



Episode 68: Amy Chua, the Original Tiger Mom, Has Bilingual Stripes
Air date: October 11, 2023

TRANSCRIPT
(Gently edited for clarity)

Note: Steve Leveen's voice appears both as narrator and in the recorded conversation with Amy.

[00:00:00] **AMY CHUA:** When I had my own two children, even though my husband is not Chinese, he's Jewish, it was really important for me that they also speak Chinese. For me, it was more about just preserving the culture, knowing where they came from. And they identify as being Jewish, but for me, it was language that was the tie.

[00:00:22] **AMY CHUA:** So I hired graduate students to come and teach them Mandarin. Even when they were babies,

[00:00:29] **STEVE LEVEEN:** Amy and her [00:00:30] husband had two daughters.

[00:00:32] **AMY CHUA:** The oldest was really rule-abiding, easy kid. And my second daughter was just impossible. We argued from the moment she was born. And at 13, she rebelled against my very strict parenting.

[00:00:45] **AMY CHUA:** And I actually wrote this book when I thought I was going to lose her, like in this very dramatic moment.

[00:00:54] **AMY CHUA:** I wrote it in a moment of crisis, and Steve, I wrote that entire book in three months. [00:01:00] It just poured out.

[00:01:01] **STEVE LEVEEN:** You're listening to Amy Chua, Harvard grad, Harvard Law School grad, now a Yale Law professor, and the bestselling author of a book you wouldn't expect from a law professor.

[00:01:12] **STEVE LEVEEN:** *The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother.*

[00:01:17] **AMY CHUA:** I didn't know it was going to be controversial. I thought it was just, how controversial can a memoir be? And then the Wall Street Journal, they excerpted the most provocative parts of the book, and they put the [00:01:30] headline on why Chinese mothers are superior, which is not at all any part of my message.

[00:01:37] **AMY CHUA:** I remember a friend said, Amy, I think you just hit the perfect storm when fear of parenting and fear of China just collided.

[00:01:46] **STEVE LEVEEN:** We were talking in her office, which is inside the formidable gothic style Yale Law School building. Amy's desk was against the windows so that she could sit *with* her students and colleagues instead of [00:02:00] across from them.

[00:02:01] **STEVE LEVEEN:** The light from the leaded glass windows illuminated something that would be out of place in any other office at Yale Law School: a child's stuffed baby tiger.

Meet the original Tiger Mom. [00:02:30]

[00:02:32] **STEVE LEVEEN:** Welcome to season five of America the Bilingual, where we are having conversations with American bilinguals whose languages have made all the difference in who they are, and how *they* make a difference in the world. For this episode, we're getting to know Amy Chua, whose Chinese heritage has added something permanent to the English lexicon.

[00:02:55] **STEVE LEVEEN:** You know, very few people get to add something to [00:03:00] American idiom, to English idiom. Tiger mom, and it now I think has become part of American idiom.

[00:03:09] **AMY CHUA:** Yes. Apparently people even use it as a verb. I have students who report that they they'll hear somebody say, "I just, I tigered mom my kid this morning." And it actually made it into the Oxford dictionary.

[00:03:23] **AMY CHUA:** It was the word of the year in 2011.

[00:03:25] **STEVE LEVEEN:** Amy is the daughter of Chinese immigrants.

[00:03:29] **AMY CHUA:** My parents [00:03:30] came to the United States in 1960 to be graduate students at MIT. And I was born in Champaign, Illinois, the eldest of four daughters. And my mom in particular, I don't even know if she knew that she was going to stay in America, but it was incredibly important that Chinese was our first language.

[00:03:51] **STEVE LEVEEN:** But her parents didn't come to the U. S. from China, and Mandarin was not their Chinese language.

[00:03:57] **AMY CHUA:** My own parents were part of the [00:04:00] tiny Chinese community in the Philippines, so they were trilingual, actually. Um, their first language, and also my first language, is something called Hokkien Chinese. It's what they speak in the Fujian province of China.

[00:04:17] **AMY CHUA:** It's also the main dialect in countries like Singapore, I think Indonesia, parts of Malaysia, and Taiwan. But it's not a very common dialect in the United States, at least not when I was young. [00:04:30]

[00:04:30] **STEVE LEVEEN:** But it was the only language Amy and her sisters were allowed to speak at home.

[00:04:35] **AMY CHUA:** For every English word that we accidentally blurted out when we were little, we got one

[00:04:40] **AMY CHUA:** whack of the chopsticks on the palm.

[00:04:43] **STEVE LEVEEN:** Did you actually get whacked yourself?

[00:04:43] **AMY CHUA:** First of all, the whack was so light. I was the oldest child and I basically avoided all the whacks.

[00:04:55] **STEVE LEVEEN:** And by the time the third child came along, Amy says her mom was pretty [00:05:00] much over the chopsticks. Welcome to parenting, American style.

[00:05:05] **AMY CHUA:** I speak my first language Hokkien Chinese—I'm, so proud of this—it's by far the strongest in my family. What's weird now is? .I speak Hokkien Chinese by muscle memory. If I think about it too much, I can't speak it.

[00:05:19] **AMY CHUA:** But when I see my parents, I just fall right into it. And I have to not think about it. And then I'm super fluent. If I think about it too much, I'm like, wait, what's the word?

[00:05:29] **STEVE LEVEEN:** [00:05:30] So how similar or dissimilar is Hokkien from Mandarin?

[00:05:34] **AMY CHUA:** Completely, mutually incomprehensible.

[00:05:36] **STEVE LEVEEN:** Could you say something in Hokkien dialect?

[00:05:39] **STEVE LEVEEN:** And then in Mandarin?

[00:05:42] **AMY CHUA:** Okay, I'm going to say, I want to eat now, or, okay, in Mandarin, it would be [she pronounces it]. In Hokkien, it would be [she pronounces it]. It's just totally different.

[00:05:53] **STEVE LEVEEN:** You went to Chinese school. When, and what was that like?

[00:05:56] **AMY CHUA:** There are many different systems of Mandarin. So I learned both.[00:06:00]

[00:06:00] **AMY CHUA:** There was one way that was Romanization teaching. It was using English letters. And then other—I also had to learn Chinese characters. And every time they changed teachers, we'd be in a different system. I can cite Chinese poems.

[00:06:17] **AMY CHUA:** These are literally things that I learned when I was nine years old. And it's just stuck in my head. And we were supposed to write letters to my grandmother, and that's where we learned it. But my Mandarin is very poor now. Like I can't, I don't have a [00:06:30] good business vocabulary. It's very household. I can say a lot of things about eating.

[00:06:40] **STEVE LEVEEN:** When you read *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, which is an engaging memoir even if you're not raising children, you learn that Amy insisted her daughters become not only excellent musicians, but also fluent Mandarin speakers.

[00:06:54] **AMY CHUA:** They speak Mandarin better than me. I gave a talk in China, but I had to [00:07:00] give it in English because my Mandarin wasn't good enough.

[00:07:03] **AMY CHUA:** But my daughter, Sophia, gave a talk in Wuhan, China to 20, 000 people, and she did it in Mandarin.

[00:07:12] **STEVE LEVEEN:** Sophia is her older daughter. What about that younger daughter, Lulu, the one Amy says was so rebellious?

[00:07:19] **AMY CHUA:** I just fought tooth and nail with her. And I just I thought, Oh my gosh, I just need to give up.

[00:07:25] **AMY CHUA:** But she, at a certain point worked for—I think it was [00:07:30] before college—for the Brooklyn Nets, a basketball team, and they made a couple of trips to China. And she found that when I wasn't pressuring her, that it was really cool to speak Chinese, that she could actually communicate and converse better than anybody else.

[00:07:55] **STEVE LEVEEN:** Amy learned English the way many children of immigrants do: when she [00:08:00] started public school. She didn't sound like the other kids, and she for sure didn't look like them.

[00:08:06] **AMY CHUA:** We were the funny-looking people. There's so many Asians now, but I was the only Chinese person in my entire elementary school. The only Asians in the neighborhood.

[00:08:15] **STEVE LEVEEN:** Her family moved to California when she was quite young, where there were more Asians. But they were still a minority.

[00:08:23] **AMY CHUA:** When I was in fourth grade, a guy named, I still remember his name, Jeremy, I pronounced the word restaurant [00:08:30] wrong. I said “rest-o,” and he just was merciless. He ran around the neighborhood making slanty eyes, cracking up, saying “rest-o,” and of course I was mortified.

[00:08:43] **STEVE LEVEEN:** When Amy got home, she told her mother what happened.

[00:08:46] **AMY CHUA:** I think a lot of Western parents would be, “Oh my God, poor you,” and sympathize. My mother—and this is going to sound mean—but my mother is the best mother. She was like, “Amy, why are you even worrying about such a stupid boy? If he doesn't even know [00:09:00] that we come for the most magnificent, the oldest civilization, then just forget about him.”

[00:09:05] **AMY CHUA:** As I wrote in another book more recently, *The Triple Package*, she was trying to respond to this horrible sense of insecurity I had by instilling a sense of pride in my heritage

[00:09:20] **STEVE LEVEEN:** In *Triple Package*, which Amy co-wrote with her husband, Jed Rubenfeld (also a Yale law professor), they uncovered three success factors that many [00:09:30] immigrant groups share.

[00:09:32] **AMY CHUA:** One is what we provocatively called a superiority complex. That is, a sense of being a special people, whether it's like chosen people in the case of the Mormons or the Jews, or in the case of the Chinese,

[00:09:46] **AMY CHUA:** what I started off talking about: my parents, my mother especially, always said, "We come from the oldest civilization. We invented everything. We have this amazing culture, a great wall." And I know that's true of Iranian [00:10:00] Americans. They learn about the great Persian Empire. And it's often a coping mechanism because in this country, you feel like, "Oh my God, people are making fun of us."

[00:10:09] **AMY CHUA:** "We're minorities. We're outsiders. They're doing the slanty-eye thing." So I think parents try to instill this sense of ethnic pride, and that's what we call a superiority complex.

[00:10:25] **STEVE LEVEEN:** So a superiority complex is the first success factor. The [00:10:30] second seems like the opposite.

[00:10:33] **AMY CHUA:** A deep sense of insecurity. And you might be like, "What? How can these two things go together?" And it's actually... precisely that odd combination that is so fascinating.

[00:10:43] **STEVE LEVEEN:** There's a well-known poster child for these two opposing traits, says Amy.

[00:10:50] **AMY CHUA:** Steve Jobs. He believed that he could change the world. A real superiority complex. But everybody who knew him also said that he had this deep feeling of [00:11:00] inferiority. And the combination gave him a chip on the shoulder. Like he just felt like he always had something to prove. And that's what that combination does.

[00:11:07] **AMY CHUA:** If you feel both insecure and not quite recognized enough, that can create a real motivation.

[00:11:16] **STEVE LEVEEN:** So a superiority complex and an inferiority complex, almost yin and yang. But then there's the third factor.

[00:11:25] **AMY CHUA:** Impulse control. Discipline. And oh my gosh, Steve Jobs had that in spades. [00:11:30]

[00:11:30] **STEVE LEVEEN:** So how might languages and bilingualism play into your triple package?

[00:11:36] **AMY CHUA:** Until you raised it, I never even thought about it. But the sense of superiority, it brings us full circle. That's why I think my parents were so adamant about us keeping our native Chinese dialect. I think other parents were like, "Oh, we want our kids to assimilate." But mine were, "No, we want them to have a sense of pride," which taps right into this superiority complex.

[00:11:58] **AMY CHUA:** And I think that's what was going on in my own [00:12:00] head. I really wanted my children to speak Mandarin. Also the insecurity—if you're an immigrant, you don't need to work on insecurity. You just automatically have that because you're an outsider. And then impulse control. The only way that you can get really fluent is just by practicing and talking.

[00:12:18] **AMY CHUA:** I think a parent that is instilling bilingualism in their children, almost by necessity, is imposing a form of impulse control and discipline, which I think is [00:12:30] beneficial.

[00:12:37] **STEVE LEVEEN:** Let's go back to fourth grade and Amy's nemesis, Jeremy, teasing her about how she pronounced "restaurant." Future Tiger Mom decided right then to impose some discipline on herself.

[00:12:51] **AMY CHUA:** I just vowed to myself that I would get rid of my Chinese accent.

[00:12:55] **STEVE LEVEEN:** And she did, although...

[00:12:57] **AMY CHUA:** I still, to this day, even [00:13:00] though I'm a Yale law professor, will say a couple of things wrong that just send my children into just gales of laughter.

[00:13:07] **STEVE LEVEEN:** Even though Amy erased her Chinese accent, the sense of shame and embarrassment from that fourth grade incident lingered, because her parents never lost *their* accents.

[00:13:18] **AMY CHUA:** I would always notice sometimes people making fun of my parents and I would feel mortified.

[00:13:24] **STEVE LEVEEN:** And your father was a professor of physics at...

[00:13:28] **AMY CHUA:** Yes, chaos theory, at [00:13:30] Berkeley. He's really prominent. His name is Leon Chua. My parents are both still alive; I'm so lucky. And they're really my inspirations. But I remember just being, feeling so ashamed for them and just, "they're being made fun of their accents and they don't even know."

[00:13:46] **AMY CHUA:** And then I remember once telling my dad and he was like, "Who cares? This is the greatest country in the world." Because he actually was the black sheep in his family back in the Philippines. So he eloped with my mother to the United States. He just couldn't [00:14:00] wait to come here. And he's just the consummate American.

[00:14:03] **AMY CHUA:** This country was made for him. I still remember being in Indiana and trying Sloppy Joes and steak and eat-all-you-can places, and macaroni and cheese. He just loved trying new things. And so it wasn't that he didn't notice that people were making fun of sometimes when he pronounced things wrong. He just honestly didn't care.

[00:14:22] **AMY CHUA:** This really was a land of opportunity for him. It's not for everyone, but for him, it's like a dream come true.

[00:14:28] **STEVE LEVEEN:** But didn't your [00:14:30] parents also want you to fit in and speak English perfectly?

[00:14:34] **AMY CHUA:** You know, they just didn't worry about that. A line from my Tiger Mom book that has gotten a lot of play because it was controversial, I use the term Chinese parents, but I think I meant Tiger parents.

[00:14:45] **AMY CHUA:** I said that Chinese parents assume strength in their children, not weakness. They don't assume fragility. And that often can be a virtuous circle. My parents just thought, "Oh, you guys are smart. You'll pick it up."

[00:14:58] **STEVE LEVEEN:** When she was 16, the [00:15:00] family went with her father on a sabbatical for a year to Europe.

[00:15:04] **AMY CHUA:** Four months in London. Four months or five months in Munich, Germany, and five months in Lausanne, Switzerland. He threw us into a Munich public school without any of us speaking a stitch of a word of German.

STEVE LEVEEN: And you were 16.

AMY CHUA: I was fine. Yeah. But I picked it up.

STEVE LEVEEN: You picked it up.

AMY CHUA: I picked it up. Same with, I've taken some basic French, but he threw us into French schools.

[00:15:28] **AMY CHUA:** I think my parents were unusual that way. [00:15:30] They were the opposite of coddling.

[00:15:31] **STEVE LEVEEN:** You said your dad was an expert in chaos theory. He practiced at home, right?

[00:15:37] **AMY CHUA:** Exactly.

[00:15:43] **STEVE LEVEEN:** Some might say that the United States is engaged in a new kind of chaos these days. Amy explored this in her book *Political Tribes*.

[00:15:53] **AMY CHUA:** There's a big change happening in the United States, which is: for the first time in our 200-year history, whites are on the verge of [00:16:00] losing their majority, probably starting around 2050. And this creates a real sense of insecurity among whites.

[00:16:07] **AMY CHUA:** “Are we losing our position?” I do hear, in darker circles, not such positive stuff. I believe there is a strong, silent majority that is becoming more tolerant. Even if you look within universities, my class is very popular. I have a lot of immigrant kids; I would say like 75% of my class is probably bilingual.

[00:16:25] **AMY CHUA:** Actually, maybe it's 85%, many different languages. They're, from [00:16:30] Cuba, Venezuela, Columbia, but also Nigeria, Jamaica. So we have been talking about resentment against cosmopolitan elites in the United States, this little group becoming the equivalent of the United States' own resented market-dominant minority viewed by heartland Americans, rural Americans, blue-collar Americans, [as]this arrogant little group that controls all the [00:17:00] levers of power from afar.

[00:17:01] **STEVE LEVEEN:** I worry about that too, in the sense that bilingualism has always been a gift that the rich have given their children. And now, immigrants today also are in a position to give the gift to their children, because clearly bilingualism is a professional and economic advantage. But what about the rest of us?

[00:17:26] **STEVE LEVEEN:** What about middle America?

[00:17:28] **AMY CHUA:** Yeah, it's a real issue [00:17:30] in large parts of the country.

[00:17:34] **STEVE LEVEEN:** So what role does bilingualism play?

[00:17:36] **AMY CHUA:** I think you and I share common ground here. I think English is important as a unifying language, but it would be great to see more. I think language is a bridge. If you can't communicate with people, how are you ever going to build bridges?

[00:17:51] **AMY CHUA:** So the more that we can get people from different groups across America being able to talk to each other in English, but also other dialogues, other languages—I think [00:18:00] that would be great.

[00:18:01] **STEVE LEVEEN:** It's not true that the whole world speaks English, as you well know, but it's almost true that the whole world wants to.

[00:18:07] **STEVE LEVEEN:** The United States has the largest repository of native English speakers in the world. What do you make of those two facts?

[00:18:16] **AMY CHUA:** Well, this is a resource. We have all these people and it's good for people across the world to be able to speak English, just because it's good for the economy, it's good for trade.

[00:18:25] **AMY CHUA:** It's good for international relations. So if something more along the lines of what [00:18:30] you've written about could be done, I think that would be a great direction to go.

[00:18:36] **STEVE LEVEEN:** Amy then told me something about English that we Americans who were born in the U.S. may take for granted.

[00:18:42] **AMY CHUA:** I'm an immigrant's daughter. We were raised thinking the Constitution was just the greatest document in the world. And English was very important. And having studied developing countries from Sudan to former Yugoslavia to Venezuela, that [00:19:00]—literally, Libya, that fell apart—

[00:19:02] **AMY CHUA:** I have been very proud of the United States. Thank goodness, we are a country united by not blood, but really the ideas of the Constitution. So it's not that English is necessarily the glue, but I think for people to be able to communicate and participate in our democracy and talk about the Constitution, I think it is good to have a common tongue, even as, of course, I couldn't [00:19:30] be a bigger fan of everybody learning multiple languages.

[00:19:32] **STEVE LEVEEN:** We do have a history in the United States of suspicion about other languages as perhaps a sign of divided loyalties. Do you sense that maybe we're at a transition point, where we accept that English unites us, but we're becoming more tolerant of other languages?

[00:19:51] **AMY CHUA:** I hope so. Depends what day you're looking at.

[00:19:54] **AMY CHUA:** Just never look on Twitter.[00:20:00]

[00:20:02] **STEVE LEVEEN:** Normally, this is where we would wrap up the episode, “but wait, there's more.” I want to share with you something else Amy and I talked about that day in her office: her newest book, which will be a surprise for her readers.

[00:20:17] **AMY CHUA:** I have never written fiction before, but I have a book coming out called *The Golden Gate* that is my first historical murder thriller.

[00:20:25] **AMY CHUA:** It's situated in the San Francisco Bay area in [00:20:30] 1944.

[00:20:31] **STEVE LEVEEN:** I'm only 50 pages in and I'm loving it. I can't wait to continue. And the main character is bilingual. And his father was Mexican.

[00:20:44] **AMY CHUA:** Yes. His father was Mexican, but actually half Jewish on his Mexican side. And his mother is.

[00:20:50] **AMY CHUA:** Okie. You can't tell that he—I guess, like myself—he speaks perfect English, and he looks like a Caucasian. But when he's investigating this [00:21:00] murder in the Claremont Hotel, and he's interviewing this maid from Mexico, she's very suspicious. She won't tell him anything until, until he suddenly switches and asks her a question in perfect Spanish, with no accent.

[00:21:14] **AMY CHUA:** And she's startled. And I think I say there, it's not that she just saw him as a different person because they shared a native tongue, but I have him say, “I felt became a different person.” He just slid into that other identity. [00:21:30]

[00:21:30] **STEVE LEVEEN:** And that's where we'll leave our story with this surprising turn in the surprising life of Amy Chua, law professor, scholar of ethnic minorities, the original Tiger Mother, and now novelist.

[00:21:40] **STEVE LEVEEN:** Her gripping new book, *The Golden Gate*, is available in bookstores, real and virtual near you.

We hope you've enjoyed this conversation with Amy Chua. If you like our podcast, please share it, send it to a friend. [00:22:00] And be one of our reviewers on Spotify or Apple Podcasts, or wherever you listen to your podcasts.

[00:22:07] **STEVE LEVEEN:** You'll be helping to spread the power of bilingualism to do good in America.

My thanks to the multi-accented members of the America the Bilingual team who worked on this episode. For sound design and mixing, Fernando Hernández and his production house in Guadalajara, Mexico, Esto No Es Radio. Also, to Mim Harrison, our [00:22:30] editorial and brand director, who wrote and directed this episode, and Karla Hernandez at Daruma Tech, who manages our website.

[00:22:39] **STEVE LEVEEN:** *Gracias por escuchar.* Thanks for listening. For America the Bilingual, this is Steve Leveen.

[Ed. Note: “what you've written about” at 00:18:25 is Amy’s reference to Steve’s book, [*America’s Bilingual Century*](#).]

