

Who Is the American-born Tiger Mother?

Resisting the Narrative of Generational Decline and the “Bamboo Ceiling”



BACKGROUND

First introduced in Amy Chua’s 2011 book “Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother”, a “tiger mom” became cultural shorthand for any parent that emphasized discipline, hard work, and academic excellence—usually of East or South Asian descent. Chua, a daughter of Chinese immigrants, argues for the case of “generational decline” that foreshadows a gradual “laziness” and “vulgarity” with each successive generation.

Jane Hyun introduced another term, “bamboo ceiling”, in her 2005 book “Breaking the Bamboo Ceiling: Career Strategies for Asians”. Bamboo ceilings are “cultural barriers that play a role in impeding career advancement”. These barriers prevent Asian Americans from management positions due to a lack of perceived leadership potential.

My research explores three main questions:

1. How are American-born Asian mothers resisting or contributing to anxieties about “generational decline”?
2. What do American-born Asian mothers think about “bamboo ceilings” and the challenge they pose (if any) to their children?
3. Ultimately, what kind of person do these mothers aim to raise?

JOYCE KOH, 47, KOREAN AMERICAN

“I PROBABLY COME RIGHT UP REALLY CLOSE TO THE LINE. MAYBE EVERYONE WHO’S A TIGER MOM WOULD SAY THAT.”



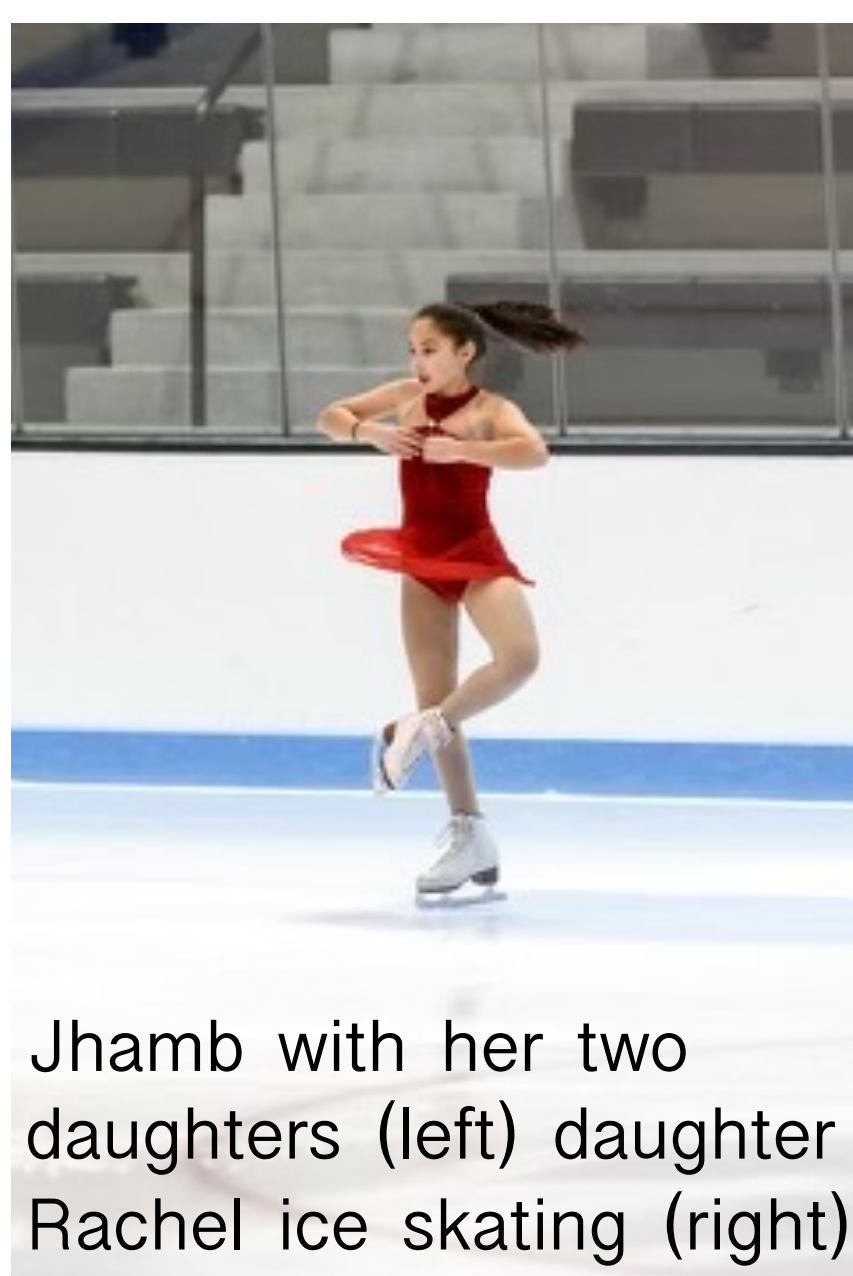
Koh with her daughter Hannah



Hannah performing in a dance recital

KRISTIN JHAMB, 56, HALF INDIAN AND HALF CAUCASIAN

“I’M A TIGER MOM WITH MODIFICATIONS.”



Jhamb with her two daughters (left) daughter Rachel ice skating (right)

METHODS

I interviewed American-born Asian mothers about their knowledge of “tiger moms” and their cultural influences on their parenting philosophies.

“Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother” was my primary text. I also consulted various psychological studies, pieces of literary criticism, and business management magazines.

I interviewed mothers regardless of whether they self-identified as a “tiger mom” or not.

FINDINGS

1. The idea of “generational decline” does not accurately represent the patterns of immigration to the U.S. While these mothers were not as demanding as their immigrant parents, different expectations arose for *their* children, such as self-advocacy and the value of being a good friend.

2. Mothers were inclined to acknowledge the validity of a “bamboo ceiling” but also acknowledged the measures they took to combat such barriers. Interpretations of what leadership potential meant varied. For example, one interpretation included strong time management skills, while another cited knowing “how to ask for what you need.”

3. Mothers described “fiercely independent young women rising to their full potential” as well as knowing how to “finish strong... [play] the long game.”