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**Chapter 2**

**Confucian Mothering: The Origin of Tiger Mothering?**

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**1. Introduction**

Amy Chua uses her neologism[[1]](#footnote-1) “tiger mother” to refer to a certain mode of parenting attributed to mothers in or from East Asia—“Chinese” mothers.[[2]](#footnote-2) Key characteristics of the tiger mother for Chua seem to involve not only pushing the children to excel academically but also a tight control of children’s daily activities, choosing their extracurricular activities—such as learning either piano or violin (but no other musical instrument)—and pressuring them to practice the musical instrument regularly. Such mothers allow their children to engage only in activities in which they “can eventually win a medal,” which “must be gold.”[[3]](#footnote-3) The tiger mother demands “perfect grades” from her children because she believes not only that her children “can get them,” but also that she is entitled to make such demands on the children; the mother knows “what is best for [the] children” and they “owe [her] everything.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Chua claims that tiger mothering is not an ethnic way of parenting—the term “Chinese” mother notwithstanding—but rather a strict and disciplinarian style of parenting that is effective in producing “stereotypically successful kids.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Whether Chua recognizes it or not, tiger mothering has its origin in Confucian mothering that was widely extolled and emulated in Confucian East Asia.

In the wake of Chua’s publication of her memoir, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, there was uproar among American parents, many of whom were shocked at the seemingly abusive manner in which Chua treated her daughters, especially as young children. The idea of the tiger mother, while unfamiliar and offensive to many American parents, is in fact quite familiar and prevalent in contemporary East Asia. There is also a widespread notion in many East Asian countries that tiger mothers have played a positive role in raising not only the general education level but also economic standards of their countries. Let me take my native country of South Korea as an example. South Korea has ranked at the top in the 2014 global ranking of student academic performance called “The Learning Curve,”[[6]](#footnote-6) up from the second in 2012.[[7]](#footnote-7) This is undoubtedly the outcome of Korean tiger mothers pushing their children to score ever higher in the annual college entrance examination,[[8]](#footnote-8) now called the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT). Further, many Koreans credit Korean tiger mothers for having made the “economic miracle” of South Korea possible. South Korea, which has the 14th highest GDP in the world as of 2013,[[9]](#footnote-9) was the poorest country in the world right after the end of the Korean War (1950-1953). It may therefore seem that Chua is justified in her claim that tiger mothering produces “stereotypically successful” kids. Or is she?

To answer this and other relevant questions, this chapter closely examines the idea of Confucian mothering, from which tiger mothering originates. Confucianism is famous for its emphasis on the family and the father-son relationship. Some Confucian classics also extensively discuss the public education of the youth, both elementary and advanced.[[10]](#footnote-10) Unfortunately, however, Confucians and contemporary East Asian feminists have both neglected the subject of motherhood occurring within the household, especially relating to young children. This chapter attempts to start a conversation on this very important topic and explores the idea of Confucian mothering as follows: In sections II and III, I examine exemplary mothers in Confucian East Asia of the past in order to derive a preliminary idea of Confucian mothering. In order to consider whether Confucian mothering is conducive to promoting the Confucian ideal, I first identify the Confucian ideal in section IV by providing a plausible conception of Confucianism as a universal philosophical system. In section V, I elaborate on how Confucian mothering in its goal and style has been conducive to enabling male children to realize the Confucian ideal. Yet these historical instances of Confucian mothering cannot be incorporated into the universal Confucian philosophical system because Confucian mothers themselves were prevented from realizing the Confucian ideal. I therefore argue in section VI for a reconceptualization of Confucian mothering consistent with Confucianism as a universal philosophical system. Reconceptualized in this way, I show in section VII the ways in which Confucian mothering is distinct from tiger mothering and argue that tiger mothering is morally unjustifiable. Finally, I conclude by examining why Confucian mothering is relevant even for contemporary American parents in the 21st century.

**2. Classical Confucian Texts and the Confucian Mother**

Confucius and Mencius, whose combined work arguably offers the true spirit of Confucian philosophy, did not make direct references to the Confucian motherhood. Indeed, it is difficult to construct any consistent viewpoint about women, let alone mothers, from the *Analects* and the *Mencius*. What little one finds about women in the *Analects* (6.28; 8.20; 9.18; 16.7; 16.14; 17.25) is unfavorable. In one case, women are viewed as in need of men’s management, just like servants (17.25); at other times women as possessors of “great beauty” are seen as sources of temptation for men aiming at moral perfection (9.18; 16.7). The *Mencius*, equally sparse regarding women (3A4; 3B2; 3B3; 4A5; 4B33; 5A1; 5A2; 6B1; 6B6; 7B9), fares somewhat better, perhaps due to Mencius’s admiration for his wise mother. Many references are related to women’s Confucian obligation to stay in the inner or domestic sphere (3A4) or to obey the husband (3B2). The ancient Confucian sages’ lack of interest in women, however, did not stop later Confucians from publishing handbooks and booklets that contain rules and precepts directed at women regarding their various roles in the family, as the Confucian transformation of China became more entrenched.[[11]](#footnote-11) The most important lesson for women, repeated in many such publications, however, pertains to the proper relation between husband and wife as “distinction (*bie*, 別),” first proposed by Mencius (4A:26). In the Mencian context, *Bie* refers to the separation of inner and outer (*neiwai* 內外) spheres “based on functions.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Accordingly, adherence to *bie* implies that men who occupy the public world ought to focus on affairs pertaining to the outside and women who occupy the private/domestic world ought to focus on affairs pertaining to the household.

The interpretation of *bie*, however, goes through a radical transformation when the Han Confucian Dong Zhongshu (董仲舒 179-104 BC), influenced by the *Book of Changes*, made a fateful connection between sex differences and the *yingyang* (陰陽) principle (Dong, section 53). Consequently, *bie* was reinterpreted by later Confucians as implying a metaphysical difference between the sexes that renders women’s status inferior to men’s in accordance with the cosmological order in which “heaven (*yang*) dominates earth (*yin*).” Hence, in the *Analects for Women* published in the Tang dynasty ([唐](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/%E5%94%90%E6%9C%9D) 618–907), women are told to treat their husband as their “master” (Song and Song, 333). In *Precepts for Family Life* published in the Song dynasty (宋 960-1279), the husband is likened to “heaven” and the wife to “earth.” Women’s “highest virtue” is defined as “being gentle and submissive.”[[13]](#footnote-13) The influential neo-Confucian Zhuxi (朱熹, [1130](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1130)–[1200](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1200)) of the Song dynasty also argues in his *Further Reflections on Things at Hand* that women’s major precept is obedience.[[14]](#footnote-14) In short, as ontologically inferior inhabitants of the subordinate sphere, women’s sole virtue is “submissiveness” (*shun* 順) and their primary obligation is “obey[ing] [their] superiors” who are male.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Even in these later Confucian publications that discuss women, references to women’s role as mothers are scarce. Liu’s *Exemplary Women of Early China* (2014), originally published in the Former Han dynasty (206 BC-8AD), is perhaps the most extensive collection of exemplary mothers from the Confucian perspective. It contains fourteen brief biographies of such mothers, most of which describe their relation to grown sons, with few stories about mothers of small children thrown in. Most of these narratives are too brief to be informative; while a consistent theme is that general qualities of exemplary mothers are moral qualities, such as devotion, reverence, and unfailing virtuousness in conduct,[[16]](#footnote-16) specific contexts or exemplary acts are rarely discussed. I would consider the story of the Mother Meng to be one of the few—if not the only—narratives that provides any clue regarding the ideal Confucian motherhood for young children. The only other relatively lengthy narrative about an exemplary Confucian mother of young children is found in Zhuxi’s *Reflections on Things at Hand*; it is actually a story by another renowned Confucian scholar of the Song dynasty, Cheng Yi, about his mother.

Mother Meng is none other than the mother of Mencius. Mother Meng was widowed when Mencius was very young and raised Mencius by herself in poverty by weaving. She valued her son’s education greatly and is famous for having moved three times in order to find the right educational environment for her son. She kept urging Mencius to apply himself to studying the Chinese Classics. One day when Mencius was still young, he told his mother that he was not progressing much in his studies. The mother was very alarmed and said, “Your abandoning your study is like my cutting this weaving,” as she cut up in front of him the cloth she had been weaving for days. She believed that a man must become knowledgeable and make a name for himself in order to “maintain tranquility” when at rest and to “keep trouble at a distance” when active. If, on the other hand, “a man is careless about cultivating his virtue,” then he will end up as a slave or a servant, if not a brigand or a thief. Mother’s stern admonition prompted Mencius to take his studies more seriously.[[17]](#footnote-17) When Mencius grew up and married, he was distraught over the fact that his new wife was not properly dressed when he entered their bed-chamber. Instead of taking her son’s side, the mother admonished Mencius that it was he who broke the rules of propriety for having entered the room without warning. Finally, when the mother learned that Mencius was reluctant to leave home and seek a fitting employment in the larger world because of his concerns about his aging mother, she urged him to leave her behind, arguing that a woman has to follow the “way of the three obediences”: a woman has to obey her father before marrying, her husband when married, and her son when the husband dies. If the son’s duty is to perfect his self-cultivation by serving a wise ruler, then the mother must assist the son to fulfill his duty.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Cheng Yi’s mother[[19]](#footnote-19) was an exemplary daughter-in-law and served her husband’s parents with filial piety and reverence. She also treated her husband with reverence as well, as if he were a “guest.” Her husband apparently reciprocated by paying her the same kind of respect, although he had “concubines.” She was humble and obedient toward her husband. Before making any decision, she would always ask for her husband’s opinion, even regarding trivial matters. She was altruistic and humane, and never jealous. She treated the children of concubines, the orphaned nephews on her husband’s side, and even servant children with the same affection and care as her own. She would always tell the children to treat those in lower stations in life, such as servants, “just the same” as those in their own class. While her love and affection for her children were great, she was stern when it came to teaching them the right values. When children committed wrongful acts or made mistakes, she would “always scold [them] with a loud voice” and admonish them not to repeat the same offense. She would never cover for the children’s wrongs or mistakes but rather inform the father so that he would administer punishment if necessary. As the children grew up, the mother advised them to “keep company with good teachers and friends.” She was obedient and followed the conventional precepts for women not to go outside the gate of her inner quarters after dark. Although she loved literature, she did not engage in creative writing of her own, for she considered it to be “wrong.” Cheng Yi credits his mother for his and his brother’s virtues.[[20]](#footnote-20)

**3. Exemplary Chosôn Confucian Mothers**

To these two biographical narratives of exemplary Chinese Confucian mothers, I will now add biographical narratives of exemplary Confucian mothers of the Korean Chosôn dynasty (朝鮮1392-1910). The Chosôn dynasty was founded through a military overthrow of the Buddhist Koryo dynasty (高麗,918 -1392) by a group of Confucian Scholars in collaboration with a military general. It was one of the most ideologically Confucian dynasties in East Asia. Chosôn Confucians, including Jeong Do-Jeon (鄭道傳, 1342–1398), the “master architect of the Chosôn dynasty” (Han), were faced with the urgent task of organizing a new society according to Confucian values and principles. They enthusiastically adopted the Neo-Confucian vision offered not only by Zhuxi’s influential interpretations of the Confucian classics but also his *Zhuzijiali* (朱子家禮), a comprehensive handbook on the rituals (*li*) of family relations.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Some of the basic tenets of the Confucian Chosôn society relevant for our purposes are as follows: All Chosôn government officials and bureaucrats came from the class of Confucian scholars (literati) familiar with the Confucian Classics. The literati class is not exactly equivalent to the European aristocracy; although the literati class status was in general maintained through family lines, it was in principle meritorious. What made persons members of the literati was Confucian education, and a family maintained its elite status through its sons’ academic success. In other words, a family retained its literati class status only if its sons scored highly in the Confucian state examination on the Confucian Classics, which selects government officials and bureaucrats of varying ranks. If there were no sons, or sons failed to become high-ranking government officials by scoring low in the state exam, then the family lost its literati status and fell into disrepute. The goal of the literati class was therefore to have their sons pass the state examination and become high-ranking government officials. It was therefore a son’s filial duty to apply himself daily to the study of the Confucian Classics and do well on the examination.

Very little, if any, reference is made to Confucian mothering in Chosôn Confucian publications, even those that were aimed at promoting Confucian customs. As far as women were concerned, the focus was mostly on the husband-wife relationship and the wifely virtues of obedience and chastity. The narratives of exemplary Chosôn Confucian mothers used in this chapter are from Eun-Sig Yi’s contemporary compilation of the Chosôn dynasty’s exemplary mothers, largely based on anecdotes and their sons’ writings.[[22]](#footnote-22) I consider stories of five such mothers: Ms. Yun (early 17th century?-1689), the mother of Kim Man-jung; Ms. An (1401-1469), the mother of the Seong brothers; Ms. Yu (16th century ?-?), the mother of Yang Sa-eon; Ms. Yi (1539-?), the mother of Seo Seong; and Ms. Shin (1480-1524), the mother of Yi Jun-keong.[[23]](#footnote-23) The book, despite its title *Korean History of Motherly Love*, gives only general qualifiers regarding the exemplary mothers’ parenting style, such as “stern,” “strict,” “devoted,” etcetera, and does not provide any detailed description. The book, in line with the general writing format of Korean Confucian writers, is mostly devoted to elaborating on their family tree, the achievements as well as the fate of their sons, the location of graves and monuments, and other related historical background. In order to identify key elements of exemplary Confucian mothering exhibited by these mothers, I therefore focus on some commonalities among such mothers.

First, the sons were all exceptionally accomplished literary figures who had reached the apex of the government hierarchy as highest-ranking Confucian government officials at least once in their lives. This means that they had passed the Confucian state examination with flying colors. Many of them were later deposed and exiled, although some were reinstated later. This is not because they were incompetent or corrupt. As a monarchical system, the governing of the Chosôn dynasty was at the mercy of hereditary monarchs. If the ruling monarch was wise or at least decent, then it was by and large orderly and even prosperous; if the ruling monarch was arbitrary, intemperate, and/or tyrannical, then it was unjust and corrupt to varying degrees. There were always multiple factions and divisions within the Chosôn government attempting to curry favor from or influence the monarch. If the monarch was wise, he was able to keep such attempts under control. If the monarch was not, factions often engaged in fatal political struggles for power. Serving in the Chosôn court was therefore a dangerous business, especially for those who spoke truth to power. One of the few stable state institutions throughout the dynasty, however, was the Confucian state examination system by which government officials were selected. Whatever their later fate, the sons of the exemplary mothers in the book were without exception those who had outperformed others in the exam.

Secondly, these mothers came from the literati class background themselves, many of whose fathers and grandfathers were high ranking government-officials. Most were taught to read and write Chinese characters—the language of the elite at the time—and *a fortiori* the Confucian Classics. This was unusual at a time when most women, even from the elite class, were not allowed to attend schools or taught how to read or write, as being educated was regarded as detrimental to being an obedient wife and daughter-in-law. Ms. Yun, Ms. An, and Ms. Shin who were taught the Confucian Classics at home were able to teach their sons when they became too poor to send them to proper schools or tutors.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Thirdly, these mothers faced extreme adversity of one kind or another. Ms. Yun, Ms. Yi, and Ms. Shin all became widows early in their marriages and had to raise young children by themselves. Ms. Yun’s husband, a high official in the Chosôn court, committed suicide to protest against the Qing dynasty’s invasion of Chosôn in 1636. After the husband died, Ms. Yun made a living by weaving and embroidering. She was impoverished but never begrudged expensive books for her son.[[25]](#footnote-25) Ms. Shin’s husband and his brothers, all high officials of the courts, were beheaded for treason by a notorious tyrant, and she herself was enslaved for a brief time. After she reunited with her sons, she lived in severe poverty but never neglected the education of her sons, teaching Confucian Classics to her sons herself.[[26]](#footnote-26) Ms. Yi was blind from birth and her husband died of natural causes at the age of 22. It is hard to imagine how a blind widow could have survived without a husband at a time when there were no opportunities for gainful employment for elite women with no business skills. Ms. Yi, however, made good money by making and selling delicacies and wine to elites and was able to support her son’s education.[[27]](#footnote-27) Ms. An was not a young widow; still she had to raise her children by herself because her ambitious husband was never around, either preoccupied with work or busy partying and drinking.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Fourthly, all the mothers were singularly committed to their son’s education to the extent that they were willing to sacrifice their lives; at least one actually did. Their unparalleled commitment is obvious from their persistence in educating their sons against all odds. Ms. Yu, however, sacrificed her life for it. She became a second wife of a widowed small town governor who was forty years her senior.[[29]](#footnote-29) In Chosôn it was legally decided in 1413 that a man must have only one legal wife, who is the primary wife, and all other wives were relegated to the status of secondary or minor wives.[[30]](#footnote-30) Due to the strict distinction between primary and secondary wives, sons of minor wives were of secondary status and were prohibited from taking the state examination. This means that they were forbidden to enter the government bureaucracy and climb the social ladder. After her husband died, Ms. Yu inquired her late husband’s family elders about how her sons could avoid this fate. She concluded that the only way her sons could avoid the fate of second-class citizens was for her to disappear. Consequently, she committed suicide in front of the relatives gathered at the funeral of the late husband, and her sons were subsequently adopted as children of the primary wife.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Fifthly, and most importantly for the purpose of this chapter, all the mothers exhibited a certain style of parenting. They were strict with their sons and emphasized discipline and self-cultivation. The style, however, went hand in hand with a two-fold goal: It was effective not only in prodding the sons to excel in the study of the Confucian Classics that were the subject matter of the state exam, but also in urging them to become morally excellent or self-cultivated persons. In fact the primary theme of the Confucian Classics is none other than the importance of attaining moral excellence or self-cultivation (*xiushen* 修身). The Confucian idea of self-cultivation comes directly from the *Analects*, and it refers to a very strenuous life-long process of “self-education” to reach the highest stage of moral perfection (*Analects* 8.7). The strict and disciplinarian style of traditional Confucian education that emphasizes persistence, perseverance, and self-discipline is consistent with the idea of self-cultivation. Confucians believe that the development of such virtues is necessary to achieve the Confucian ideal of *junzi* (君子, noble person) who succeeds in self-cultivation (cf. *Mencius* 6A.15; 4B.19). Given the arduousness of self-cultivation, it is widely recognized that only a small number of persons would persist in it throughout their lives. Consequently, those who were considered to have achieved the status of *junzi* were widely revered. Many of these mothers themselves exemplified virtues of persistence, perseverance, and self-discipline. These mothers were not merely preaching to their sons to cultivate themselves and develop Confucian virtues. They themselves had ample self-discipline, perseverance, and grit, and taught their sons by example as well as by instruction.

Sixthly, they all subscribed and were well-adapted to the Confucian ideology regarding the place of women in society. All Confucian mothers examined here, including Mother Meng and Cheng’s mother, accepted women’s subordination and exhibited qualities that contemporary feminists would find submissive. These mothers all took for granted that a woman’s sole duty was to be a good wife and mother. Although many of these mothers were well versed in the Confucian Classics, they did not have any ambition of their own. Cheng’s mother, in particular, refrained from developing her considerable talent for literature. They were ambitious, however, for their sons, which was an important reason that they devoted themselves to their sons’ education. I will later return to the topic of the exemplary Confucian mothers’ willing acceptance of subordination.

**4. Confucian Ideal in Morality and Politics**

How does Confucian mothering relate to Confucianism in general and the Confucian ideal in particular? Is Confucian mothering practised by the exemplary Confucian mothers consistent with Confucian education aimed at promoting the Confucian ideal? In order to answer this question, we must identify the idea of Confucian ideal predicated on the concept of the Confucian person. In order to do so, I suggest that we go back to the Ancient Confucianism of Confucius and Mencius before Dong’s interpretation of the *yingyang* principle was incorporated into the Confucian philosophical system, which propelled Confucianism’s excessively patriarchal turn. The Confucian person is essentially a moral being with the “moral mind” (*xin* 心) (6A.15).[[32]](#footnote-32) The moral mind consists of four kinds of feelings: commiseration (*ceyin* 惻隱), shame and dislike (*xiuwu* 羞惡), modesty and yielding (*cirang* 辭讓), and the sense of right and wrong (*shifei* 是非) (*Mencius* 2A.6). These four feelings, if preserved, provide the “beginnings” of the four “constant” Confucian virtues of *ren* (humanheartedness 仁), *yi* (righteousness 義), *li* (propriety 禮), and *zhi* (wisdom 智), respectively (*Mencius* 2A.6). The moral mind is common to all humanity, sages and ordinary humans alike (cf. *Mencius* 3A.1, 6A.7, 6A.10; *Analects* 17.2): “[A]ll human beings are endowed with the authentic possibility to develop themselves as moral persons through the cognitive and affective functions of the mind.”[[33]](#footnote-33) The Confucian ideal is the embodiment of the four virtues by preserving and developing the four beginnings , which is essentially a moral ideal.

Although all four Confucian virtues are important in actualizing the Confucian ideal, the most significant Confucian virtue is *ren*, and, therefore, Confucians must strive to embody *ren*—what I call the precept[[34]](#footnote-34) of *ren*. *Ren* is not merely a “particular virtue” of human relations, but a “general virtue” in its “inclusiveness” of other Confucian virtues.[[35]](#footnote-35) Some even attribute to it a special status as “a principle of inwardness” that guides the Confucian person toward moral perfection.[[36]](#footnote-36) Construed thus, the process of actualizing *ren* is “practically identical” to the process of self-cultivation (*xiushen* 修身),[[37]](#footnote-37) a life-long process of arduous “self-education” aiming at moral perfection, which often involves pain and suffering (*Analects* 8.7). The burden of self-cultivation, however, is not imposed from without but is in fact “an internally motivated sense of duty,”[[38]](#footnote-38) as “the uniqueness of being human is as much a responsibility as a privilege.”[[39]](#footnote-39) The Confucian self, however, is “irreducibly interpersonal”[[40]](#footnote-40) in that it emerges only in a net of human relations[[41]](#footnote-41) in which the self is expected to play definite roles. It is in the process of performing these roles and performing them well that the Confucian self acquires a unique identity. Therefore, Confucian self-cultivation must occur within the confines of human relations and maintaining harmonious human relations is an integral component of the Confucian ideal.[[42]](#footnote-42)

In concrete relational contexts, *ren* manifests as “love” (*ai* 愛) for others[[43]](#footnote-43) and cultivating oneself in human relations requires expanding one’s love to those involved in relations with oneself. The family relation, among others, is crucially important, because it is where Confucian persons experience and practice love for the first time. This is why *ren*, especially in its Mencian interpretation, is often translated as “love with distinction” (*chadengai* 差等愛).[[44]](#footnote-44) Yet the Confucian *ren* as love, even interpreted in the Mencian way, does not imply egoism centered on one’s family. Despite the Confucian emphasis on the parent-child relation (*Analects* 1.2; *Mencius* 4A.27, 6B. 3, 7A.15), the Confucian person must embrace all in his or her love (*Mencius* 7A.46).[[45]](#footnote-45) The concept of love with distinction is concerned primarily with “the application of love” and implies that there is “an order, a gradation, or distinction, starting with filial piety” when exercising the virtue of *ren*.[[46]](#footnote-46) In other words, we must apply the lessons about love learned within the family to non-familial relations, albeit in a diluted fashion. As implied in Mencius’s statement that “All the myriad things are there in me” (7A.4),the true Confucian self is “an open system”[[47]](#footnote-47) at the center of “a series of concentric circles, … the outer rim of [which] never closes.” The precept of *ren*, then, requires “the broadening and deepening ‘embodiment’ of an ever-expanding web of human relationships.”[[48]](#footnote-48) It is therefore stated in the *Daxue* (大學) that the stages of this process are fourfold: first, self-cultivation (*xiushen* 修身); second, regulating one’s family (*qijia* 齊家); third, governing the state (*zhiguo* 治國); and fourth, bringing peace to the world (*pingtianxia* 平天下) (*Daxue*大學 1).

This interpretation of the Confucian precept of *ren* clearly shows that Confucian politics and Confucian morality are intimately connected. The circle of human relations involved in politics is by far the widest, involving the last two stages of self-cultivation mentioned in the *Daxue*; governing the state and bringing peace to the world. A classical statement about the Confucian way to govern a state can be found in the *Mencius*, where it is stated that “the people (*min* 民) are the most important [element in a state]” (*Mencius* 7B.14). Therefore, “the ruler must love the people wholeheartedly” and all state policies must aim at promoting their well-being.[[49]](#footnote-49) Some Confucians call this “people-centeredness (*min-bon/minben* 民本)”and take it as the most central political value of Confucianism.[[50]](#footnote-50) Since “To govern (*zheng* 政) is to rectify (*zheng*正)” (*Analects* 12.17 see also, 13.6, 13.13), governing the people and promoting their well-being also means cultivating/rectifying them (*zhengren* 正人 or *zhiren* 治人), which means enabling them to engage in self-cultivation and strive toward moral excellence. This is the politics of *ren* (*renzheng* 仁政, cf. *Mencius* 2A.3), considered the best form of government in Confucianism. We might call this the Confucian political ideal, which is distinct from what I have identified as the Confucian (moral) ideal. Only *junzis* who have attained the Confucian [moral] ideal can practice the politics of *ren*, as it is the ultimate realization of *ren*This explains why Confucius himself never gave up his dream to serve a wise king and rectify the world (*Analects* 13.10, 14.41, 17.1, 17.5, 18.7).

**5. The Parenting Goal and Style of Confucian Mothering**

The exemplary Confucian mothers’ parenting goal and style were in general conducive to their sons’ approximating the Confucian (moral) ideal. The twofold educational goal of Confucian mothers was, first, to enable their sons to master the Confucian Classics and excel in the Confucian state examination in order to become high-ranking government officials, and, second, to enable their sons to approximate the Confucian ideal. These goals were intimately related because the Confucian education is essentially moral education and the main theme of the Confucian Classics is the importance of attaining the Confucian ideal through self-cultivation. Given the intimate connection between excelling in the state exam and obtaining/maintaining the socio-political privilege, one may argue that these mothers were more motivated by social success than Confucian morality. Perhaps. Yet real human motives are always complex; it cannot be denied that, as moral beings well socialized in Confucian morality, they would also have been committed to the Confucian ideal and the value of self-cultivation. Taking as the starting point the presumption that at least one of the Confucian mothers’ motives was to enable their sons to realize the Confucian ideal, this section examines further the style of Confucian mothering in order to determine whether it would be conducive to enabling children to realize the Confucian ideal.

The Confucian mothers’ parenting style involved stern exhortations to develop the virtues of self-discipline, perseverance, and persistence. One notable aspect of this parenting style was that it did not endorse frequent and liberal expressions of affection, love, and compliments considered necessary for raising children among contemporary American parents.[[51]](#footnote-51) This does not mean that Confucian mothers did not feel affection toward their children, nor does it mean that emotion is unimportant in Confucianism. Emotion, as we have seen, is fundamental as the “beginning” of Confucian virtues. However, following the precept of *ren* actually requires distancing oneself from unreflective and visceral emotion, even in the case of the parent-child relation. The reason is that *ren* must be expressed through proper *li*, which represents “enlightened” and “refined” norms of comportment expected of one’s role in human relations.[[52]](#footnote-52) In other words, it is not enough for Confucians that one adopts *ren* as inner morality, but *ren* must be externally expressed in accordance with certain public expectations pertaining to one’s role in human relations, *li*. The intimate connection between *ren* and *li* is evident in *Analects* 12.1, which defines *ren* as “to subdue oneself (*keji* 克己) and return to *li* (*fuli* 復禮).”

*Li*, however, involves *jing* (respect or reverence, 敬) toward others. Indeed, various sources in the *Mencius* (*Mencius* 2A6; 4B28; 6A6) suggest that “*jing* is the central element of *li* just as love is to *ren*.”[[53]](#footnote-53) *Jing*, whatever else it may imply, implies at the very least “seriousness toward a person,” which involves “taking to heart a person’s claims on us and dutifully expressing our responsibility toward that person.”[[54]](#footnote-54) As such, *jing* entails some deferential distance between the one expressing *jing* and the object of *jing* (Chan 2006, 235). Consequently, spontaneous and unprincipled expressions of emotion are in general prohibited. Therefore, in the Confucian parent-child relation children are required to show the requisite *li* of affection, and the consistent theme in the Confucian classics regarding children’s obligation toward parents is to be respectful (*jing*) toward them (2.7; *Xiao jing* 孝經, bk. 2). In the *Li ji* (禮記), in which how to comport oneself in front of parents is extensively discussed, the unifying theme is again to serve one’s parents sincerely and to maintain a deferential and respectful manner and attitude. This means that there must be some emotional distance when children act in their parents’ presence.

How about parents’ treatment of children? Strangely, there is in Confucianism an eerie silence concerning the *li* of affection required of parents toward children.[[55]](#footnote-55) It is not entirely clear why Confucianism has been silent on this issue[[56]](#footnote-56) and has placed such disproportionate burden to fulfill the *li* of affection on children and not on parents. Most Confucian relations, however, presuppose reciprocity[[57]](#footnote-57) and if one party to the relation does not act in accordance with *ren* and express appropriate *li*, then the other party need not reciprocate (cf. *Mencius* 1B.8; 4B.30). Therefore, it is possible to interpret the *li* of parent-child relation to include duties of parents to express proper affection toward children.[[58]](#footnote-58) If so, then might it not be possible to interpret the proper *li* of affection that parents ought to express toward children as involving emotional intimacy?

I would like to argue that, even in the case of parents’ treatment of their children, deferential distance is required of their *li* of affection. Evidence for this can be found in *Analects* 16.13, in which Ziqin asks Confucius’s son Boyu about his father’s way of instructing him as a child. Boyu recounts that, when he was passing his father in the courtyard, Confucius, rather than expressing affection or compliments, urged him to apply himself to studying the Chinese Classics. Upon hearing this, Ziqin extolls Confucius for maintaining “a certain distance in relations with his son.”[[59]](#footnote-59) The Song commentator Sima Guang interprets such a distance as expressing “ritual propriety” and claims that father and son ought not to “consort with one another day and night in an indecently familiar manner”[[60]](#footnote-60); the distance that a father ought to maintain “from his son” is due to “his role as teacher, guide, and disciplinarian.”[[61]](#footnote-61) This supports my view that the primary responsibility of parents toward children in Confucianism is to enable them to realize the Confucian ideal of *junzi* committed to the life-long process of self-cultivation. The best way to instill in children requisite *li* in human relations and enable them to be virtuous Confucian citizens is for parents to take on the role of moral educators by becoming moral exemplars themselves. This means that parents themselves have to maintain deferential and respectful manner and attitude toward their children, so that children can learn by following parents’ example.

The emphasis on exemplary mothers’ moral qualities, such as devotion, reverence, and unfailing virtuousness in conduct[[62]](#footnote-62) discussed previously is consistent with this conclusion. The Confucian mothers’ parenting style, involving stern exhortations to embody self-discipline, perseverance, and persistence, was conducive to enabling the children to engage in self-cultivation and develop Confucian virtues, especially because the mothers themselves exemplified such qualities and habits. This is not to say that Confucian mothering style should be devoid of affection or caring. Confucian mothers ought to express proper affection and approval toward children when called for, complimenting them when they exemplify requisite virtues and encouraging them to continue to behave properly, so that the children form good habits and eventually develop virtuous character fit for a *junzi*. When children misbehave, on the other hand, Confucian mothers ought to chasten and discipline them. Punishment may be involved in this process, as long as it is proportionately, unemotionally, and fairly administered, making sure that children themselves understand why it is appropriate. Whether showing affection or disapproval, Confucian mothers ought never to be overly emotional or indulgent, but moderate, controlled, and respectful, based on self-disciplined emotional restraint.

**6. Is Confucian Mothering a Worthy Parenting Ideal in the 21st century?**

We have seen that Confucian mothering as was exemplified in history has contributed to raising sons to approximate the Confucian ideal. Might historical Confucian mothering, then, be considered a worthy model of parenting, if not by everyone than at least by parents in traditionally Confucian East Asia? I do not think so. The most problematic aspect of historical Confucian mothering from the contemporary perspective is that these mothers themselves were prevented from achieving the Confucian ideal and they seem to have willingly accepted their subjugated status as women in their society. If a hallmark of a plausible philosophical system is that it promotes universal moral values, then there is something off-kilter about the fact that Confucian mothers were mere tools to facilitate the realization of the Confucian ideal by their male children, while they themselves were excluded from realizing the ideal. One might conclude, therefore, that Confucian mothering as was practiced in the past is not fully integrated into the Confucian philosophical system but is rather a mere instance of patriarchal manipulation of women to perpetuate male dominance. If this is the case, then our initial question whether Confucian mothering is a relevant parenting ideal in the twenty first century would lose its significance.

I fully recognize that historical Confucian mothers were unduly restricted in their agency as they tried to survive in a severely patriarchal socio-political system to which Confucianism was historically reduced. And who could blame them? There is no doubt that they tried their best under the circumstances and deserve our utmost admiration and respect for their achievements, however meager they may seem from the contemporary feminist perspective. The important question for our purposes,then, is whether Confucian mothering can be *reinterpreted* to be fully integrated into the universal Confucian philosophical system, which also had to be resuscitated from the ideological distortions of Confucianism since the Han dynasty. My answer to this question is a “Yes.” Making my case, however, requires answering two further questions in the negative: First, is women’s subjugation entailed by the Confucian philosophical system? Second, is women’s subjugation constitutive of Confucian mothering?

Let us begin with the first question. Women’s subjugation is contradictory to the spirit of Confucianism because it is inconsistent with the Confucian moral precept to embody the virtue of *ren*. There is simply no justifiable reason why women should not be considered moral persons capable of self-cultivation. If they are capable of self-cultivation, then the universal moral precept of *ren* ought to apply to women as well. As we have seen,the true Confucian self is “an open system” and the completion of one’s self-cultivation, while starting with the family, must include “the universe as a whole.”[[63]](#footnote-63) Not extending oneself outward, whether due to one’s refusal or others’ interference, “restricts us to a closed circle”[[64]](#footnote-64) and stunts one’s moral growth. Circumscribing women’s domain of self-cultivation to the domestic sphere therefore constitutes a morally unjustifiable restriction of women’s moral growth, which goes against the core Confucian precept.

What about the second question, is women’s subjugation constitutive of Confucian mothering? The answer is again, no. In Confucianism, taking “care of family affairs is itself active participation in politics,”[[65]](#footnote-65) since the family itself is intimately connected to the public realm as “the training ground for moral cultivation.”[[66]](#footnote-66) The pivotal importance placed on the family in Confucianism entails that “taking care of family affairs” should be an important Confucian responsibility for all members of the family, whether men or women, directly related to the precept of *ren*. If so, then Confucian mothering should be understood as “Confucian parenting” required of parents of both sexes[[67]](#footnote-67) and the responsibility of Confucian mothering should fall equally on parents of both sexes. In order to raise and educate the next generation to become moral persons and active participants of the public sphere, the parent must understand the crucial connection between the domestic sphere and the public sphere, which is in turn predicated on her being an active participant in the public sphere as well as in the private sphere. Therefore, it is incumbent on parents of both sexes to actively engage in both domestic and public spheres, in order to be informed about the connection between the two.

Variations may exist in the extent to which each parent engages in either sphere, depending on his/her disposition and preferences. This variation, however, should not pose a problem for Confucianism, provided that a reasonable balance between the two spheres is maintained. The degree to which each parent cultivates him or herself in different spheres should be a matter of negotiation and mutual agreement between the two parents who both care deeply about raising children to be moral and politically active Confucian persons. Understood in this way, women’s subjugation is by no means constitutive of Confucian mothering. Indeed, it obstructs the attainment of Confucian mothering’s main goal, which is to enable children to approximate the Confucian ideal.

**7. Relation between Confucian Mothering and Tiger Mothering**

I have shown that the idea of Confucian mothering can be made consistent with the universal Confucian philosophical system and argued that the reinterpreted Confucian mothering can provide a worthy model of parenting in the contemporary world, especially for parents in East Asia, which still retains much of its Confucian tradition. In this section, I examine the relation between Confucian mothering and tiger mothering discussed at the outset. Recall that the goal (moral education) and the style (disciplinarian) go hand in hand in Confucian mothering. The similarities between Confucian mothering and tiger mothering mainly pertain to their parenting style, which involves instilling in children self-discipline, perseverance and persistence. Tiger mothering also shares one of the goals of Confucian mothering, which is academic excellence of the children. Yet this is where similarities end.

Academic excellence in Chosôn, as I have argued, was subordinate to the more fundamental goal of moral education. If academic excellence is disassociated from moral education, then it can no longer count as Confucian education. In tiger mothering, academic excellence is a mere instrument for winning in social competition and advancing oneself toward a higher social status. Recall Chua’s emphasis on winning “the gold medal”? Tiger mothering is all about advancing one’s own children at the expense of other children. Moral or civic education is irrelevant to Chua’s tiger mothering. As in any brand of egoism, the logic of tiger mothering works only if a small minority practices it. If the majority of parents were to become tiger mothers, then this would lead to a brutal zero-sum game in which only the fittest or the strongest or the luckiest will survive after much wasted money, time, and energy, not only at the individual level but also at the social level.

This scary scenario is being played out in contemporary South Korea where the majority of mothers in upper and middle classes are tiger mothers. Traditionally, Confucian mothering was the mothering style among the literati class in Chosôn (1392-1910). The Confucian socio-political system of Chosôn that had lasted for over 500 years, however, was violently dismantled when the Japanese Empire colonized Chosôn in 1905. After Korea’s independence from Japan in 1945, the Korean War (1950-53) and the influx of American capitalism in its aftermath completely disintegrated the Confucian socio-political hierarchy. The lacuna that resulted from a succession of devastating social and political upheavals for 50 years opened up new opportunities for ambitious individuals who were no longer constrained by traditional socio-political hierarchy, and social competition spread to the masses. Remarkably, however, the college entrance examination—a secular successor to the state examination of Chosôn—has survived the test of time and is still the most significant way to decide the winners of social competition. The subjects of the college entrance examination, however, are not the Confucian Classics, but rather an assortment of subjects that define modern education, including math and English. The ingrained cultural belief that education is the key to success is proven true time and again, however, as income statistics show that the more educated end up with much higher income.[[68]](#footnote-68) As recently imported capitalism that identifies success with financial gains has become more entrenched in South Korea, competition for higher education has become increasingly severe among Koreans. This is the background for the emergence of Korean tiger mothers.

Recall that South Korea has ranked first in the most current global ranking of student academic performance. Undoubtedly, Korean tiger mothers have played a significant role in this. Similar to the tiger mother described in Chua’s memoir, Korean tiger mothers typically exhibit strict parenting style toward their children: They tightly control their children’s daily activities, choose their extracurricular activities and pressure children to not only practice for their extracurricular activities, but also excel academically. It is unclear whether these mothers share Chua’s level of confidence in the mother’s authority or feel the sense of entitlement to coerce her children, but at least they believe that they know “what is best for [the] children”[[69]](#footnote-69) in order to ensure their survival in severe social competition. Chua had to risk being seen as a ruthless and uncaring mother by her own children, because other American mothers are not tiger mothers. Korean tiger mothers, however, do not have to worry about being singled out, because most other Korean mothers of similar class backgrounds, against whom they are competing, are tiger mothers too.

Given that tiger mothers have contributed to South Korea’s ranking at the top in student academic performance, the phenomenon of tiger mothers may seem positive. The fact of the matter is that it is not. South Korea is infamous for the severe competition for the yearly College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT). In 2011, like countless preceding years, about 700,000 students, which is over 80% of high school students, took the CSAT.[[70]](#footnote-70) The aim of these students is the same: to do as well as possible in the test, so that they can enter the three best universities in South Korea-- Seoul National University (SNU), Korea University and Yonsei University, collectively nicknamed “SKY.” To be able to enter any of these three universities, one must get a near perfect score on the CSAT, in addition to having top grades in high school. Although entering these universities may not guarantee success in life, it will certainly make life easier for the alumni and make their success more likely; not only will prospective employers consider them elites from the “best” universities, but strong and thriving alumni networks will support them in employment and promotion. The chances of marrying up also increase for the alumni of the three universities.[[71]](#footnote-71)

Under these circumstances, tiger mothers start their children’s education early and enroll them in diverse pre-school programs with the hope that the early development of their malleable brains would turn their children into “gifted” children.[[72]](#footnote-72) In elementary schools, tiger mothers sign their children up in private academic institutions known as “hagwon” for after school extracurricular activities. According to the Korean Ministry of Education statistics, almost 75% of the student population took up private education through different hagwons (Lee 2011). Once students enter junior high, tiger mothers prepare their children for the CSAT coming up six years later by enrolling them in more hagwons primarily aimed at increasing the CSAT scores. Hagwons have proliferated because there is a widespread distrust of school education. These hagwons cost an average of US $700-$1,000 a month, which is quite burdensome on most middle-class families.[[73]](#footnote-73) By high school, it is common for students to spend most of their waking hours in schools and after-school hagwons and come home past midnight.[[74]](#footnote-74) According to a 2011 survey, high school seniors slept just 5.5 hours a night on average and typically study more than 10 hours each day.[[75]](#footnote-75) Tiger mothers—mostly full-time housewives— are on call to transport their children to different hagwons, so that as little time would be wasted on non-study related matters.

Children suffer in an environment of such intense social competition. Korean teenagers don’t have any spare time to play or develop hobbies or reflect about who they are and what they want to be in their future. It is therefore not surprising that the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child announced in 2003 that South Korea violated the children's "rights to play." Perhaps predictably, the suicide rate of Korean teenagers is one of the highest among OECD countries. Numbers differ depending on the statistics, but according to one, more than 1,000 students between the ages of 10 and 19 killed themselves from 2000 to 2003. In addition to the psychological and financial cost to individual students and their families, the cumulative cost of private education is astronomical. According to the Korean Educational Development Institute, the total private education costs have risen from 7.12 trillion won (US$6.9 billion) in 2000 and 10.66 trillion won in 2001 to 13.65 trillion won in 2004, which is the highest of all OECD counties in private education tuition.[[76]](#footnote-76)

The financial burden on individual families and society as a whole that results from this over-heated educational competition is not the only social cost. Having been dissociated from the goal of Confucian education as moral education, the Confucian style of parenting is misapplied. As getting the highest grade possible in the exams becomes the most important goal for their children, parents push and prod their children to spend as much time as possible studying. Time to engage in moral or civic education is considered time wasted. In the constant drumbeat for academic excellence, the other equally important areas of childhood development—emotional, psychological, and moral—are drowned out. Feeling sorry for their constantly stressed and tired children, parents refrain from disciplining their children’s daily behavior unrelated to studying.[[77]](#footnote-77) When the idea of self-esteem is divorced from moral maturation, it gets wrongly associated with feeling powerful and dominant vis-à-vis others. Hence many Korean parents try to instill self-esteem in their children by praising them indiscriminately and refraining from chastising or disciplining them when they misbehave. Therefore, one can often witness loud and disruptive children in public spaces, such as restaurants, while parents look on unperturbed and ready to jump in to protect their children should anyone else chastise them.[[78]](#footnote-78) Children who are socialized to outcompete others and are positively rewarded for doing so without checks on their socially disruptive behavior are turning into egoistic individuals concerned only with their own success at the expense of others.[[79]](#footnote-79)

**8. Contemporary Relevance of Confucian Mothering**

The intended aim of Chua’s book to show “how Chinese [tiger] parents are *better* at raising kids than Western ones” (jacket cover, added emphasis) calls for a critical interrogation: Depending on how one specifies the goal at which one is “better,” it is either incoherent (if the goal is raising ethical and politically engaged kids) or morally repugnant (if the goal is raising kids who are egocentric and obsessed with winning). As has been argued in the paper, Confucian mothering is distinct from tiger mothering, although related in some superficial ways. The most important aim of Confucian mothering and Confucian education is to raise children to become moral and politically engaged citizens of a polity. To promote this aim, the Confucian mothering style emphasizes instilling in children self-discipline, persistence, and perseverance. I have argued that Confucian mothering understood in this way is still a live and relevant ideal for contemporary parents in East Asia, whose tradition is largely Confucian. As East Asia and the West have distinct cultural and moral traditions, Confucian mothering with its concrete goal to realize the Confucian moral ideal may not be replicable in the West. In concluding this chapter, however, I would like to argue that Confucian parenting as essentially moral and civic education may be instructive for American parents in the 21st century.

Let me start with a brief overview of the prevalent parenting style in the upper and middle class America.[[80]](#footnote-80) Even in earlier times in its relatively short history, American families have been by and large nuclear, consisting of parents and their biological children, unlike families of the Old World. Due to its Puritan origin, focus on (religious) morality has been a cornerstone of children’s education in America until the end of the 19th century; 19th century parents emphasized the “internalization of moral prohibitions” through obedience and self-control.[[81]](#footnote-81) As capitalism, industrialization, and the immigration of different ethnic groups became more entrenched in America, education increasingly came to be seen as a tool for upward social mobility for urban middle-class families. Although American upper and middle class parents have been quite involved in children’s education,[[82]](#footnote-82) their parenting style took a distinct turn toward boosting children’s positive self-esteem in the 1970s. Po Bronson argues that this has to do with the 1969 publication of Nathaniel Branden’s influential *The Psychology of Self-Esteem*, in which self-esteem was singled out as the “single most important facet of a person.” In the broad “self-esteem movement” set in motion as a result, one of its “key tenets” is that “praise, self-esteem, and performance rise and fall together.” Reflecting this broad social trend, 85 % of contemporary American parents think that it’s important to tell their children that they’re smart.[[83]](#footnote-83) In line with this parental mindset, “Anything potentially damaging to kids’ self-esteem was axed. Competitions were frowned upon. Soccer coaches stopped counting goals and handed out trophies to everyone. Teachers threw out their red pencils. Criticism was replaced with ubiquitous, even undeserved, praise.”[[84]](#footnote-84) Consequently, “over-parenting,” “over-protecting” (Firestone), or “over-praising” has become the main feature of upper and middle-class American parents’ parenting style.[[85]](#footnote-85)

There is, however, increasing evidence that over-praising, undeserved praising, or even praising children for their intelligence can backfire.[[86]](#footnote-86) Most notably, the Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck’s research has repeatedly shown that praising children for their smarts can induce children to become risk-averse, unmotivated to take on challenging tasks, and unwilling or unable to persist or persevere in overcoming difficulties. This is not to say that all praise is bad for children. Praise that is sincere, focused on their effort, and specific to the concrete task with which the child is engaged can motivate children to perform better and be effective at it.[[87]](#footnote-87) Over-praising, however, induces children to be more focused on the praise itself rather than the intrinsic enjoyment of the task at hand. When such children enter school, they tend to be narrowly focused on the grade they get than the learning experience in taking a class. As college students, they lack persistence or perseverance and “commonly drop out of classes rather than suffer a mediocre grade.” They have difficulty choosing a major, as they are scared of committing to something that they are uncertain about succeeding.[[88]](#footnote-88) They are also more willing to cheat, rather than try harder to perform better; the fact of the matter is they have not “developed a strategy for handling failure.”[[89]](#footnote-89)

If this is true, then the answer to the much hyped question, “Can American education compete globally?” seems to be a no. The evidence seems to be in the aforementioned global rankings of student academic performance, “The Learning Curve,” in which America has consistently ranked one of the lowest among developed nations, 14th in 2014 and 17th in 2012. In order to improve American students' performance in this ranking, the cultivation of self-discipline, persistence and perseverance in children may be a necessary first step. Perhaps this is the reason why Chua's prescriptions for tiger mothering touched a nerve with American parents.

Yet, surely, the right question to ask is not "Can American education compete globally?" Rather, the right question is "Can American education be a worthy model to be emulated globally?" If so, then simply instilling self-discipline, persistence and perseverance in children only regarding intellectual or other academic endeavors is clearly not sufficient. In doing this, American parents would be are approximating tiger mothers. America full of tiger mothers may overtake South Korea, currently number one, in the global education ranking. However, South Korea is saddled with social problems caused by its over-heated educational competition fueled by its tiger mothers. Instilling in American children self-discipline, persistence and perseverance must accompany proper moral and civic education that teaches them to embody moral and civic virtues necessary for promoting the common good, as is required of Confucian mothering. Since the content of moral and civic virtues in America is obviously different from the Confucian counterpart, I am not arguing that Confucian mothering can be transplanted onto American soil without modification. Yet the need for moral and civic education is extremely urgent in 21st century America, where income inequality is the widest among industrialized countries,[[90]](#footnote-90) the voter participation in national elections is dismally low, between 30% and 55 %,[[91]](#footnote-91) and the political process is dysfunctional due to extreme partisan division as well as voter apathy and ignorance.[[92]](#footnote-92) To overcome such debilitating social and political problems, Americans must rally around their own moral and civic ideals and reform their parenting approach and educational system to center on moral education, teaching their children not only self-discipline, persistence and perseverance, but also, more importantly, worthy moral and civic goals necessary for a meaningful human life for every member of society.[[93]](#footnote-93)

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1. See Nadine DeNinno, “Amy Chua, Tiger Mom, Talks Strict Parenting Success,” *International Business Times* January 04 2012, <http://www.ibtimes.com/amy-chua-tiger-mom-talks-strict-parenting-success-390612>. I thank the editors for suggesting this web article. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Amy Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 3-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Pearson, "The Learning Curve 2014 Report: Education and Skills for Life," http://thelearningcurve.pearson.com/index/index-comparison. Incidentally, according to this 2014 study, the first four top countries, South Korea, Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong, have all been influenced by Confucianism in the past. China and Taiwan are not included in the study. Finland, which surprised the world by ranking first in the same study in 2012, ranked fifth in 2014. See <http://thelearningcurve.pearson.com/index/index-ranking>, accessed 11/8/15. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. "Best Education in the World: Finland, South Korea Top Country Rankings, U.S. Rated Average," *Huffington post* 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Seung-Suk Jo, "Korean Family and Children’s Education," in *Today and Tomorrow of Korean Family Culture*, ed. Institute for Korean Women and Society (Seoul, Korea: Society and Culture Research Institute Publishing, 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/GDP.pdf>, accessed 2/27/15. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. E.g., *Xiaoxue jizhu* (小學集注); *Dà xué* (大學) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See, Robin Wang, *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture: Writings from the Pre-Qin Period through the Song Dynasty* (Hackett Publishing Co., 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Sin Yee Chan, “Gender and Relationship Roles in the *Analects* and the *Mencius*,” in *Confucian Political Ethics*, ed. Daniel A. Bell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Guang Sima, "Precepts for Family Life," in *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture: Writings from the Pre-Qin Period through the Song Dynasty*, ed. Robin Wang (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 2003), 418. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Zhuxi, "Further Reflections on Things at Hand," in *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture: Writings from the Pre-Qin Period through the Song Dynasty*, ed. Robin Wang (Hackett Publishing Co., 2003)., 324. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Martina Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 231. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Liu Xiang, *Exemplary Women of Early China: The Lienü Zhuan of Liu Xiang*, trans. Anne Behnke Kinney (New York: Columbia University Press 2014), 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Liu Xiang, *Exemplary Women of Early China: The Lienü Zhuan of Liu Xiang*, trans. Anne Behnke Kinney (New York: Columbia University Press 2014)., 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., 19-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The social milieus in which the Mother Meng and Cheng’s mother lived were rather different. Patriarchy in Confucian societies became more severe and entrenched in the post-Han dynasties due to the influence of the aforementioned Dong’s interpretation of the *yin-yang* principle as implying women’s ontological inferiority. Erin Cline argues that the Mother Meng and other mothers in Ancient China were “confident and effective” agents. See Erin M. Cline, *Families of Virtue: Confucian and Western Views on Family Development* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 76. Whether or not this was the case, I am skeptical that this can be said of other mothers discussed here who had to contend with extremely patriarchal social conditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Zhuxi, "Further Reflections on Things at Hand.", 319-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology*, 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Eun-Sig Yi, *Korean History of Motherly Love* (Seoul, Korea: Taoreum Press, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. In Korea, women did not take up their husband’s family name upon marriage. The last names of these mothers are their own family names. Regarding the dates, the book does not provide specific dates of all the mothers. This is probably because such dates are not available in the family records, due to the fact that daughters or daughters-in-law were not considered family proper. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Yi, *Korean History of Motherly Love*, 12-13; 93; 335. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Yi, *Korean History of Motherly Love* , 12, 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., 331-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid., 286-92. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid., 92-96. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid., 228-38. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology*, 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Yi, *Korean History of Motherly Love*, 239-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. ‘‘Mind’’ (*xin*) in Confucianism, unlike the Western notion, which is primarily epistemic, deliberative, and therefore passive, encompasses emotions, desires, and actions and is therefore inherently active and moral. In fact, in Confucianism, distinguishing moral mind from epistemic mind is inconceivable. See Xinzhong Yao, "Self-Construction and Identity: The Confucian Self in Relation to Some Western Perceptions," *Asian Philosophy* 6, no. 3 (1996): 183–184. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Wei-ming Tu, "Pain and Suffering in Confucian Self-Cultivation," in *Way, Learning, and Politics: Essays on the Confucian Intellectual* (Singapore: Institute of East Asian Philosophies, 1989), 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. I use “precept” instead of “principle,” because I take Confucianism to be a branch of virtue ethics, distinct from rule based ethics such as utilitarianism or deontology. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Wing-tsit Chan, “The Evolution of the Confucian Concept Jen,” *Philosophy East and West* 4, no. 4 (1955): 298; *Analects* 13.27. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Wei-ming Tu, “The Creative Tension between Jen and Li,” in *Humanity and Self-Cultivation: Essays in Confucian Thought* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1979), 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Wei-ming Tu, "The Creative Tension between Jen and Li," in *Humanity and Self-Cultivation: Essays in Confucian Thought* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1979)., 6; cf. *Analects* 14.25. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. “Pain and Suffering in Confucian Self-Cultivation,” 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Wei-ming Tu, "Pain and Suffering in Confucian Self-Cultivation," in *Way, Learning, and Politics: Essays on the Confucian Intellectual* (Singapore: Institute of East Asian Philosophies, 1989)., 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Roger T. Ames, “Reflections on the Confucian Self: A Response to Fingarette,” in *Rules, Rituals and Responsibility*, ed. Mary Bockover (LaSalle: Open Court, 1991), 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Typically, “five human relations” (*wulun* 五倫) are considered fundamental for the Confucian society. The other three relations are between ruler-minister, old-young, and friend-friend. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Tu, “Li as Process of Humanization,” 20, 22, 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Chan, “The Evolution of the Confucian Concept Jen,” 299; *Analects* 12.22. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Wing-tsit Chan, "The Evolution of the Confucian Concept Jen," *Philosophy East and West* 4, no. 4 (1955). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Ibid., 303. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Ibid., 301. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Wei-ming Tu, “An Inquiry in the Five Relationships in Confucian Humanism,” in *The Psycho-Cultural Dynamics of the Confucian Family: Past and Present*, ed. Walter H. Slote (Seoul, Korea: International Cultural Society of Korea, 1986), 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Wei-ming Tu, "An Inquiry in the Five Relationships in Confucian Humanism," in *The Psycho-Cultural Dynamics of the Confucian Family: Past and Present*, ed. Walter H. Slote (Seoul, Korea: International Cultural Society of Korea, 1986)., 188. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Do-Jeon Jeong, *Sambong Jeong Do-Jeon Mun-Jip*, trans. Association of Minjok-Munhwa-Chujin, 1-14 vols. (Seoul, Korea: Hanguk-haksul-jeongbo co., 2006), Bk 13, 236; *Analects* 12.2, 14.45. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Young-Woo Han, *The Architect of the Chosôn Dynasty: Jeong Do-Jeon (in Korean)* (Seoul, Korea: Ji-shik-san-eop co, 1999), 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. In this sense, Confucian mothering contrasts with the ideal mothering endorsed by care ethicists. For an example, see Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Univ of California Press, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. A.S. Cua, "The Conceptual Framework of Confucian Ethical Thought," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 23, no. 2 (1996), 162; cf. *Analects* 9.3 *Analects* 3.3, *Analects* 15.17; *Mencius* 4B6. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Sin Yee Chan, “The Confucian Notion of Jing (Respect),” *Philosophy East and West* 56, no. 2 (2006), 237. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Sin Yee Chan, "The Confucian Notion of Jing (Respect)," *Philosophy East and West* 56, no. 2 (2006)., 233; cf. *Mencius* 6A5. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. This is consistent with the fact that the early Confucians “say little on [the broader] topic” of the “education of the youth” (Van Norden, cited in Cline, *Families of Virtue*, 41). [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Joel Kupperman has ventured three possible reasons for such an “omission” in Confucianism (Cline, *Families of Virtue*, 41-42). [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Tu, “An Inquiry in the Five Relationships in Confucian Humanism,” 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Tu, "An Inquiry in the Five Relationships in Confucian Humanism.", 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Cline, *Families of Virtue*, 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Cited in Cline, *Families of Virtue*, 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Ibid., 48. Mencius also emphasized the importance of disciplining children and the “importance of children learning to take criticism from others, which is essential for self-cultivation.” As Cline points out, however, Mencius recognized the possibility that such a disciplinarian attitude toward one’s own children could “hurt” their feelings and recommended letting others taking on the role of the teacher (Mencius 4A18). See Cline, *Families of Virtue*, 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Liu Xiang, *Exemplary Women of Early China: The Lienü Zhuan of Liu Xiang*, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Tu, “Li as Process of Humanization,” 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Tu, “An Inquiry in the Five Relationships in Confucian Humanism,” 188. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Tu, "An Inquiry in the Five Relationships in Confucian Humanism.", 189; cf. *Analects* 2.21. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Chan, “Gender and Relationship Roles in the *Analects* and the *Mencius*,” 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. I will continue to use “mothering,” however, for the sake of consistency. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Jo, “Korean Family and Children’s Education,” 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Jiyeon Lee, "South Korean Students’ ‘Year of Hell’ Culminates with Exams Day," *CNN*, November 13 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. James Card, "Life and Death Exams in South Korea," *Asia Times*, Nov 30 2005. See also Jo, “Korean Family and Children’s Education,” 170-72. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. “Korean Family and Children’s Education,” 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Teachers there earn handsome salaries, some of whom become millionaires, but they often go unreported. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. James Card, "Life and Death Exams in South Korea," *Asia Times*, Nov 30 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Samuel Lee, "South Korea’s Dreaded College-Entrance Exam Is the Stuff of High School Nightmares, but Is It Producing ‘Robots’?," *CBS NEWS*, November 7 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Card, "Life and Death Exams in South Korea." [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Jo, “Korean Family and Children’s Education,” 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Jo, "Korean Family and Children’s Education.", 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Ibid, 202. In exposing the details of the South Korean educational conundrum partly caused by tiger mothers, I by no means intend to blame individual Korean tiger mothers. In many ways, they are the victims of a structural problem from which there seems to be no way out. In an environment of intense competition to just stay afloat, not following the crowd may seem to ensure failure for one’s child. This sentiment is expressed by one tiger mother who argues that she would stop sending her child to private hagwons if others would do the same: “I send my kid to private hagwons because I’m afraid that my child will lag behind if I don’t” (ibid., 201).This perfectly exemplifies the mentality of a prisoner in the prisoner’s dilemma. For more on the prisoner’s dilemma, see Steven Kuhn, “Prisoner's Dilemma,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*,ed. Edward N. Zalta (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Although confining the focus on the upper and middle class America may sound too narrow, it is suitable for the purpose of this paper, which is to identify what is considered to be an ideal parenting style among Americans manifested most frequently in the upper and middle class families. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Maris Vinovskis, and Stephen Frank, "Parenting in American Society," in *Contemporary Parenting: Challenges and Issues*, ed. Terry Arendell (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997), 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Ibid., 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. A Columbia University survey, cited in Po Bronson, *Nurtureshock* (New York: Twelve, 2009), 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Po Bronson, *Nurtureshock* (NY, NY: Twelve, 2009)., 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Catherine Pearson, "The over-Praise Dilemma: When Complimenting Kids Actually Holds Them Back," *Huffington post*, 1/06 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. See Carol Dweck, "Caution-Praise Can Be Dangerous," *American Educator* 23, no. 1 (1999); "The Perils and Promise of Praise," *Educational Leadership* 65, no. 2 (2007); R.F. Baumeister, J.D. Cambpell, J.I. Krueger, and K.D. Vohs, “Exploding the Self-Esteem Myth,” *Scientific American* 292 (2005); Eddie Brummelman, Sander Thomaes, Orobio de Castro, Geertjan Overbeek, and Brad Busman, “That’s Not Just Beautiful—That’s Incredibly Beautiful!: The Adverse Impact of Inflated Praise on Children with Low Self-Esteem,” *Psychological Science* 25, no. 3 (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Bronson, *Nurtureshock*, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Ibid., 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Ibid., 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Robert Reich, *Aftershock: The Next Economy and America's Future* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Thomas E. Patterson, *The Vanishing Voter* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002). The much touted 61.6% turn out for the 2008 presidential election was an exception rather than the rule. It went down to 58.2% in the 2012 presidential election. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Alan Wolfe, *Does American Democracy Still Work?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. To my mind, two among such goals are (1) the fair and moral treatment of co-citizens—not only at the individual level but also at the collective level—and (2) active civic participation in democracy to realize this moral ideal in a common polity. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)