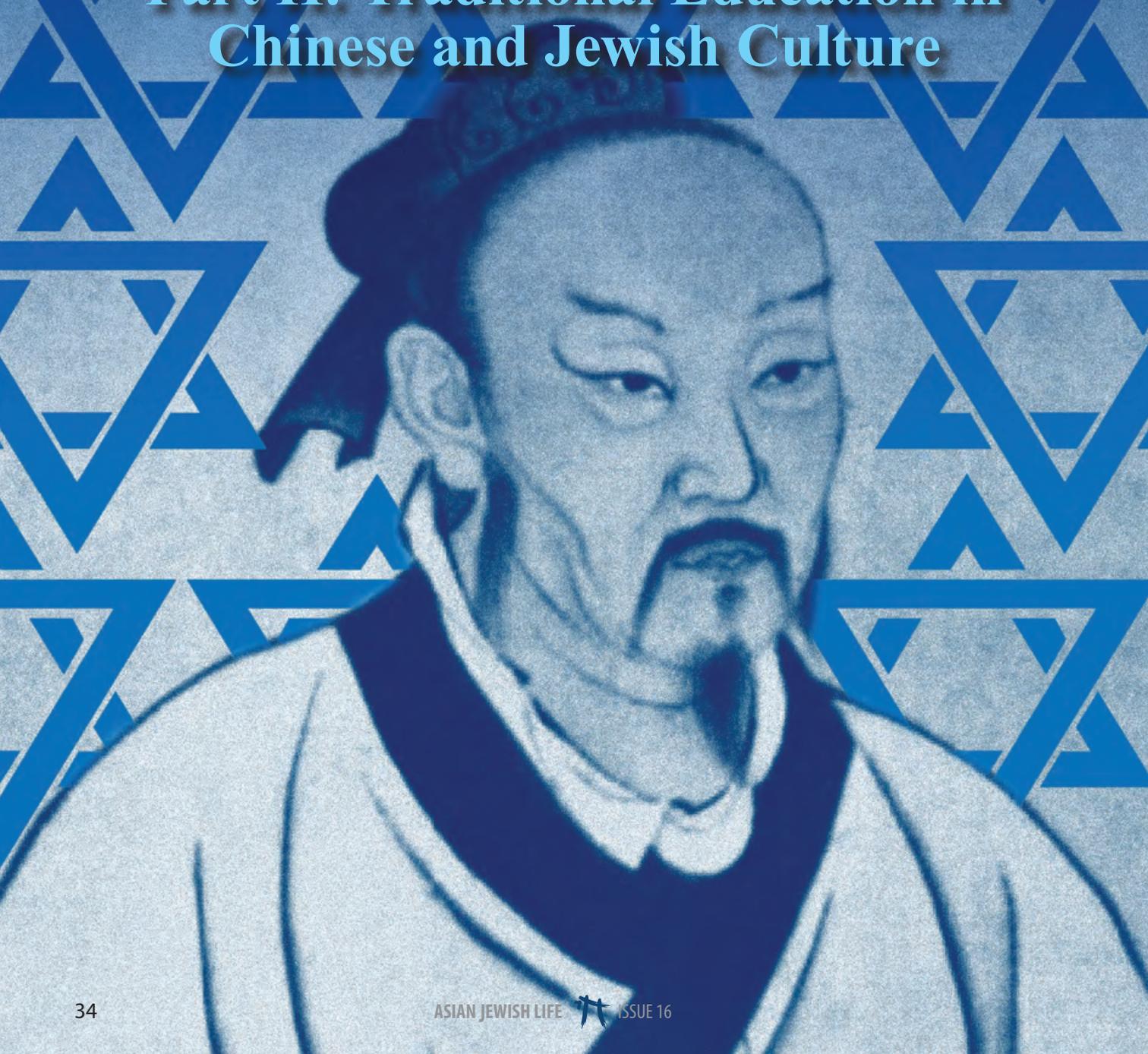


**Feature**

*by Tiberiu Weisz*

# Tiger Mom vs. Yiddishe Mame

## Part II: Traditional Education in Chinese and Jewish Culture



The rigidity of the traditional Chinese education and the flexibility of Jewish education has come into sharp focus in modern times. In her book *Battle Hymn of Tiger Mother* (Penguin 2011) the author Amy Chua, a woman of Chinese descent and a professor at Harvard, married to a Jewish husband, also a professor, created quite a stir with the way she raised her two daughters. She raised her children in a fashion that was strict by even traditional Chinese standards. With seemingly little input from her Jewish husband, Tiger Mom conceded: “even though my husband’s not Chinese, I tried to raise my two daughters the same way my parents raised me.” With one slight difference: like sons.

How did Chinese mothers raise daughters in traditional China? The general rule was that girls had no business learning even the rudiments of the written language. Chinese sages expressed their views that “Women without cultured ability are virtue itself.” Nonetheless, clever and resourceful mothers circumvented this traditional limitation. They taught daughters directly, focusing on four accomplishments: Virtue, Deeds, Words and Work. These four goals constituted the general knowledge expected from Chinese women and wives.

The mothers focused on teaching their daughters practical things, ideal-ly how to be good wife, a good mother, and her duties at home were to be obedient, chaste, hardworking and Confucian. Hardworking refers to household chores. In addition they were to observe the traditional hierarchy of dependences: dependence on father before marriage, dependence on husband after marriage, and dependence on sons if widowed. Though mothers’ influence on sons was indirect and subtle, on daughters it was exactly the opposite, direct and in your



face. In either case, mothers’ wisdom mattered: it was deeply rooted in daily life, human emotions in addition to being practical.

Slightly different in method, were the Jewish mothers who also played similar roles in education. Though the Mishna and Talmud devoted an entire chapter to the status of women in Judaism, they both relegated women to subservient roles to their husbands. Jewish sages, like their Chinese counterparts, had little to say about the education of women, and less on learning. They simply banned women from studying in *heder* (study hall). One of the Talmud sages said that “a girl’s place is at the spinning wheel” while another commented that: “If a girl can read a little, pray a little, then she is a real ‘intellectual’”. Not surprising, both Jewish and Chinese cultures treated females as another “mouth to cloth and feed.” Their place was to attend the family and home.

Despite these restrictions, the reality was that Jewish women were industrious, strong willed and the ones who managed the household. On top of that they quite often established a business of their own to support the family financially. To their assistance came their daughters who helped both at home and in business. Jewish mother’s greatest concern for their daughters was to maintain these four accomplishments: chastity, morals, reputation, and virtues. These attributes also were considered vital for a good match.

Pragmatism taught both Jewish and Chinese mothers to excuse their sons from the daily activities. Sons needed to study. For a Jewish mother, an accomplished son was a “learned student and clever businessman” or in the words of the Talmud: “worldly gain is good and worldly loss is bad.” Or as my mother used to say: “Man makes money and not money makes the man”. Traditionally, the ideal male role in Jewish family was the scholar, the diligent, promising yeshiva student. With the exception of the very young, the very old and the very learned, everyone was expected to make a living in addition to learning. A Jew without knowledge of the Torah was considered incomplete, and parents would bend the sky to educate their son. Jews valued more an educated son than an ignorant priest, as the Talmud said: “Better a learned bastard than an ignorant priest”. The Torah cemented Jews together and its study was essential.

The ideal Chinese man was one who passed the imperial examination and got “degrees and honors” (see *Asian Jewish Life*, Issue 15). Building wealth was the logical outcome of officialdom. Unlike in Judaism where the scope of schooling was for the sake of learning, the scope in China was to pursue recognition, honors and social status. As Confucius

(c. 551- 479 BCE) said: “Learning without thought is labor lost; thought without learning is perilous.” Chinese believed earnestly that history repeated itself and learning the past was the key to the future. Those who mastered the ancient tradition of writing and passed the examinations became officials who were to shape the course of China, a trait that is still prevalent in China today. Those who failed to attain a degree were often disillusioned and turned to teaching, to assure a steady “rice bowl” (income). And those who went into trade or business had a very rudimentary education, far below the required standard. Farmers and craftsmen had nothing to do with schools.

Both Jewish and Chinese mothers took an active role in “guiding” their sons towards success. But success was defined differently in the two cultures. Beginning with birth, a newborn Jewish child developed a special bond with the woman who attended his mother at his birth, usually a midwife. That bond followed the child throughout life, and manifested itself in visits giving her gifts while she participated in all the festivities and celebrations of his life. The midwife called the children she delivered “her babies.” And the community called her *di Bobeh* (granny in Yiddish). While *di Bobeh* influence smoothed the rough social edges of the young man, the mother created an environment to influence his upbringing by taking care of his daily needs and comfort.

A similar tradition existed in China. Beginning at birth, Chinese mothers relied on the centuries-old superstitions called *Old Mothers Encyclopedia* (*Mama Da Chuan*). It was an unofficial guide to new mothers orally transmitted only and never ever in print. One of the most common superstitions made Chinese mothers very choosy as to who should

be the first person let into the room after the baby was properly cleaned and wrapped? Auspicious was if a clever/smart boy came in and performed the ceremony called *cai sheng* or “stepping on the birth” hoping that the new boy baby would be smart too. This superstition was not practiced with baby girls.

Cultural beliefs as such bound mothers of the two cultures and it reflected in their names. A Jewish mom was called *Yiddishe Mame*, a Yiddish word with East European roots that radiated an overprotective mother with endless self-sacrifice. A Chinese mother was called *huma* or *Tiger Mom* a Chinese term that described an overambitious mother who raises her children in the strictest of strict discipline. The term is often synonymous with fierce ambition to help her children conquer, overcome and finally to succeed in professional life. Only recently did this term come to the attention of Westerners with the publication of Amy Chua’s book. Both the *Yiddishe Mame* and *Tiger Mom* strived for the same goal, to nurture the child to adulthood, to make him a *mentsh*, “a man as a *man*” in Judaism and a *ren*, “a man above *man*” in China.

*Mentsh* is a Yiddish term that means to attain the status of an accomplished human being, a whole person, a real adult with all the responsibilities and obligations. A *Yiddishe Mame* was proud if sons did well in secular schooling but prouder if they could also recite a passage from the Torah to their father. Schooling was important, grades and outside activities were secondary to Jewish learning. Jews pursued learning with no specific goal in mind, it was for the sake of learning. *Yiddishe Mame’s* greatest joy was to see her sons performing the *mitzvot* (good deeds) for the sake of *mitzvot*,

culminating in being recognized as a *mentsh* in his community.

Ren is the most basic character in the Chinese language, literally means, “man”, yet its meaning changes significantly in context. Chinese sages struggled with the question of “How can one become a *man* [and benefit from it]?” (*qi neneg wei ren* 岂能为人). Some defined *ren* (*man*) as: “Rites and righteousness are what makes a man above other *ren*.” Others as “the fulfillment of all filial duties and social obligation,” while modern interpretations offered some context “to be not as an ordinary person but as a *ren*, a man above *man* in society at large.” Each of these definitions carried their connotations. The first was to fulfill the ceremonial and public obligations; the second emphasized the obligations of children to parents, family and by extension the country. The last one came closer to the meaning of *mentsh* in Judaism, but not quite.

The definition of *ren* contained an inherent difference from *mentsh*. Just as *ma nishtana* differed from the Chinese *how can I know [to gain from it]* (see *Asian Jewish Life*, Issue 15), so did *mentsh* complement *ren*, just as yin and yang. In Judaism, a *mentsh* grew up in a classless society with allegiance to a code of conduct of an invisible and immortal deity called God. Every Jew was required to read the Torah (Law) or His words. That by itself required a basic education to each and every Jew, herein the name “people of the book.” In addition, each individual was in charge of his destiny, and every individual male Jew was equal both in the eyes of the Torah and in the community.

Not so in China. A *ren* grew up in a traditional class conscious society composed of *junzi*, “gentlemen” representing the ruling class and the *xiao*

*ren* “the little people” or commoners. The *junzi* included the nobility, and by virtue of social mobility also the “mandarins” who acquired their status through education. At the head of this social pyramid was the Son of Heaven (emperor) who was considered a deity in China, but a mortal human being by Jewish standards. The *xiao ren* “commoners” were the masses, either with a rudimentary education of *shu yuan*, (see *Asian Jewish Life*, Issue 15 for a discussion on book halls) or not educated at all. Subsequently the *junzi* were privileged and often above the law while the commoners were subject to the

law. Such a social distinction highlighted the unbridgeable gap between the class-conscious *ren* and the classless Jewish *mentsh*.

Tiger Mom brought this distinction into sharper focus. Initially she thought that perhaps a traditional upbringing with a modern education could combine the Chinese *ren*, “a man above man” with something like the Jewish *mentsh*. But first she had to face the low status of women in the traditional Chinese hierarchy. She skillfully weaved an understanding of the hierarchy of

dependencies with modern Western education, and treated her daughters the same way as she would have treated sons. Her daughters were expected to attain the highest achievement in the field of study, or rather in the mother’s field of choice. The daughters had no say in their upbringing, only a mother’s ambition mattered. In addition, she taught her daughters that traditional Chinese values for girls: Virtue, Fate, *Fengshui*, Confucianism (religious merits) and *Dushu* (reading) could enhance their aspiration to succeed, but they had to aim higher than that to obtain



their highest potential. If an artist, be an accomplished artist, recognized in the field. If a scholar, be an academic with the highest ranking schools. If married, be a *ren* first and only then follow the traditional Chinese values for wives.

Trying to weave the concept of *ren* with the Jewish *mentsh* offer insurmountable challenges. *Yiddishe Mame* saw her responsibility for the total physical way of life of a “real Jew.” Her rules were more flexible, more in sync with real life situations. She made sure that the dietary laws were observed, that the food was kosher, milk and meat were separated, and that she kept the family harmony. Disciplining a child was more a reflection of the domestic climate, rather than the offense. Tiger Mom on the other hand applied the traditional upbringing for sons to raise her daughters “if you expect the child to be healthy, you must allow him thirty percent of hunger and the same percentage of cold. Experience has taught parents that if you give him too much to eat and too much to wear the child gets indisposed through the faults of the parents.”

Puzzling however was the limited Jewish education of their daughters. “*Bat Mitzva* was Jed’s [her husband] terrain,” said Amy Chua. The daughters “read from the Torah seamlessly at *Bat Mizva*,” and the father “also approved the choice of ‘Hebrew Melody’ for violin at his daughter’s *Bat Mitzva* recital.” But beyond this, their Jewish upbringing was secondary. Tiger Mom Amy Chau followed what she knew best, the traditional Chinese Way that was handed down to her from her great, great, great... grandfather, the royal astronomer appointed by chief military staff in 1644. She imposed harsh rules on her daughters even by Chinese standards. Her rules:

“School work always came first

An A- minus is a bad grade

Your children always must be two years ahead of your classmates ...

You must never compliment your children in public

If your children disagree with a teacher or coach, you must side with the teacher or coach

The only other activities your children should be permitted are those in which they can eventually win a medal

That medal must be gold.”

In other words, no boyfriends, no sleepovers. Total respect for parents; daily drilling in math and Chinese from early age; and speaking Chinese at home. In addition there were daily school homework, hours of music practice, and reading. Expectations were so high that any grade below an “A” would invoke additional discipline. Her daughters went through the “ten years of *ku*, or bitterness. As the Chinese proverb says: “To be a man above *men*, you must endure the bitterest of all bitterness.”

Such expectations were contrary to

the aspirations of the *Yiddishe Mame*. Learning was just part of becoming a *mentsh* and wealth was a close second, though due to the economic and historical circumstances the two became contenders to higher social recognition. The ideal *mentsh* was learned in the ways of the Torah, generous and interacted easily in the community. Wealth was not necessary, but it certainly elevated the status of a *mentsh*. A learned man automatically belonged to the recognized status no matter how poor he was. Similarly, a wealthy man with little learning also belonged to the recognized class provided he used his wealth in accordance with the law of the Torah, and donated generously.

Tiger Mom justified her strict disciplinarian methods by pointing to the success of her daughters. They became accomplished academics and musicians according to the traditional Chinese Way. They became scholars, and successful in their own rights. The daughters attained the social standing, recognition and honors in the fields that Tiger Mom carved for them. They endured years of *ku* (bitterness) to become “men above *men*” in Chinese eyes. With the addition of two Jewish traits, that of generosity and interaction in the community, they could have also become *mentsh* in Jewish eyes. ✧

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*This article is Part II of a discussion on how the traditional Chinese education served as the driving force behind the Chinese Tiger Mom and how the Diaspora shaped the Yiddishe Mame. See Asian Jewish Life, Issue 15 for Part 1 (No Bread No Torah - No Degrees No Honors).*