

transcript - Exploring Tiger Style, episode 2

“What is parenting ... Tiger Style?”

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Host: Welcome back to Exploring Tiger Style, a series of conversations hosted by Huntington Manager of Curriculum and Instruction Regine Vital. These talks include perspectives from the playwright, director, actors, local community members, and scholars. This episode is called "What is Parenting.... Tiger Style!?"

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Regine Vital: Hello, everybody. I am Regine Vital. I'm the Manager of Curriculum and Instruction in the Education Department at the Huntington Theatre. And today we're going to have a panel conversation with three guests; um and if you will, please introduce yourselves.

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Mike Lew: Hi, Mike Lew, playwright, and I am calling in from Brooklyn.

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Francis Jue: Hi, my name is Frances Jue, I am calling in from my closet here in midtown Manhattan, and I played all of the older father figures in Tiger Style.

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Trisha Pham: And I'm Trisha Pham. I am the Calderwood Pavilion ticketing associate at the Huntington Theatre. And I'm calling in from Boston.

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Regine Vital: Awesome. The title of the play is Tiger Style. There's a reason for that. In 2011, I believe it was, Amy Chua wrote a book, The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother. It set off a firestorm. There was controversy. I've not read the book, but it strikes me -- is there a way to define it? If you had to define tiger style parenting, how would you define it?

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Mike Lew: I would say that it's defined by the demand for academic excellence, and very top down in terms of discipline focused and "you have to listen to your parents" -- like a filial piety take on parenting. Yeah, I think that those are the biggest tenets for me.

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Francis Jue: Yeah. I think Régine, I'm so grateful that you started this conversation by asking that question, because depending on who you ask, tiger style means or signifies a lot of different things. I mean, it goes back twenty five hundred years to the definition of Confucianism where -- and I think of two principles. One, that any success that a person achieves is a reflection of their family, of their nation, of their community. And so it's much less about achievement as an individual sort of accomplishment as much as it is "Let's improve the world." And China was one of the very first -- 2000 years ago -- it was one of the first civilizations that provided a system whereby there was upward social mobility. It didn't depend on who you were related to. It didn't depend on how much money you had. Status and authority was acquired by taking exams. And if you passed those exams, if you were one of the best in your field, you could move up in society. All those ways of social mobility that we take for granted now here in America really have origins way back in China two thousand

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years ago. But if you ask people now what tiger parenting is, they don't necessarily think of these -- you know, for their time -- revolutionary concepts. They think of parents destroying their kids individuality. They think of really harsh corporal punishment. They think of kids committing suicide, because of the academic pressures that they have placed upon them. And I think that tiger parenting as a negative idea became attached to Asians in particular, because in America, it got linked to very ingrained stereotypes of Asian people, where Asians are not seen as fully human, as having emotions the way that -- or an appreciation of humanity -- the way that European-centric or white-centered cultures 'do.' And so it very quickly became a very pejorative term. So it means all of these things. And so I have a really complicated relationship to the very term 'tiger parenting.'

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Mike Lew: Wow Francis!

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Trisha Pham: I wholeheartedly agree. For me, Tiger cell parenting, like it conjures up an image of helicopter parenting, but kind of on steroids. But what it really means from an Asian perspective, or just like the Asian experience, is that your parents are just trying to make sure that you're able to take care of yourself and then them when they're older and pay it back. Yeah, there's a lot of negative associations with it. You know, is it abusive? Does it damage you mentally? That's a whole 'nother conversation. But what it's really meant to be is to instill discipline and respect and loyalty to your family and to yourself. But of course, this play shows like what it can do, if you lose track of that notion.

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Regine Vital: I mean, you brought up the term helicopter parenting. I don't think of it as having a negative connotation in society, but tiger parenting does. What exactly is the thing about the tiger parent? Is it the expectation? Is it the level of discipline? Do we think it's the fact that it doesn't promote 'rugged individualism,' -- community instead, family first instead. Does it feel like a major cultural clash that's happening or just a misunderstanding of what it actually is?

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Mike Lew: Yeah, I think that there's some layers at play here because it's not only the philosophy around family, or style of parenting, that a lot of Asians share, but then I think that the term itself is so loaded and as Francis alluded to, has like a kind of pejorative sense to it. And so why I wrote the play was because I recognize in that style of parenting pretty much exactly how I was raised. But then I also recognize, like, both the -- some of the limits to it, but then also, like the limited nature of the discourse around it that I had been witnessing, that it was actually like a lot of like non Asian people opining on that -- and not a lot of digging into where it works, or doesn't work. or sort of like what it actually means. I think that it's a style that to me feels very rooted in specific reasoning, and not just some kind of irrational thing. I tie it into an immigrant mentality, that it's like a way to achieve success as an immigrant in the U.S. That you, when faced with all sorts of like racism and bias, like a way to try to get around that through really drilling into academics, so that you

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can build a little bit of a bit of a, you know, a safe haven here, and then pull up the rest of your family with that.

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Francis Jue: Yeah, I think you hit the nail on the head when you relate it to previous generations, immigrant dynamics, because when you're an immigrant trying to make it in a new country where you have no money, you don't know the language. You realize that you are an outsider, not just by nature of who you are -- but how other people see you becomes a part of your identity. Taking into account how other people are looking at you as opposed to just having your own perspective. So I trace back what my parents said to me about, you know: in order to just be even, you have to work twice as hard because you're a Jue. My last name is Jue. I'm not Jewish, but at the same time, they said "You are a Jue. So you're special. You have a lot to live up to because the Jues are smart, they achieve. They work hard." All of those things. I remember going to Catholic school and Jesuit school, and it was very earthy, crunchy. And I came home one day and I asked my parents, "Why can't I call you Frank and Jenny? Why can't we be friends and get to know each other that way? Because I love you." And my mother looked at me and she said, "No, we are your parents. We will always be there for you. And friends will come and go, but we will always be there. And so we deserve the title mom and dad." And I think I can trace that kind of parenting to immigrant stories like where -- they grew up in Chinatown, they didn't venture out of Chinatown, you know, just a few square blocks in San Francisco because it literally was dangerous. You cross Columbus Avenue and you could get beat up and you didn't -- you weren't allowed into the same schools. You weren't allowed to rent or buy homes outside of certain areas in the city by law. So it was about self-preservation, and it was about learning the rules that you're presented with in order to achieve. So, yeah, it can be -- it can be hard. And there's a focus on achievement goals that, you know, you can measure like grades, like awards and prizes, and how much money you make, that kind of thing. But it also, I think is a really valuable way to provide a moral compass and a way to make sure that your kids are motivated. So, yeah, it's all of those things.

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Trisha Pham: Yeah, I definitely -- I remember when Amy Chua's book came out in 2010. I was a senior in high school. In the morning. I was getting ready for school. I think the Today show was on TV or something. My mom was watching and people were just like, 'oh my God, what is this like? That's abuse.' I'm like, really, this is normal. This is this is not news. This has been around for like thousands of years. Asians have had to, like, pull their bootstraps up and, like, really grind just to get by. And it really does stem back from like when we were in our home countries. We were targeted all the time for battles, invasions, colonization. And we are like one of the most resilient cultures out there. We're good at just getting into survival mode -- and tiger style parenting like, it has negative connotations in modern times, just because straight up, I think people are just kind of racist. Honestly, I'd be so lost if my parents didn't put that, like, discipline on me. Like, I wouldn't have the structure like I could follow now as a functioning adult. Whenever I, like, have kids one day, like, I definitely will have that, like, you know, seriousness when it comes to, like, doing what's best for them and making sure, like, they are successful but happy.

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Mike Lew: I think all the time about how I was raised, how my parents were raised and and how I'm raising my children like kind of under this umbrella philosophy. And I think for the play, like, what I was really craving was to create an intra-Asian framework where you could discuss the merits and the shortcomings -- but like in an insider way of not like with a lens that felt like it was judgmental and outside and sort of Orientalist for lack of a better term -- which I felt like was the prevailing dialogue around this idea at the time.

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Regine Vital: Yeah, what I will say is what I what I've pulled from, like, everything that all three of you have said -- my family is from Haiti. So I was born here. My parents met here, but they both emigrated from Haiti. And it's very similar, very strict. I often tell people it wasn't a question of if I was going to college; it was a question of how many times were how many degrees were you going to get: bachelor's masters and PhD? But like I grew up in a house where I have two younger sisters. All of us have have Masters degrees. My dad has a Masters degree. My mom finished her bachelor's degree at sixty one, and that's because she was working to get us through school. And it was -- if I brought home an A minus, the question was never, "Oh great. It's an A." It was "Why the minus. What did you forget?" So I saw the play and and I, and I immediately understood it again, that immigrant background, that immigrant story and that idea of resilience. That's one of the things we're talking about. And it's in the play. I mean, the dinner scene with the parents and the play before Albert and Jennifer go off on their freedom tour. That speech was like I've heard a version of that speech and that idea of instilling into resilience. And so, Francis, you're right. The story isn't just about parenting. It's also an immigrant story, this particular one in the play is three generations long. And it's continuing to unfold with Albert and Jennifer. And one of the things that kind of hit me while you're doing this speech, which is a very grounded speech, and it's a moment where it's not about satire, it's not about comedy. It's about like, let's get real, kids. Here's the situation. Felt like a moment where legacy was coming into the room. Felt like a moment where legacy was being passed from the parents to the children. For you, how did it feel to deliver that speech?

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Francis Jue: Wow. Thank you for that great description of that moment in the play. I got so much feedback from people coming to see the play who thought it was hilarious, and they recognized themselves in the play -- and their own families in the play, -- whether they were Asian or not. And one of the highlights for people out coming up to me was the dinner scene, where the family was all together. And this huge confrontation comes around, and a lot of people talked about that speech, and how they had -- or they longed to have -- that moment where that legacy was talked about. You're not just fighting for yourself, for your promotion or your relationship. Your relationship and your job are only possible, because of what these generations of other people have done and have given you. Having a sense of that kind of belonging, I think, is something that all people really long for: that sense of home, that sense of family, that sense of belonging, having that kind of grounding in knowing who you are. Doing that speech was was always one of the hardest things, because it took me a long time to realize that all I really need to do in this speech is be honest. In a play that asked me in all these different characters to put on a lot of performative aspects --

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so that we immediately knew who these people were or what they were trying to hide. There's that -- just that one moment where I just had to be, for lack of a better word, just be myself, instead of a character. Because what the speech had to say was so true for me personally. And so I'm really grateful for that. That's a rare gift.

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Francis Jue: Mike, what was that speech for you in writing it?

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Mike Lew: It's funny because like with a new play, like almost everything gets rewritten a lot. And I think that the substance of that speech has remained pretty constant from draft to draft and from production to production. The comedic and sort of humanistic feats that Francis is capable of are really on display in terms of like he's able to do these crazy characters -- and then like really ground the whole play -- and then march off to this other thing directly after that beat. But I think the audiences are craving a fair shake for these parents, because they've been sort of caricatured, and in terms of people's way into the play: not everybody who's coming to see the play is going to be going through this existential stuff. A lot of people that come to theater are going to be more like sort of parents with grown children age. And I think that that's seen as a big kind of window into like, 'how do I participate in this play' in terms of their perspective? For me, that speech evokes like a long kind of conversation with myself about ... A lot of people would come up to me, right after I got in the theater and be like, "oh, what do your parents think of that" or "what do your parents say about you going into theatre?" And there was a lot of -- I think there's a lot of hand-wringing from my parents about like, "oh, are you going to be poor on the street?" And that was not for no reason. The theater's not the most remunerative. But I think also, though, that there was a little bit of guilt on my part that, like, if I go into theater, is that in some ways squandering the legacy of like of the generations that came before me? Because I have my grandparents who fled World War two and came to the US and had so little and were able to raise doctors. And then I had my parents who had to put themselves through college, and work so hard to become a doctor, and then like, do I squander that by going into the arts? And having to really reckon with like if they hadn't done that, and there'd be no way that I would be able to dream of going into theater. And if I just do the same thing as them and be doctors, then that actually doesn't further the legacy. For me, what furthers the family's impact here is if I strike off in another direction, whatever that is, and do that to the fullest of my capabilities. And so all that gets filtered into the speech about "where you came from and where you're going," and then they throw it out and they do their own thing.

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Regine Vital: Yeah, no, it's like that's what kids do. I totally get that. And Trisha, I'm kind of putting you on the spot here, not because you're necessarily the youngest person in the crew, but I think it's a generational conversation that's happening alongside this great migration story. When you're kind of of a more potentially open, freer, looser group of kids than maybe what your parents came from. I know for me, there's like a seven year difference between me and my younger sister. That generation of kids is not my generation of kids. And her crew is a lot looser, a lot freer. So when you hear that speech, how does it ring for you?

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Do you agree with Albert and Jennifer, when they are kind of struggling and clashing with it? And want an apology or want some acknowledgement that maybe it didn't work?

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Trisha Pham: Oh, my goodness. I've had that speech at some point in my youth. But my parents, they're actually more lax than like my aunts and uncles, or like my cousins. So I got really lucky with putting my foot down -- like my dad and my mom, they're actually more American than a lot of the rest of my extended family. They came to America like pretty much as kids. Like my dad was like 13 and my mom was like 19. They met here in Massachusetts. They got to experience like being young in America, whereas like my cousins, like they some of them came from Vietnam. They came with their mom and my mom's aunt who came here to the States. Whenever I hear that speech, I feel like a sense of pride. I just think back of, like, wow, my parents went through a lot of stuff. I'm sure they have PTSD. But how the hell do they like hide it? [laughter] You know, like I don't know. I don't know how you do it, but how your parents are the most resilient people you'll ever meet.

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Regine Vital: There is one thought that I did want to ask. Charles Haugland helped me with this one. In the wild, a group of tigers is called a streak. He was thinking one of the positive images about Tiger parenting is the idea of prioritizing your family and your children, which, as we've discussed, seems to have some sort of a negative connotation here in the states for whatever reason. But when Tiger parenting is a natural developed response to a world that meets your accomplishments with skepticism, that doesn't acknowledge your value, it's a deep and necessary act of solidarity with your family. So in the words of the play, Chens don't quit. Right? Or Jues are special or I don't know if the Lews have a motto or if the Phams have a motto. But how does that image of a Tiger parent powerfully draw on a sense of familial unity?

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Mike Lew: I'm actually responding more to the word streak, which I never knew before. But like, to me it's like 'keep up the streak,' like we had to run for you and now you have to run for us and you have to keep up that streak. And if you flag or if you sort of veer off, then that disrupts the relay.

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Francis Jue: Yeah, that's great. I think of the American dream paired with Tiger parenting, if you're only focusing on how you're being perceived, then you should also know that, you've always got home. Which is your family. Where you get to decide, who you are, and where you you have a safe space to just be yourself. I think that there are other families that have that same kind of dynamic -- maybe expressed in different ways. But at night, when you're going to bed, really just having family is what matters.

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Trisha Pham: Definitely. The rest of the world is pretty screwed up or they're out to destroy you no matter what. But at least you have yourself. You have your family. That's all that matters. That's a pretty powerful unit when you have, like, you know, a core group of people who really are, like, tied to you, like from birth to death. So,

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Regine Vital: Yeah, and I think that's actually a really lovely note to end on the idea. Like at the end of the day, yes, you've got you, but you've also got your family. And is that now that we've got each other, we've got this legacy, we can continue to pass on and we will continue to survive and be resilient. That's lovely. I think that's a lovely, lovely lesson for parents to teach their children. I'm going to say thank you. Thank you, Mike. Thank you, Francis. Thank you, Tricia. This is really great. I always love the moment when I can talk to folks about having an immigrant background, and what that's like. Thank you so much for sharing with us. I'm excited for for the next one of these.

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Mike Lew: Thanks.

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Francis Jue: Thank you.

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Trisha Pham: Thank you.

00:23:03

Francis Jue: Thank you for listening to this episode of Exploring Tiger Style, hosted by Huntington manager of Curriculum and Instruction Regine Vital. Exploring Tiger Style is sound engineered by Valentin Frank. This episode features Mike Lew, Francis Jue and Trisha Pham. To hear the Tiger style audio play and more of exploring Tiger style and to donate in support of programs like these, visit [Huntington Theatre dot org](http://HuntingtonTheatre.org). If you enjoy Exploring Tiger style, please follow us wherever you found this series. Thank you for listening.