Tiger Parenting Beyond Cultural Essentialism: Discourses of Class, Culture, and Competition in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Purpose: This study explores a nuanced understanding of tiger parenting by moving beyond cultural essentialist perspectives and an East (Chinese)-versus-West binary framework.

Design/Approach/Methods: The study draws on data from 80 parents in Hong Kong SAR, an example of a culturally-hybrid East Asian metropolis. We applied maximum variation sampling to recruit participants with diverse school choices encompassing different education levels, occupations, social classes, and ethnicities. We used semi-structured interviews to investigate parental beliefs, practices, and understandings of tiger parenting.

Findings: The findings suggest that tiger parenting is a cross-class and cross-culture phenomenon that would be more fruitfully analyzed by considering parental mindsets, educational structures, peer pressure, generational influences, cultural roots, class preferences, and global aspirations. We posit that tiger parenting and similar parenting practices are increasingly necessitated by

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fiercely competitive education systems, and becoming globalized across ethnic groups and social class spectrums.

Originality/Value: This study contributes to the discussion on tiger parenting by highlighting previously understudied factors underpinning the concept. We argue that our analytical approach avoids the previous narrow and cultural essentialist understanding of tiger parenting, and advances the theoretical cogency of the concept.

Few non-academic books in education can rival the success of Chua's (2011) memoir, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, which has spurred discussion about Asian parenting, and foregrounded culturalist explanations of different parental styles. Since its publication, the highly malleable and frequently used term *tiger parenting* has inspired various scholars in East Asia and beyond, leading to large volumes of scholarship in education and cultural studies around the term and its associated practices (Doan et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2013; Lui, 2020; Xie & Li, 2019; Zhang, 2020). Characterized by an achievement-oriented nature, tight scheduling of educational activities, and strong—even overbearing—control of children, tiger parenting has become a central concept in the exploration of parenting logic in East Asia, especially among Chinese, and is often associated with Confucian heritage cultures (Cheah et al., 2013; Choi et al., 2013; Watkins & Noble, 2013). Currently, tiger parenting is colloquially used to refer to intensive parenting—parents strictly plan and closely scrutinize nearly every aspect of their children's lives. Tiger parenting, as a concept, has received global media and public attention. As a popular imaginary it has been transformed into a highly successful video game (Ye, 2018), in addition to constituting the central premise for multiple popular TV drama series, such as Tiger Mom in the Chinese mainland and Sky Castle in Korea.

As popularized by Amy Chua, tiger parenting is a loose concept constructed under the imagined Eastern (Chinese)-Western dualist cultural framework. Rhee (2013) comments that the book promoted a *culture-clash* framework similar to Benjamin Barber's *Jihad vs. McWorld*. Chua's book emphasizes an Asian (Chinese) child-rearing philosophy that is distinctly different (and superior) to its Western counterpart. This led to negative stereotyping of "Chinese parenting," often extended to "Asian parenting." This "aggressive" parenting style has been used to explain the success of East Asian students while simultaneously being blamed for causing emotional or developmental problems. Chua's criticism of liberal American parenting from the standpoint of a second-generation immigrant mother engaged in what she viewed as her family's "anti-decline campaign" acquired a

broader significance within the East-West binary framework, and especially in increasing narratives of "the decline of the West" (Ho, 2017). One popular reading in the aftermath of the 2007–2009 Great Recession—in the context of China's continued economic dynamism—was that of declining American exceptionalism in the face of Chinese "hard work" and "discipline" (Manjikian, 2011).

Numerous previous studies highlight the problematic nature of a cultural essentialist conceptualization of tiger parenting. Several empirical investigations challenge the assumed popularity of tiger parenting among Chinese (Ho, 2017; Xie & Li, 2019; Zhang et al., 2017). Others find that Chinese parents increasingly care about children's happiness and overall well-being, in addition to academic achievements (Chan & Yeung, 2019; Xie & Li, 2019). Moreover, hypercompetitive parents and intensive parenting practices are increasingly identified as globally ubiquitous in industrialized societies (Doepke & Zilibotti, 2019). Some sociologists of education associate intensive parenting and investments in education with middle-class strategies to secure intergenerational advantages (Kobakhidze & Hui, 2023; Vincent & Maxwell, 2016; Zhang, 2020). Others associate it with the "neo-liberal endorsement of competition" beyond Asia (Ho, 2017).

This study moves beyond the cultural essentialist perspective. In contrast with previous literature, we offer a more nuanced understanding of tiger parenting based on qualitative data from Hong Kong SAR. The city provides an educational context with its own particularities—different types of schools and a diverse set of parents of varying ethnic, cultural, educational, economic, and social purports—and significant commonalities with other contemporary metropolises of East Asia, such as Singapore, Taipei, and Shanghai. Hong Kong SAR still has paradigmatic potential as a research and knowledge production site when considering its relevance to Asia in a methodology. It is an Asian locality long defined by colonial experiences and neoliberal imaginaries. Its emergence as a global metropolis during the cold war personified "East-versus-West" and "East-meets-West" stories, in nearly equal measure, to the detriment of its subjectivities.

We scrutinize and re-situate the concept of tiger parenting and its main parameters within a richer analytical tapestry that accounts for issues surrounding parental beliefs and mindsets, educational structures, social influences, cultural roots, class preferences, and global aspirations. We analyze the discourse surrounding tiger parenting and present tiger parenting practices as reported by the participants. In the spirit of Chen's (2010) critique of facile binaries and call for regionally focused modes of analysis, we posit that the cultural-essentialist approach—presenting tiger parenting as distinct from, or opposite to Western parenting—ignores the contingent nature of its practices, and obscures the importance of other crucial factors. By contrast, we draw empirical data from diverse groups in Hong Kong SAR to offer an evidence-based and multifaceted reconstruction of tiger parenting with enhanced theoretical cogency.

East Asian parenting: Cultural essentialist perspective and criticism

Active parental investment in educational activities or intensive parenting has been the subject of ongoing debates in education for decades in Asia and beyond. Parents' decisions and preferences can be embedded in cultural discourses on parenting as evidenced by various publications, including a substantial edited volume, *Parenting Across Cultures: Child-Rearing, Motherhood, and Fatherhood in Non-Western Cultures* (2014), by Selin. The book examines the similarities and differences in parenting styles across non-western countries such as China, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Turkey, Singapore, Israel, Ghana, Argentina, and Brazil. These contributions highlight the difficulties of applying the established categories of parenting styles—primarily informed by Western experiences—to other settings. The field of child development and psychology also provides extensive literature exploring parenting styles and associated stereotypes. For example, the "Gangnam mothers" of Korea are said to micro-manage their children's education and compete with other mothers to obtain places for their children in prestigious universities (Park et al., 2015). These "helicopter parents" are believed to harm their children's well-being with their overparenting (Fingerman et al., 2012). Other terms and labels include "loving lion," "dolphin dads," "panda dads," "elephant parents," "kiasu parents," "lawnmower parents," and "chicken parents" (Feng, 2021; Göransson, 2015; Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups [HKFYG], 2017; Wheeler, 2011; Xie & Li, 2019).

East Asia, with its Confucian cultural legacies, has an established history of valuing education and academic excellence. This has continued since ancient times, and is reflected in parenting styles (Shek & Sun, 2014; Yung, 2016). The success of East Asian countries or students of Asian backgrounds living abroad in international assessments, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), has often been explained in cultural essentialist terms "with hard work and ambition seen as inherently 'Asian,' especially 'Chinese'" (Watkins et al., 2017, p. 2284). Portrayals of Chinese parents as "controlling" and "authoritarian" alongside cultural stereotypes have been common in educational research.

Perhaps the best-known stereotype of East Asian parenting is the Asian-American "tiger mother," popularized by Chua (2011) to describe a parent who puts her children through grueling academic preparation activities, such as countless hours of private tutoring sessions in the hopes of securing their academic, and subsequently, life success. Although Chua explains that tiger moms do not have to be of Chinese descent, she described her parenting style as the "Chinese way," reinforcing existing stereotypes of Asian parents.

Meanwhile, the concept is strongly associated with the desires and challenges of Asian (Chinese) immigrant families in Western host societies. Such parenting practices are deemed necessary and appropriate because of the desire for success, the fear of generational decline, an identity or cultural

crisis in *Others'* society, and globalized competition (Butler et al., 2017; Ho, 2017; Rhee, 2013). As Butler et al. (2017) and Ho (2017) remark, the "ethnicization of educational achievement" is widespread in Australia, where "Asian success" is often explained in cultural terms. This could contribute to politics of racial hostility. Takayama (2018) provides additional images of how media has framed educational aspirations and perceived practices of Asian immigrants—such as the drive for academic excellence and use of tutoring—as "un-Australian," thus reinforcing their *Othering*.

In 1994, Chao (1994) referred to such stereotypes as "ethnocentric" and "misleading," and remarked that these concepts have different connotations in Asian culture compared to American and European traditions, and encouraged researchers to use more indigenous concepts such as *jiaoxun* (教训, training) and *guan* (管, to love and to govern)*,* derived from Confucian ideas (p. 1111). Similarly, Shek and Sun (2014) maintain that the Chinese parenting style reflects cultural values rooted in Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism—values that may not be well-understood by "outsiders." The authors trace parenting ideas in ancient Chinese writings about family values and relationships, and argue that, given the differences between this parenting style and Western archetypes, there is a need for culturally specific measures when exploring parenting in East Asia.

However, the cultural essentialist arguments regarding tiger parenting have been criticized on factual and analytical grounds. Zhang (2020, p. 401) observes that the demeanor and modus operandi of Chinese tiger parents is antithetical to core tenets of Confucianism, most notably the role of moral education and harmonious relationships, sidelined in the pursuit of success. Ho (2017) argues that tiger parenting is not the most common parenting profile among Chinese Americans in Australia, nor does it lead to optimal educational outcomes. Similarly, Watkins et al. (2017) challenge the cultural essentialism that underlies the popular discussion of Asian success in terms of Confucian cultural practices. They argue that educational achievements and parenting styles should not be reduced to ethnic categories; rather, they should be explained by other structural factors such as the social context of migrant families, ethnic capital, social class, and discrimination.

In providing alternative explanations for the success of East Asian students, some scholars have emphasized the significance of social class (Butler et al., 2017; Zhang, 2020). Sociologically, intensive parenting is associated with the middle class as their strategy to transmit advantages across generations. Regarding private tutoring, Vincent and Maxwell (2016) remark that the enrichment activities observed in middle-class families serve as an investment in children, aimed at dominating a competitive education and labor market. Ball (2003) argues that concepts such as *middle-class anxiety* and *cultural family practice* overgeneralize social reproduction and its derivatives such as tiger parenting and the growing investment in *shadow education*. Other scholars claim that, for middle-class families in particular, shadow education is an exercise of their financial privilege to establish intergenerational social advantage through education (Zhang, 2020).

Explanations beyond social class include wider socio-economic realities and the impact of globalization. For example, given the global socio-cultural forces affecting societies, Shih (2019) argues that parenting is no longer locally constructed. Hypercompetitive parents are ubiquitous. Tiger and helicopter parenting have become more common in industrialized countries (Doepke & Zilibotti, 2019), partly in response to changes in economic conditions and deepening social inequalities. Similarly, in the context of Singapore, Göransson (2015) highlights the importance of social mobility as perceived by the parents; *kiasu* parents, who place high demands on their children in terms of academic performance, treat academic achievement as "the primary route to upward social mobility" (p. 223).

Another perspective suggests factors that influence the individual level. For example, Katz (2018) remarked that tiger parents believe their parenting strategies reflect their ability to control and manifest success within their child. He argues that tiger parents derive narcissistic pleasure from their children's success; they perceive their children as "investments." The children of tiger parents are offered knowledge and resources that the parents think will help them succeed in different ways (Allatt, 1993). Likewise, if the child cannot meet the parents' expectations, this "investment" in a child will be perceived as a waste of time and opportunities. These explanations are closely linked with the sentiments in Chua's (2011) book, claiming that for Chinese parents, "the child is the extension of the self" (p. 148).

However, recent studies have found changes in parenting styles in East Asia and elsewhere. For example, a longitudinal study of the Chinese mainland parents reports the more recent prevalence of a "happy childhood" philosophy (Xie & Li, 2019). A systematic study on school choices in Hong Kong SAR suggests that parents have taken a more balanced approach to parenting, considering the importance of the child's happiness alongside academic performance (Chan & Yeung, 2019). Similarly, Shek and Sun (2014) report changes in the roles of mothers and fathers in Hong Kong SAR, including weakening traditional Chinese values.

In sum, despite the long shadow cast by the cultural essentialist perspective on research on East Asian parenting styles—particularly tiger parenting—scholars have made significant progress in criticizing and moving beyond it. Areas of interest under the topic of tiger parenting include East Asian cultural patterns and parenting styles, middle-class anxiety, intergenerational transmission of social capital, and the role of private tutoring as means of academic success and social advancement. However, research on tiger parenting that provides non-culturalist explanations—of how parents conceptualize this notion and what other educational, societal, and contextual factors contribute to engagement in tiger parenting—remains limited.

The tiger parent: Before and after Chua

When we examined the historical etymologies of the term, we found that being a tiger parent had both different and similar connotations before Amy Chua's book. The term *tiger mother* has been used in Western literature since the 19th century to characterize a protective mother or a strong

community leader (Ortiz, 2009). The tiger mother has functioned as a feminist construct to describe how motherhood and caring for children contribute to female leadership and activism. Confronting injustices, tiger mothers received media coverage in different parts of the world as they protested killings and kidnappings of youth in the Iraq war, in Chechnya, Argentina, and other places (Ortiz, 2009; Westcott, 2005). In the context of a Chinese American cultural repertoire, Huang (2017) argues that the tiger mother represents an archetype popularized in the literary works of Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior* and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*. Both writers describe (often in performative and exaggerated terms) Chinese authoritative mother figures that are echoed in Amy Chua's book.

As one of the 12 Chinese zodiac signs, the tiger has deep cultural resonance across East and Southeast Asia. Amy Chua cites this symbolism as the reason for choosing a tiger to describe herself, having been born in the Year of the Tiger. However, the tiger is less iconic in Chinese culture than the dragon. It is noteworthy that while a dragon represents *yang*, the masculine, a tiger represents *yin*, the feminine. In Southeast Asia, tigers are the respected, beneficial protectors of villages and forests (Wessing, 1994). According to environmental historians, the tiger is prominent in Korean cultural imagination, and is known as the "king of a hundred beasts" (Seeley & Skabelund, 2015). The tiger characterizes someone who has willpower, courage, confidence, and personal strength, in diverse cultures. However, the tiger in Chinese culture also symbolizes danger and oppression. For example, the Confucian canon's *Book of Rites* portrays the tiger as a dangerous animal causing fatalities (Huang, 2017).

Chua's description of tiger parenting includes academic preparation and extra-curricular activities (e.g., piano and violin). However, some scholars only include academic tutoring (Zhang, 2020). This study includes both academic and extra-curricular preparation, because together, they best describe parental approaches, investment patterns, and child-rearing styles. Moreover, as emerging research reports, many extra-curricular activities are directed toward academic achievements, for example, gaining an advantage in the admission process (Tan et al., 2021). There is a danger of generalizing tiger parenting to describe all aspects of strict parenting. Our approach to tiger parenting differs from Chua's. For her, tiger parenting is a middle-class Chinese emigrant parental strategy. By contrast, we view it as a mindset shared by parents across social class categories and not necessarily a Chinese or Asian parental strategy.

A clear and broadly accepted definition of tiger parenting is elusive in academic literature; some studies define it, while others assume readers know about it. For example, Lui (2020) refers to tiger parents as those who de-emphasize the self-esteem and autonomy of their children; Doan et al. (2017) describe tiger parents in terms of behaviors characterized by strong monitoring, control, punitive actions, and strong discipline; Kim et al. (2013) refer to it as both highly authoritarian and authoritative; Zhang (2020) focuses on the monitoring and control of aspects of the children's

academic careers. The negative concept collated from the literature suggests that tiger parenting is a controlling, harsh, narrowly effective, but profoundly unhealthy way of parenting—most popular among Asian (Chinese) middle-class households with immigrant backgrounds.

Amy Chua applies this term in the American context to describe the experiences of Asian emigrant parents. However, the concept has become deterritorialized and entered an international discourse about intensive parenting. We use the term *tiger parenting* instead of its equivalents, such as *intensive* parenting, for various reasons. First, the study participants were familiar with the term. Second, it is part of popular discourse and has attracted parents' and media attention in Hong Kong SAR. Third, the term helped us focus on comparing parenting styles based on cultural backgrounds. Although it is not a local term, it has been assimilated into the local vocabulary of parents and educators. Given these reasons, we believe that the term *tiger parenting* has analytic validity in the context of Hong Kong SAR.

This study refers to tiger parenting as a mindset or approach to parenting that displays most of the following characteristics: careful planning of and investment of extensive resources in both academic and extra-curricular activities, having high expectations, and often ignoring child agency. Beyond the starting point of these characteristics, we are conscious of tiger parenting's role as an elastic term encompassing variations and contradictions as a function of its place in popular and academic discourses. By often expressing dissonant narratives of how they practice, encounter, or think about tiger parenting daily, the research participants demonstrate the advantages of adopting an approach that reflects its lived realities more closely. One of the main goals of this study is to investigate such multiplicities of meaning, and draw connections between these subjective experiences and the factors often neglected or understated in debates about intensive parenting.

Research methods and the context

This paper draws on qualitative data collected from 80 parents from May–July 2021 in Hong Kong SAR. The larger project aimed to (1) explore the educational and career aspirations of parents in Hong Kong SAR and the role of shadow education in achieving those aspirations, and (2) develop theoretical perspectives on parental investment in children's education by elaborating on parent diversity based on social class. This paper focuses on one aspect of the project—the factors influencing tiger parenting. The interview protocol of the study included specific questions on tiger parenting which were directly asked to interviewed parents, for example whether they regarded themselves as tiger parents, their reasons for choosing tiger parenting, and what educational, social, economic, personal, and other factors they associated with tiger parenting.

We adapted the original research design for the "new realities" presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, including diversifying the modes of access to participants and moving face-to-face interviews online (Kobakhidze et al., 2021; Saberi, 2020). Considering the nature of the research questions, we employed a maximum variation sampling strategy, which allowed the selection of information-rich

cases and comparisons among groups (Schreier, 2018). Additionally, we used a snowball sampling method to recruit participants (i.e., referrals by the participants). We conducted the interviews via *Zoom* (69), phone (10), and *WeChat* (1). The average interview duration was 39 min. Where necessary, we added follow-up interviews to clarify particular views and validate findings.

The multi-lingual capacity of the research team allowed us to conduct semi-structured interviews in Cantonese (40), English (29), Mandarin (2), and Japanese (9). We audio-recorded the interviews, which were transcribed, translated, coded, and analyzed using NVivo 12. The research team held weekly meetings and wrote reflection memos to promote understanding of the coding frame and reduce discrepancies between the two coders (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). We used inductive and deductive coding strategies to identify initial codes and coding trees. We analyzed the codes thematically, and compared analytical memos to ensure consistency (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013).

At the end of the interviews, we administered a short survey (16 questions) to collect more systematic background data about the families' socio-economic, educational, and cultural backgrounds. Schools in Hong Kong SAR are classified by type of funding—government, aided, Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS), and private international (Education Bureau of Hong Kong SAR [EDB], 2021). In our study sample, the majority of parents opted to enroll their children in local schools, constituting 60.7% of the total, while 36.9% of parents chose international schools for their children. Among the category of local schools, 41.6% of parents opted for aided schools, 10.7% for DSS schools, and 8.3% for government schools. A smaller portion, 2.3% of parents, sent their children to other types of schools, such as boarding schools. Among the 80 participants, 87.5% were female, while 12.5% were male. In terms of educational background, 28.8% of the interviewed parents held a Bachelor's degree, 23.8% had a Master's degree, 12.5% had completed Senior Secondary School, 11.3% had attended Junior Secondary School, and the same percentage (11.3%) held an Associate Degree and a Doctoral Degree (11.3%). Regarding ethnicity, 70% of participants identified themselves as Chinese. Among these, 40% were local Hong Kong Chinese, 21.2% were Mainland Chinese, and 8.7% were of other Chinese origins (e.g., Chinese from Singapore). The remaining parents consisted of 12.5% from Anglophone countries (i.e., English-speaking countries), 12.5% from East Asian backgrounds (e.g., Japanese), 3.7% from South Asia (e.g., Indian), and 1.2% from European origins (e.g., Dutch).

To classify the parents' social class, we adapted some multiple-choice questions from Hong Kong SAR's latest Census and Statistics Department report, and developed our tailored survey questions. Based on information on monthly household income, education level, occupation, and industry of parents, we classified parents into four class categories. The heterogeneity of school types and parents' backgrounds allowed us to compare parents' socio-economic status and ethnicity across schools.

The study received ethical clearance from the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) at the University of Hong Kong. The project offered strict confidentiality and anonymity to the

participants, ensuring their privacy was protected. Written consent forms were obtained from each individual, further affirming their willingness to participate. Extra care was needed regarding online interactions, including data privacy issues and ethical concerns from virtual fieldwork. Our data protection strategies included the removal of all personal identifiers and using ID numbers instead. We discussed all other ethical concerns in weekly team meetings on Zoom, and posted written reflections on a shared live blog.

Findings: Understanding tiger parenting

What is tiger parenting?

Throughout the interviews with various types of parents, it was clear that the term has acquired a negative connotation among parents; thus, many tried to distance themselves from it. In response to this question, parents told us (sometimes in a defensive tone) how they valued their children's happiness, individualism, freedom, and well-being. Considering the sensitive nature of the phenomenon, the team members sometimes had to ask parents indirectly, encouraging them to provide examples of people around them instead of directly asking about their parenting practices. Desensitizing issues and depersonalizing questions for participants (Agar, 1996; Rubin & Rubin, 2011) facilitated discussion with some parents, and generated rich data grounded in real examples.

Most parents in our sample were familiar with the term *tiger parenting*; however, their understanding varied. Nonetheless, most of their interpretations referred to themes highlighted in Amy Chua's book and the existing scholarly literature. Parents from various social class backgrounds explained that a tiger parent is a parent who pushes children, directs them to what they think is best for them, and fills their time with activities; a parent who schedules children's time back-to-back, allowing no free time, dominates their lives, and has a clear goal for their academic achievement; a tiger mom is a pushy mom who wants so much for her children that sometimes she even loses the balance and compromises their well-being; a parent who is anxious if a child does not get an A in every subject; a parent who is too involved, directive, and prescriptive in making sure that their children "do something in art, something in music, something in sports," and willing to pay to support high academic achievements; or a parent for whom there is "no compromise, no negotiation" with their children on academic matters. Although our respondents mainly expressed negative attitudes toward the term, a few positive comments included the remarks that "tiger parenting is an expression of love" and that tiger parents "set a strict timetable for children, because they want to finish homework earlier to have free time for play and rest" (a view from a self-proclaimed tiger parent). Overall, the understanding was blurred between general and tiger parenting aspects.

We found that tiger parenting, as understood by our respondents, does not have a clear focus on academic subjects but goes beyond the academic domain and includes other social and cultural

activities. Interestingly, some parents talked about tiger parenting in terms of a degree of "tigerness"—"I am tiger enough," and "it depends on how tiger one is." Some moderate versions of tiger parenting emerged in our data—not as pushy as Amy Chua's character in the book and more willing to negotiate the terms with their children.

Among the 12 participants who self-identified as tiger parents, one-third reported no longer being one, while another two described practices that seemed more limited in scope than most definitions of tiger parenting. Apart from two South Asian parents, all had ethnically Chinese backgrounds and encompassed all social class categories.

The findings of our study suggest that tiger parenting is a mindset adopted by parents of various social classes and ethnic backgrounds, and not only by middle-class Asian parents, as previously assumed. It is a mindset about what parents can do to ensure the security of their children's future. We found that tiger parents strongly believe in "success stories" and meritocracy—a linear transition from good education and skills to good life opportunities.

An excellent example of this was the discussion with one self-proclaimed tiger parent who did not see it as a negative practice, and shared her philosophy of being a tiger mother with us, summarizing some of the main features of the phenomenon. According to her, tiger parenting is a belief that one needs to control the situation (academic and social lives of children) and not leave their success to chance; tiger parenting is related to confidence (or lack thereof) about how life will unfold, and believe in it as the right strategy.

Tiger parents believe in the power of effort—a characteristic of the input–output model in education where the tiger parent controls their children's education process by investing in "input" (e.g., academic tutoring and extra-curricular activities) with the hope that the "output" will be closer to their wish/goal. Although controlling the process does not guarantee the final result, it assures tiger parents that "inputs" will still positively impact "outputs," that is, children's chances of success in education and jobs. Tiger parenting requires parents' time, wealth, and involvement capacity. This, in turn, signals the necessity of social and economic capital.

Is tiger parenting an Asian or a global phenomenon?

Findings demonstrated that parents from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds perceived tiger parenting as common in Hong Kong SAR. Many of them adopted culturalist explanations. Several non-local and non-Chinese parents believed that tiger parenting was found mainly among Asian parents. The views differed regarding who engages in tiger parenting: According to some, it is a Chinese phenomenon, while others pointed out that Koreans, Japanese, Indians, Singaporeans, and other Asians are more likely to be tiger parents. An Indian middle-class parent mentioned, "Yeah, sadly, it is an Asian [practice]," reflecting negative sentiments and anxiety related to this concept.

Similarly, some European parents believed that tiger parenting is the Asian way of parenting. For example, a Dutch parent who thought that tiger parents were mostly Asians, contrasted their attitudes to European parenting styles and mentioned a possible cultural explanation: Ideas about perfectionism are less common in Europe than in Asia. In addition, to indicate a relatively sophisticated understanding of tiger parenting that engages with its deeper philosophical underpinnings (in this case, Confucian beliefs on the malleable nature of humans), such an explanation further emphasizes points of incommensurability between types of parenting practices perceived as highly specific to a culture.

Overall, those respondents who had the opportunity to comment on ethnicity and tiger parenting, believed that it is predominantly an Asian practice. A middle-class Japanese parent remarked, "I think every parent in the Japanese school is a tiger parent to some extent. Their time management is really strict." Another parent, originally from the Chinese mainland, said Asian parents around her were "mostly tiger parents." She called it an "Asianized phenomenon." Still, certain respondents were keen to make more granular distinctions between Asian parenting styles. For example, a Japanese mother married to a native of Hong Kong SAR perceived that Japan is less focused on academics than Hong Kong SAR and had the impression it was mostly the locals that were tiger parents compared to herself and her friends. A working-class father, originally from Sri Lanka, observed a yawning gap between what he saw as the more relaxed South Asian parenting style and the intensive, high-pressure version of Chinese parents.

Simultaneously, some parents thought that tiger parenting has become increasingly global and is no longer an exclusively Asian phenomenon. Some thought that tiger parenting is common in big cities with high population density, high competition for university places, and among immigrant families struggling to gain social and cultural capital. One British mother said that "tiger parenting used to be Asian," and implied that it is now global. According to her, the focus of Asian parents on competitiveness and success influences non-Asian parents who realize that "Asian children are raising the bar." Family relations contribute to more widespread tiger parenting.

Social class and tiger parenting

Contrary to most previous research—which posited that tiger parents are usually middle-class—we found that it is a cross-class approach or belief. Our sample showed that parents from all social class backgrounds exhibited characteristics of tiger parenting. Parents from across the socio-economic spectrum used similar parenting styles that could be considered tiger parenting—prioritizing academic achievement and extra-curricular activities, controlling children's time, excessive tutoring (albeit not always), and educational and social success—often at the expense of the children's well-being and positive parent–child relationships.

Our class-based analysis of parents' practices showed differences in spending on academic tutoring versus extra-curricular activities. The upper middle class (very high income) and middle class (high income) aspired for their children to achieve in a more all-rounded way, rather than merely in academic terms. These parents also associated being tiger parents with having the resources to provide children with extra help. However, their expenses for private tutoring were not necessarily higher than other parents. One possible explanation could be that upper-middle-class and middle-class parents typically send their children to international and DSS schools, where the schools take on these responsibilities.

The lower-middle class (middle-income) and working-class (low-income) self-identified tiger parents focused more on academic performance or behavioral discipline. These parents often explained their reason for being a tiger parent as external—the society, competition, or pressure from teachers. Most lower-middle-class and working-class parents had children enrolled in local schools, and believed that extra tutoring was needed. Yet, they seemed "softer" than the stereotype as they would stop being tiger parents in response to children's resistance and negative impacts on the parent–child relationship.

As findings showed, social class differences emerge in relation to resources and the capacity of parents to achieve tiger parenting goals in which economic, social, and cultural capital plays a decisive role. We argue that the imbalance in resources creates the illusion that tiger parenting is practiced mainly by middle-class parents. However, our data show that the parents from "lower" social stratum also use tiger parenting strategies for various reasons that are not solely related to social class. A parent from an aided school with a low income said that tiger parenting was simply "too expensive"; therefore, she preferred to save money for future university expenses. Similarly, another participant with a middle income said that she would like to hire private tutoring for her children, but she "chose not to because it's too much of an expense." This suggests that tiger parenting is also a function of access to financial resources.

Changing dynamics: Tiger parenting is not static

We collected evidence stating that some participants who had once considered themselves tiger parents eventually changed their approach. Some changing dynamics are related to lived experiences. For example, global experiences of living, working, and raising children abroad have contributed to Asian parents relinquishing their tiger parent approach. Other factors contributing to the change of mind are related to parent–child relationships and the age of children—factors that have been understudied in the literature.

The following quotation from a local Chinese middle-class mother illustrates the change of approaches of parents as children grow older:

I used to be one [tiger mother]. I am more laid back now. When my kids were in primary school, I wished to explore their talents as soon as possible, and I wanted to make sure that they could head

to their goals as early as they could. We want them to "survive at school," so we constantly monitor their academic performances, and I would arrange more tutorials for them once I found that their achievements were not high enough.

We found similar remarks among other parents: When children are younger, tiger parents are more authoritarian, and they gradually become more liberal. Tiger parenting strategies were most common with primary school students, while parents of teenagers in secondary and high schools chose to negotiate instead of insisting. A local Hong Kong Chinese working-class mother shared with us:

> I was once a tiger mom. Yet I have fewer expectations for them as they grow older … You tend to have many expectations of the children when they were small … Now they are in secondary school and have developed their own ideas. I conceal what I want them to do and simply encourage them … sometimes, it leads to fights. What parents want isn't what children want, so I have changed my attitude a lot too. Sometimes I think parents nowadays have no choice.

Other participants remarked about the negative impact of tiger parenting on relationships with older children, while younger children were more tolerant. However, some parents recalled episodes when younger children blamed them for being "too harsh." Some parents changed their attitudes. As one shared, "Now, I am nicer to him … and he loves me back" (a local Hong Kong Chinese mother).

An upper-middle-class Chinese American parent who initially embraced tiger parenting shared similar opinions regarding evolving relationships between tiger parents and children. She used to control and monitor her daughters at a younger age, but they are more independent now, and she does not see the need to be an "active tiger." We found that some tiger parents exhibited tiger parenting characteristics during their children's nursery and kindergarten years—in preparation for the competitive entrance procedures of primary schools—but stopped after they secured good primary schools and had their children on the "right track."

While some parents thought that there was a need to steer the lives of children in the beginning, showing a "winning from the starting line" mentality, some thought that tiger parenting approaches depend on the children themselves; some require the push from parents while others do not.

System, societal, and individual-level factors behind tiger parenting

Most participants considered Hong Kong SAR's competitive education system the major cause underlying practices of tiger parenting, while others identified peer pressure among parents as a primary contributing factor. Although these two factors are not mutually exclusive, the importance

of school/teacher pressures seems emphasized in responses by local parents. By contrast, respondents from international schools focused on competition among parents.

Teachers encourage tiger parenting, while school culture breeds the practice. Many parents from local schools cited school- and teacher-led pressures on parents coming from highly competitive and exam-oriented schools. Some schools in Hong Kong SAR teach ahead of the curriculum and have high admission standards. Competitive school admission requirements call for more academic tutoring and extra-curricular activities, requiring certificates and thus promoting credentialism. Some parents follow such demands because they want their children to be exceptional in the school admission process. Competition is ubiquitous—starting from kindergarten admissions and extending to elite/advanced classes within schools. The following quotation from a local Hong Kong Chinese middle-class mother illustrates the chain of pressure:

> I think it's because of the schools. Schools put pressure on teachers who in turn put pressure on parents, [and] finally parents put pressure on students. It's a chain. It's important for parents to find a school that suits their children. In order to meet certain requirements, schools are demanding on the teachers, who in turn shift the demand to students. Teachers could make students join classes or activities by simply putting pressure on parents.

Some parents from local schools shared that primary school policies push parents to add more language classes and extra-curricular activities. Overall, the participants believe Hong Kong SAR school culture is very competitive and driven by a scarcity of resources and opportunities, especially for universities. A working class, local parent put it eloquently:

> There are too many people but too few resources in Hong Kong SAR. The education system is elitist, and students have to compete for something at every stage, although they all receive an education. First, they must compete for a good kindergarten because that determines whether they can get into a good primary school. Then there is competition for a spot in the "elite class," where more complicated concepts are taught. That determines whether they can get into a good secondary school and have a good learning environment. Finally, it is the competition for a university degree.

While a portrait of such a competitive environment cannot be generalized to all Hong Kong SAR schools, and perhaps best describes entrance into elite schools, it was common for parents in both local and international school sectors to point to school policies and systemic factors. It was common to refer to the generalized concept of "Hong Kong SAR culture," where "everyone wants to reach the top." Some parents, who were not from Hong Kong SAR, mentioned that they absorbed the local culture after moving to the city. A middle-income parent from Chinese Taiwan reported after moving to Hong Kong SAR that she feels "tiger parenting is the norm,"

and there is no way to escape for parents if they want their children to reach the top, "As much as you try to refrain from becoming a tiger parent, you naturally just become one because you're sucked into this whole vicious cycle."

Peer pressure among parents contributes to tiger parenting. Parent-driven factors behind tiger parenting included peer pressure, parental attitudes, and high aspirations. Notably, most respondents did not make explicit distinctions between tiger and regular parent competition. Strong social influence (often facilitated by social media and parents' groups) and competition cultivated the fear of falling behind. While local parents compete for places in local elite schools, expat families compete among themselves for placement in top international schools and world-class universities abroad. At least two parents highlighted the small-circle nature of the parent group they saw at their school, and associated it with a strong mutual influence toward more competition.

Besides pressure, some parents acknowledge the values of cooperation and exchange information among themselves. A Japanese middle-class parent explained how she eventually became competitive due to peer influence. After other parents exchanged a lot of information with her, she became socialized into all components of academic success for a Japanese exam:

> Friends' influence is really big. In my case, I built my own business abroad, so I used to think it's all about passion; we don't need to do much about studies. However, once I became friends with all these mums, I became more anxious about doing more for my child. We exchange a lot of information. And we have the attitude of "let's do it together," advising each other whether this *juku* [Japanese tutoring institution] is good or not.

Later in the interview, this parent shared how she transformed her parenting style from wanting her child to just "be happy and healthy" to developing more ambitious desires, noting how other parents invested in "amazing experiences" for their children. She concluded that "we cannot just be relaxed."

Other parents noted that achievements by children of friends lead to comparisons and more competition. Fear of losing in a race increased anxiety for parents and led some to mimic other successful cases, hoping for success for their children. A local Hong Kong Chinese middle-class parent remarked: "Becoming a tiger mom or dad … it is all about making comparisons." She explained that competition among tiger parents leads to even more "forceful" behaviors. The predominant topic of discussion with other parents is usually tutorials' and children's performance. She thought that even if some parents initially tried to resist this trend, they were "influenced by the behaviors of parents around them, and gradually became 'more tiger.'"

Catching up with others emerged as a theme in our analysis. This is well-illustrated by the following quotation: "If we do not follow others or catch up to their pace, we might be left behind in

the race." Parents citing peer pressure and social influence tended to be from medium and high-income households and international or DSS schools.

In contrast to the general pattern, we had many relaxed parents in our sample, representing various school types, household incomes, and ethnicities. This group of parents tended to comment negatively on tiger parenting, citing high stress, negative child–parent relationships, and the overall unhealthy and even dangerous nature of tiger parenting. Many parents shared stories about tiger parents around them, how they scheduled tutorials and "activities after activities" for their children, feeding their children in cars between tutoring classes, leaving no time for proper meals or watching TV. For some parents, tiger parenting was simply not effective. "It is true that forcing does not help," said a local, low-income parent. She valued the cultivation of independence for her children because she considered it the best preparation for real life. Similarly, a Korean middle-class parent shared that tiger parenting does not consider children's agency. In her opinion, parents must respect children's personalities, ideas, and values.

Other relevant factors influencing tiger parenting. Another reason cited for tiger parenting was global competition in higher education due to the increasing admission standards for top universities. Some parents believed that the current generation of parents faced tougher competition in education, jobs, and social life, leading them to adopt a more demanding parenting style. To understand the generational impact of tiger parenting, we asked participating parents to reflect on their childhood experiences and their own parents' parenting styles. Our findings suggest that some tiger parents emulate their own tiger parents, while others choose to take a different approach or adopt more balanced parenting styles.

The following quotation from a Chinese American upper-middle-class parent illustrates this theme. She explained that she was a "product of tiger parents," but she refused to become one:

> For me, there are some times when your initial reaction is, "I've got to make that happen." However, when you've calmed down, you take a moment to think, is that really the best path? Is that really what we want for our kids? Do they really need to strive mindlessly, just head down, don't look up, toward that particular goal? Then I hesitated. I don't think that's the right way. Then I stopped.

Some parents perceived scheduling activities and extra lessons as a parental responsibility. They stressed that all parents want to offer "the best opportunities for their children" for "a better future." As a self-proclaimed tiger parent, an upper-middle-class Asian American mother expressed: "Doing seems more assured than not doing."

Tiger parenting was perceived as an "insurance" against uncertainties and risks in life. For many parents from various backgrounds, fears mostly converged on the possibility of social reproduction—not being able to provide opportunities for their children. For a few parents, tiger parenting was a

response to perceived risks related to being unfamiliar with the Hong Kong SAR education system or general future risks regarding education and job prospects.

Discussion

The findings present a multifaceted picture that advances understandings of tiger parenting beyond cultural essentialism and an East versus West binary. While Chinese or East Asian cultural roots may have provided particularly fertile ground for tiger parenting to flourish in the region and remain associated with the concept in popular discourses, such parenting practices are increasingly necessitated by fiercely competitive education systems, and becoming globalized across ethnic groups and the social class spectrum. As Ho (2017) remarks, "Cultural essentialism is simplistic," and can lead to stereotyping. Following Takayama (2018), we move beyond treating East Asia as a region of "negative reference societies," as seen from the viewpoint of cultural essentialist approaches that are—directly or indirectly—still prevalent in academic and popular debates about education and parenting.

The focus on ethnicity and culture has redirected scholarly attention toward a limited number of aspects underlying tiger parenting. The paper argued that tiger parenting is not an exclusively Chinese practice. Despite enduring images of hypercompetitive East Asian parenting held by parents from within and outside the region, most participants described experiences and perceptions that referred to factors outside of ethnic background. This echoes Watkins and Noble (2013), who state that "Chinese" practices, such as excessive private tutoring and high expectation about academic achievement, are evident in non-Chinese families (p. 26). Simultaneously, we believe that parents' decisions and preferences are embedded in culture, which plays a significant role in tiger parenting. Consequently, we acknowledge some cultural roots and beliefs that may have created fertile ground for tiger parenting in the Chinese culture, particularly in Hong Kong SAR.

The etymologies and symbolic meanings of the tiger in Chinese culture support Huang (2017), Amy Chua's book, and the subsequent discourse around tiger parenting. We argue that the tiger mother could be treated as an archetypal image established in literary works and popular culture. This reinforces the stereotypical image of the strict authoritarian Chinese mother, pays too much attention to tiger parenting as a counterbalance to alleged Western/American parenting, and contributes to "culture clash" frameworks (Rhee, 2013). This study departs from the stereotype without neglecting the archetype's features rooted in culture by elaborating on different factors influencing a tiger parenting mindset among parents in Hong Kong SAR.

Tiger parenting has been associated with middle-class parents as their strategy to secure an advantage in a competitive education system. Data from the interviews support the notion that this parenting style is a function of economic capital, as engaging in it requires family wealth. Multiple interviewees from lower socio-economic segments held generally positive views on forms of intensive parenting. However, they recognized limitations regarding the support they

could provide their children while "keeping up with" competition in society. These observations reinforce the findings of Ishizuka's (2019) national survey experiment in the US, indicating widespread cross-class support for intensive parenting, despite a divergence in actual behaviors—a likely consequence of socio-economic inequalities.

Our findings show that tiger parenting is a cross-class and cross-culture phenomenon; neither social class nor culture alone can explain its complexity. Instead, it must be theorized in broader contexts—school policies and practices, peer pressure among parents, means of social advancement, and social media use, among others. There is a need to explain tiger parenting as a product of a broader social and educational context that includes the role of school admissions, teacher-led factors, examinations, parental aspirations and fears, and generational influences. These factors are not necessarily cultural differences, but reflect a more complex combination of educational, economic, and social factors that are often overlooked. Due to the multiplicity of the factors leading to tiger parenting, the term itself is multifaceted and elastic, often straddling the boundaries among the different parenting styles.

We hope our paper enriches the understanding of the analytical concept of tiger parenting and the associated beliefs and practices as perceived by parents in Hong Kong SAR. Several aspects might be specific to Hong Kong SAR's social, economic, and educational realities, but some may have relevance in other parts of East Asia and beyond. Other limitations in the scope and generalizability of our findings can be attributed to using self-reported data, and adopting an analytical focus on individual perceptions surrounding tiger parenting versus a more in-depth examination of the social practices and foundations behind the tiger parenting mindset. More research is needed to unpack various domains, including child agency, aspects of gender (mothers and fathers parenting boys versus girls), and how global trends in education lead to increased competition, and impact families and parenting. We recognize the changing role of parenting in uncertain times, acknowledging demographic shifts, geopolitical dynamics, and the impact of the pandemic and related constraints.

Concluding remarks

Moving beyond the Eastern–Western dualist framework, we ask, "How much does the tiger parenting literature make sense in parents' real perceptions and practices of parenting, especially regarding private tutoring?" Questions remain regarding the academic utility of the concept, given the difficulty of extricating it from the polemical debates that emerged upon the initial publication of Amy Chua's book in 2011, and continued for much of the decade. Ultimately, should we abandon *tiger parenting* as merely a once-popular buzzword or develop it into a rigorous academic term? To foster meaningful dialogue about this concept, we argue that research on tiger parenting must avoid cultural essentialism and account for the multiple factors identified by this paper, including

Confucian legacies, structural policies, generational influences, class strategies, social influences, and social reproduction.

Contributorship

Magda Nutsa Kobakhidze was responsible for writing, revising, and addressing the reviewers' comments for the entire paper. These included theorizing, writing the literature review, presenting the findings, writing discussion section, and formulating conclusions. Ying Ma and Alexandros Tsaloukidis were involved with data collection, analysis, interpretation, and drafting the research findings.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethical statement

The study received ethical clearance from the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) at the University of Hong Kong. The project offered strict confidentiality and anonymity for the participants, ensuring their privacy was protected. Written consent forms were obtained from each individual, further affirming their willingness to participate. Data protection strategies included the removal of all personal identifiers and using ID numbers instead.

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