Teeth Marks and Bubbles

Chinese parents can get away with things that Western parents can’t. Once when I was young—maybe more than once—when I was extremely disrespectful to my mother, my father angrily called me “garbage” in our native Hokkien dialect. It worked really well. I felt terrible and deeply ashamed of what I had done. But it didn’t damage my self-esteem or anything like that. I knew exactly how highly he thought of me. I didn’t actually think I was worthless or feel like a piece of garbage.

As an adult, I once did the same thing to Sophia, calling her garbage in English when she acted extremely disrespectfully toward me. When I mentioned that I had done this at a dinner party, I was immediately ostracized. One guest named Marcy got so upset she broke down in tears and had to leave early. My friend Susan, the host, tried to rehabilitate me with the remaining guests.
“Oh dear, it’s just a misunderstanding. Amy was speaking metaphorically—right, Amy? You didn’t actually call Sophia ‘garbage.’”

“Um, yes, I did. But it’s all in the context,” I tried to explain. “It’s a Chinese immigrant thing.”

“But you’re not a Chinese immigrant,” somebody pointed out.

“Good point,” I conceded. “No wonder it didn’t work.”

I was just trying to be conciliatory. In fact, it had worked great with Sophia.

The fact is that Chinese parents can do things that would seem unimaginable—even legally actionable—to Westerners. Chinese mothers can say to their daughters, “Hey fatty—lose some weight.” By contrast, Western parents have to tiptoe around the issue, talking in terms of “health” and never ever mentioning the f-word, and their kids still end up in therapy for eating disorders and negative self-image. (I also once heard a Western father toast his adult daughter by calling her “beautiful and incredibly competent.” She later told me that made her feel like garbage.) Chinese parents can order their kids to get straight As. Western parents can only ask their kids to try their best. Chinese parents can say, “You’re lazy. All your classmates are getting ahead of you.” By contrast, Western parents have to struggle with their own conflicted feelings about achievement, and try to persuade themselves that they’re not disappointed about how their kids turned out.

I’ve thought long and hard about how Chinese parents can get away with what they do. I think there are three big differences between the Chinese and Western parental mind-sets.

First, I’ve noticed that Western parents are extremely anxious about their children’s self-esteem. They worry about how their
children will feel if they fail at something, and they constantly try to reassure their children about how good they are notwithstanding a mediocre performance on a test or at a recital. In other words, Western parents are concerned about their children's psyches. Chinese parents aren't. They assume strength, not fragility, and as a result they behave very differently.

For example, if a child comes home with an A-minus on a test, a Western parent will most likely praise the child. The Chinese mother will gasp in horror and ask what went wrong. If the child comes home with a B on the test, some Western parents will still praise the child. Other Western parents will sit their child down and express disapproval, but they will be careful not to make their child feel inadequate or insecure, and they will not call their child "stupid," "worthless," or "a disgrace." Privately, the Western parents may worry that their child does not test well or have aptitude in the subject or that there is something wrong with the curriculum and possibly the whole school. If the child's grades do not improve, they may eventually schedule a meeting with the school principal to challenge the way the subject is being taught or to call into question the teacher's credentials.

If a Chinese child gets a B—which would never happen—there would first be a screaming, hair-tearing explosion. The devastated Chinese mother would then get dozens, maybe hundreds of practice tests and work through them with her child for as long as it takes to get the grade up to an A. Chinese parents demand perfect grades because they believe that their child can get them. If their child doesn't get them, the Chinese parent assumes it's because the child didn't work hard enough. That's why the solution to substandard performance is always to excoriate, punish, and shame the child. The Chinese parent believes
that their child will be strong enough to take the shaming and to improve from it. (And when Chinese kids do excel, there is plenty of ego-inflating parental praise lavished in the privacy of the home.)

Second, Chinese parents believe that their kids owe them everything. The reason for this is a little unclear, but it's probably a combination of Confucian filial piety and the fact that the parents have sacrificed and done so much for their children. (And it's true that Chinese mothers get in the trenches, putting in long grueling hours personally tutoring, training, interrogating, and spying on their kids.) Anyway, the understanding is that Chinese children must spend their lives repaying their parents by obeying them and making them proud. By contrast, I don't think most Westerners have the same view of children being permanently indebted to their parents. Jed actually has the opposite view. "Children don't choose their parents," he once said to me. "They don't even choose to be born. It's parents who foist life on their kids, so it's the parents' responsibility to provide for them. Kids don't owe their parents anything. Their duty will be to their own kids." This strikes me as a terrible deal for the Western parent.

Third, Chinese parents believe that they know what is best for their children and therefore override all of their children's own desires and preferences. That's why Chinese daughters can't have boyfriends in high school and why Chinese kids can't go to sleep-away camp. It's also why no Chinese kid would ever dare say to their mother, "I got a part in the school play! I'm Villager Number Six. I'll have to stay after school for rehearsal every day from 3:00 to 7:00, and I'll also need a ride on weekends." God help any Chinese kid who tried that one.

Don't get me wrong: It's not that Chinese parents don't care
about their children. Just the opposite. They would give up anything for their children. It's just an entirely different parenting model. I think of it as Chinese, but I know a lot of non-Chinese parents—usually from Korea, India, or Pakistan—who have a very similar mind-set, so it may be an immigrant thing. Or maybe it's the combination of being an immigrant and being from certain cultures.

Jed was raised on a very different model. Neither of his parents were immigrants. Both Sy and Florence were born and raised near Scranton, Pennsylvania, in strict Orthodox Jewish households. Both lost their mothers at a young age, and both had oppressive, unhappy childhoods. After they were married, they got out of Pennsylvania as fast as they could, eventually settling in Washington, D.C., where Jed and his older brother and sister grew up. As parents, Sy and Florence were determined to give their children the space and freedom they had been deprived of as children. They believed in individual choice and valued independence, creativity, and questioning authority.

There was a world of difference between my parents and Jed's. Jed's parents gave him a choice about whether he wanted to take violin lessons (which he declined and now regrets) and thought of him as a human being with views. My parents didn't give me any choices, and never asked for my opinion on anything. Every year, Jed's parents let him spend the entire summer having fun with his brother and sister at an idyllic place called Crystal Lake; Jed says those were some of the best times of his life, and we try to bring Sophia and Lulu to Crystal Lake when we can. By contrast, I had to take computer programming—I hated summers. (So did Katrin, my seven-years-younger sister and soul
mate, who on top of computer programming read grammar books and taught herself sentence diagramming to pass the time.) Jed’s parents had good taste and collected art. My parents didn’t. Jed’s parents paid for some but not all of his education. My parents always paid for everything, but fully expect to be cared for and treated with respect and devotion when they get old. Jed’s parents never had such expectations.

Jed’s parents often vacationed without their kids. They traveled with friends to dangerous places like Guatemala (where they were almost kidnapped), Zimbabwe (where they went on safari), and Borobudur, Indonesia (where they heard the gamelan). My parents never went on vacation without their four kids, which meant we had to stay in some really cheap motels. Also, having grown up in the developing world, my parents wouldn’t have gone to Guatemala, Zimbabwe, or Borobudur if someone paid them; they took us to Europe instead, which has governments.

Although Jed and I didn’t explicitly negotiate the issue, we basically ended up adopting the Chinese parenting model in our household. There were several reasons for this. First, like many mothers, I did most of the parenting, so it made sense that my parenting style prevailed. Even though Jed and I had the same job and I was just as busy as he was at Yale, I was the one who oversaw the girls’ homework, Mandarin lessons, and all their piano and violin practicing. Second, totally apart from my views, Jed favored strict parenting. He used to complain about households where the parents never said no to their children—or, worse, said no but then didn’t enforce it. But while Jed was good at saying no to the girls, he didn’t have an affirmative plan
for them. He would never have forced things like piano or violin
on them if they refused. He wasn’t absolutely confident that he
could make the right choices for them. That’s where I came in.

But probably most important, we stuck with the Chinese
model because the early results were hard to quarrel with. Other
parents were constantly asking us what our secret was. Sophia
and Lulu were model children. In public, they were polite, in-
teresting, helpful, and well spoken. They were A students, and
Sophia was two years ahead of her classmates in math. They were
fluent in Mandarin. And everyone marveled at their classical
music playing. In short, they were just like Chinese kids.

Except not quite. We took our first trip to China with the
girls in 1999. Sophia and Lulu both have brown hair, brown eyes,
and Asianesque features; they both speak Chinese. Sophia eats all
kinds of organs and organisms—duck webs, pig ears, sea slugs—
another critical aspect of Chinese identity. Yet everywhere we
went in China, including cosmopolitan Shanghai, my daughters
drew curious local crowds, who stared, giggled, and pointed at
the “two little foreigners who speak Chinese.” At the Chengdu
Panda Breeding Center in Sichuan, while we were taking pic-
tures of newborn giant pandas—pink, squirming, larvalike crea-
tures that rarely survive—the Chinese tourists were taking
pictures of Sophia and Lulu.

Back in New Haven a few months later, when I referred in pass-
ing to Sophia as being Chinese, she interrupted me: “Mommy—
I’m not Chinese.”

“Yes, you are.”

“No, Mommy—you’re the only one who thinks so. No one
in China thinks I’m Chinese. No one in America thinks I’m
Chinese.”
This bothered me intensely, but all I said was, "Well, they're all wrong. You are Chinese."

Sophia had her first big music moment in 2003 when she won the Greater New Haven Concerto Competition at the age of ten, earning the right to perform as a piano soloist with a New Haven youth orchestra at Yale University's Battell Chapel. I went wild. I blew up the article about Sophia in the local newspaper and framed it. I invited more than a hundred people to the concert and planned a huge after-party. I bought Sophia her first full-length gown and new shoes. All four grandparents came; the day before the performance, my mother was in our kitchen making hundreds of Chinese pearl balls (pork meatballs covered with sticky white rice), while Florence made ten pounds of gravlax (salmon cured with sea salt under a brick).

Meanwhile, on the practice front, we kicked into overdrive. Sophia was going to perform Mozart's Rondo for Piano and Orchestra in D Major, one of the composer's most uplifting pieces. Mozart is notoriously difficult. His music is famously sparkling, brilliant, effervescent, and effortless—adjectives that strike terror in the hearts of most musicians. There's a saying that only the young and old can play Mozart well: the young because they are oblivious and the old because they are no longer trying to impress anyone. Sophia's Rondo was classic Mozart. Her teacher Michelle told her, "When you're playing your runs and trills, think of champagne or an Italian soda, and all those bubbles rising to the top."

Sophia was up to any challenge. She was an unbelievably quick study, with lightning-quick fingers. Best of all, she listened to everything I said.

By then, I had become a drill sergeant. I broke the Rondo
down, sometimes by section, sometimes by goal. We’d spend one hour focusing just on articulation (clarity of notes), then another on tempo (with the metronome), followed by another on dynamics (loud, soft, crescendo, decrescendo), then another on phrasing (shaping musical lines), and so on. We worked late into the night every day for weeks. I spared no harsh words, and got even tougher when Sophia’s eyes filled with tears.

When the big day finally arrived, I was suddenly paralyzed; I could never be a performer myself. But Sophia just seemed excited. At Battell Chapel, when she walked out onto the stage to take her soloist’s bow, she had a big smile on her face, and I could tell she was happy. As I watched her performing the piece—in the imposing dark-oak hall, she looked tiny and brave at the piano—my heart ached with a kind of indescribable pain.

Afterward, friends and strangers came up to congratulate Jed and me. Sophia’s performance was breathtaking, they said, her playing so graceful and elegant. Sophia clearly was a Mozart person, a beaming Michelle told us, and she had never heard the Rondo sound so fresh and sparkling. “It’s obvious that she’s enjoying herself,” Larry, the boisterous director of the Neighborhood Music School, said to me. “You can’t sound that good if you’re not having fun.”

For some reason, Larry’s comment reminded me of an incident from many years before, when Sophia was just starting the piano but I was already pushing hard. Jed discovered some funny marks on the piano, on the wood just above middle C. When he asked Sophia about them, a guilty look came over her. “What did you say?” she asked evasively.

Jed crouched down and examined them more closely. “Sophia,” he said slowly, “could these possibly be teeth marks?”
Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother

It turned out they were. After more questioning, Sophia, who was perhaps six at the time, confessed that she often gnawed on the piano. When Jed explained that the piano was the most expensive piece of furniture we owned, Sophia promised not to do it again. I'm not quite sure why Larry's remark brought that episode to mind.