

## Chinese Style Parenting

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### Opinion

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For a long while, I sort of take it for granted about parenting practices locally and haven't given it much thought. This was until recently when I was asked to give a speech on "Executive Coaching in Hong Kong" at HKU Space. I got approval from my colleague, Dr. Tommy Chan, to use some of his material on "Coaching in Asia" in LinkedIn, and it made me reflect on characteristics of Hong Kong parents' model of raising their children which foster certain traits and behaviors as adults.

Successful top executives tend to be clear about what they want and why they want what they want. Dr. Chan goes further to say that compared with their international counterparts, Asian executives may not be as clear about their desires or reasons for success. Many times, their aspirations are bundled with those of the society and their parents. The point of individualism vs collectivism cannot be over-stressed. The Chinese Olympic Gold Medalist thanks his coach, team, family and/or China before taking credit for himself or herself; this is usually the reverse order for the Western champion. I have observed in my local teaching that when I call on a student to answer a standard textbook question, there is usually help and consultation from his or her neighbor or neighbors before a collective answer is coyly replied. In contrast, in the US where I also taught college, this phenomenon would seldom happen. According to Dr. Chan, "showing off" in solo tends not to be a desirable cultural trait and this may be a detriment in the competitive business workplace. Moreover, Chinese executives prefer not to rock the boat and behave/think "outside of the box". This could take the form of compliance and fear of trying new things and failing, when creativity and entrepreneurship is in high demand in all endeavors.

Chinese parents are known for being overly controlling of their children especially when it comes to their safety and independence. Studies have shown that compared with western children, Chinese children have fewer injuries and bone fractures in their childhood. If you have a chance to observe how freely and boldly western children are allowed and even encouraged to play in public playgrounds you would understand. Instead, Chinese parents would forbid, let alone encourage, any kind of play that may be high risk such as climbing up to the top of slide that is over 10 feet. Similarly, Dr. Chan points to how Asian parents may over-react when their toddlers stumble and fall in public places and the implications for Asian executives to acquire independent skills to stand on their own and the courage to face the many challenges in corporate life.

From a parental perspective, for safety sake, this kind of over-protective attitude is perfectly understandable--but it could also thwart the children's curiosity and development of independence. In fact, regarding independence training, Chinese parents often see and treat their offspring as immature children until they are well into their mid 20's or 30's--or only when they get married.

Chinese children are less encouraged to "think and do" for themselves fearing failure and/or "loss of face". I note that in class, when I put forth an open question and ask for anybody to volunteer an answer, I often get a blank--in contrast to my experience with their American counterparts. Exactly, traditionally Chinese students were expected to learn by listening and observing rather than questioning and debating as in the Socratic model. Again,

as adults and executives this puts them at a disadvantage in business meetings and in the board room.

Having read Amy Chua's best-selling "Battle Hymn of Tiger Mom", I can appreciate the shock waves it sent to mainstream America which adopts a different approach to child rearing. Chua describes a parenting style that doesn't emphasize the child's cultivation of individual identity or a sense of self-esteem but on making sure the child meet collectively defined measures of success like getting superior school grades and becoming the highly culturally valued professionals such as doctor, lawyer, accountant, engineer or architect. Children are too busy to follow their parents' dictate in "winning at the starting line" than to discover who they are, what they want and why they want what they want, according to Dr. Chan.

While these behaviors which are pounded into their heads could lead them to succeed academically they could in turn hold them back in the workforce. As compared to western counterparts there is a perception that Chinese executives lack authority, leadership and creativity. Taught to be high-achieving robots, the lessons from Chinese parents, like blanket obedience to authority,

"don't argue with co-workers" and "don't cause trouble" are not the qualities that get executives promoted or earn them the covetable projects. An unnamed client says it well: "There are times when I'm too quiet, afraid to speak up and question my superiors and create uncomfortable situations. I don't know how to find and project the confidence required to get ahead? I see myself as someone who works hard and quietly toils away, finding me ignored when it comes to moving to the next step of the career ladder. Self-doubt circulates in my head all the time and I constantly aspire to be more 'perfect' to meet the expectations of my parents and others."

So does this mean all Chinese parenting practices are bad? Of course not, but for the sake of brevity the merits of Chinese parenting will have to wait. Meanwhile, let me issue the caveat that there are always the dangers of generalizing about the entire ethnic Chinese population. Are we talking about Hong Kongers, Mainlanders, Taiwanese, Macanese or overseas Chinese as in Chua's Chinese American story? Finally, even within a defined geographical grouping such as Hong Kongers, there can be vast individual differences.

