Sophia is my firstborn daughter. My husband, Jed, is Jewish, and I'm Chinese, which makes our children Chinese-Jewish-American, an ethnic group that may sound exotic but actually forms a majority in certain circles, especially in university towns.

Sophia's name in English means "wisdom," as does Si Hui, the Chinese name my mother gave her. From the moment Sophia was born, she displayed a rational temperament and exceptional...
powers of concentration. She got those qualities from her father. As an infant Sophia quickly slept through the night, and cried only if it achieved a purpose. I was struggling to write a law article at the time—I was on leave from my Wall Street law firm and desperate to get a teaching job so I wouldn’t have to go back—and at two months Sophia understood this. Calm and contemplative, she basically slept, ate, and watched me have writer’s block until she was a year old.

Sophia was intellectually precocious, and at eighteen months she knew the alphabet. Our pediatrician denied that this was neurologically possible, insisting that she was only mimicking sounds. To prove his point, he pulled out a big tricky chart, with the alphabet disguised as snakes and unicorns. The doctor looked at the chart, then at Sophia, and back at the chart. Cunningly, he pointed to a toad wearing a nightgown and a beret.

“Q,” piped Sophia.

The doctor grunted. “No coaching,” he said to me.

I was relieved when we got to the last letter: a hydra with lots of red tongues flapping around, which Sophia correctly identified as “I.”

Sophia excelled in nursery school, particularly in math. While the other kids were learning to count from 1 to 10 the creative American way—with rods, beads, and cones—I taught Sophia addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, fractions, and decimals the rote Chinese way. The hard part was displaying the right answer using the rods, beads, and cones.

The deal Jed and I struck when we got married was that our children would speak Mandarin Chinese and be raised Jewish. (I was brought up Catholic, but that was easy to give up.
Catholicism has barely any roots in my family, but more of that later.) In retrospect, this was a funny deal, because I myself don’t speak Mandarin—my native dialect is Hokkien Chinese—and Jed is not religious in the least. But the arrangement somehow worked. I hired a Chinese nanny to speak Mandarin constantly to Sophia, and we celebrated our first Hanukkah when Sophia was two months old.

As Sophia got older, it seemed like she got the best of both cultures. She was probing and questioning, from the Jewish side. And from me, the Chinese side, she got skills—lots of skills. I don’t mean inborn skills or anything like that, just skills learned the diligent, disciplined, confidence-expanding Chinese way. By the time Sophia was three, she was reading Sartre, doing simple set theory, and could write one hundred Chinese characters. (Jed’s translation: She recognized the words “No Exit,” could draw two overlapping circles, and okay maybe on the Chinese characters.) As I watched American parents slathering praise on their kids for the lowest of tasks—drawing a squiggle or waving a stick—I came to see that Chinese parents have two things over their Western counterparts: (1) higher dreams for their children, and (2) higher regard for their children in the sense of knowing how much they can take.

Of course, I also wanted Sophia to benefit from the best aspects of American society. I did not want her to end up like one of those weird Asian automatons who feel so much pressure from their parents that they kill themselves after coming in second on the national civil service exam. I wanted her to be well rounded and to have hobbies and activities. Not just any activity, like “crafts,” which can lead nowhere—or even worse, playing the drums, which leads to drugs—but rather a hobby that was
meaningful and highly difficult with the potential for depth and
virtuosity.

And that's where the piano came in.

In 1996, when she was three, Sophia got two new things: her
first piano lesson, and a little sister.