

# MEIYI'S "MAMA STYLE"

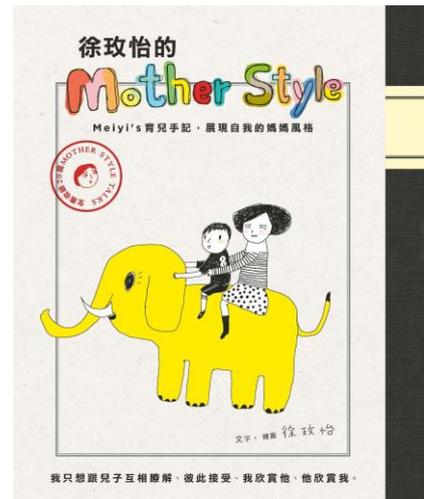
## 徐玫怡的 Mother Style

Taiwan's #1 writing housewife Hsu Meiyi's newest book describes her experiences moving back from France to Taiwan with her French husband and young son. Conflicts abound for this young mother as she settles herself and her son in her parents' home: interacting with his grandparents, finding him a good school, even getting him out of bed all develop into colorful dramas full of excitement, compassion, and blood-boiling frustration! Hsu Meiyi's own illustrations throw the many vicissitudes of motherhood and family life into vivid, sometimes hilarious detail.

Listen up! Taiwan's queen of creative homemaking Hsu Meiyi has stories that will ring true for anyone who has ever been a parent.

### Hsu Meiyi 徐玫怡

Hsu Meiyi is a maven of creative invention. She is a songwriter, an illustrator, DIY expert, columnist, and professional mother. Her 1998 picture book, *Diary Exchanges*, done in collaboration with Chang Miao-Ju, was so successful in Taiwan that the two continued it for eighteen subsequent volumes. *Mama Style* is a collection of Hsu's syndicated column "Toys for the Home," which appears in *Parenting* magazine.



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# MEIYI'S "MAMA STYLE"

By Hsu Meiyi. Translated by Kao Ai-Ying.

## 01 Back in Taiwan

"Come on, say hello."

"What should I say?"

"Hello, thank you!"

(Dad only knows how to say the easiest Chinese expressions)

It wasn't easy bringing my son back to Taiwan, but after seven years away from home, I can finally be with him in a place I know best.

"If you're raising a child, why does it matter where you are?"

## Of Course It Matters!

Readers who haven't lived overseas before probably don't know, but shrewd Taiwanese girls like me who live abroad usually possess excellent foreign language skills and incredible professional capabilities. Otherwise, we end up staying home studying recipes.

"Is staying home so bad?"

"It's very nice! Staying home is good, studying recipes is fun, and being a mother is a blessing. There is nothing wrong with staying home, but when I leave the house, everything is so strange."

I lived like this for several years. As my son slowly grew up, I couldn't escape feelings of regret.

I felt like my son only saw one version of his mother. The other version – the free, localized, liberated side – had remained concealed.

"What do you mean the other "you"? Do you mean the "you" that goes shopping, gossips with your friends, and talks fast?"

"Well, you're right, but that is also very important! He doesn't know the open-minded part of me. He probably thinks his mother uses only simple words in conversation."

I didn't care; I was going to bring my son back to my hometown so he could see and experience the place I loved.

But this kind of decision requires willpower. There was no way that I could get my husband to go to Taiwan. This was a major obstacle right from the start.

"What? You're going back? What about me? I don't want to eat alone! I'm the man of this house!"

"OK, then we won't go. It'll just be harder and harder for A-Fu to learn Chinese."

With my plan already set, I looked on retreat as a prelude to advancement.

That's right: I made learning Chinese my main argument for returning to Taiwan. This persuaded my husband; he had spent many years working abroad, and knew the importance of learning languages.

"What! You never read stories to your child? It's all the rage now."

"It's not that she doesn't read to me. It's just whenever she reads, she falls asleep."

"I'm sorry for not being responsible."

My husband understood the importance of being bilingual. It would be a real pity if a cross-cultural family like ours didn't use it to our advantage.

I didn't want my son to learn Chinese with a bad attitude or for the wrong reasons, like fitting a cultural stereotype, or gaining a competitive edge in a globalized world. If my son didn't like to study, I was prepared to make it like a game.

But kids don't usually do what we expect of them.

"Come on, Mom, give me some homework to do. I want to do homework!"

"Mom wants to be an easygoing parent, not the kind that pressures her children. Why do you love to do homework?"

"A kid who loves writing, but isn't motivated by stories..."

"Come on, let's play with these toys!"

“Let me finish reading the manual...”

“My son loves reading different kinds of manuals.”

It turned out that I have a son who loves words and symbols. He didn't become the boy that I had expected – someone who liked to sing and dance or play around outside. (He is a scholar, not a warrior.) Sometimes, I'd invite him very patiently to come play with his new toys, but he insisted on reading the instruction manual first.

All right, since my son loved language and words, his mother would adapt to his abilities. Let's go back to Taiwan and learn Chinese, learn Taiwanese, and learn English! Let's do it all!

“Son, you are my lifesaver. Now Mom can justifiably go back to Taiwan for two years.”

### **As for Dad...**

“I found a job in China. Now I can visit you on the weekends!”

Dad works hard to earn money to support us. Agreeing to endure the separation shows not only his love but also his willingness to sacrifice.

What about Ah Fu's French Grandma and Grandpa, who love their grandson so much?

“Bye bye, love! We will come visit you at the end of May.”

### **Mother-Styling 1**

#### **First Brother and Second Brother**

A son asked, “Mom (this is always the opening line), Who is older, second brother or first brother? First brother is older, right?”

The quick-witted mother immediately understood the son's question.

“Even though two is bigger than one, in the adult world, one and two have many different meanings.”

## **02 Getting Out The Door in One Piece**

Just like a gas stove, the first spark lights up the biggest flame. But I kept my wits, and decided to turn the dial down low, and keep the fire within smallest inner ring.

This morning I was hurrying to get Fu to preschool nine o'clock. Yet this child has a tendency to retract into a single pursuit just when life is rushed. I had to decide: should I push him or not?

Today, right after he'd finished his breakfast, he took a piece of paper and a pencil and focused all his energy on drawing.

"Hurry! You'll be late. Put on your shoes now."

In the time it took me to shower and change my clothes – less than five minutes – he became completely engrossed in drawing, and wouldn't even answer me.

Did other kids do the same thing, or was it just my dear Fu who liked to dilly-dally? We were already running late and he does this to me. Was I really going to start screaming at my child this early in the day?

Just like a gas stove, the first spark lights up the biggest flame. But I kept my wits, and decided to turn the dial down low, and keep the fire within smallest inner ring.

Alright! Let me see what he is really doing and what is it that makes him live in his own world?

"What are you doing? Wow, how cute! Well, if you're really into this, I guess I'll..."

Should I stop him while he's being creative, or let him be free to do what he's doing? Should I take him to school and let him obey the rules there, or should I give him time to finish doing the things he wants?

"Let this child develop his character. Give him some space!"

"I can't let him get willful. I have to be strict!"

Why is being a mother so difficult? Just leaving the house turned a major dilemma.

So I replied gently: "I'll give you five more minutes! If you can't finish it by then, then you can finish it after school, okay?"

I tried my best to be politically correct and parental, like a fair, benevolent mother. The truth was...

"Mom has very low self esteem!"

“I say it because I always take your side.”

Today was drawing, he had a hundred other tricks up his sleeve. Some days, he'd suddenly turn obedient, but not to the point of putting on his shoes like Mom told him. Instead, he'd become passionately interested in making his bed.

“Go to school!”

“I want to make my bed nicely.”

“You're not really cleaning, you're just wasting time!”

Was it really because he had no awareness of time, or did he simply like to do things slowly? Every time we reach the critical juncture of trying to get out the door, his good-natured mother erupts like a volcano.

“Put on your shoes RIGHT THIS MINUTE!”

Sometimes my son isn't joking around. There are days when, his shoes already on, he turns and says: “I have to go to the bathroom.”

How could I possibly stop him?

Fu: “I need to go to the bathroom.”

Mom: “This is a request no one can refuse.”

Dad: “Go ahead and go.”

Grandma: “Come on, I will take you.”

Grandpa: “Go quickly.”

Teacher: “Go to the bathroom before school. I'm not wiping your butt.”

All right, go ahead and go. I lost again!

I bent to get his shoes off quickly and let him go to the bathroom as fast as he can.

So this morning I gave Fu an extra five minutes to finish his drawing. In reality, five minutes was only enough for him to get a few more lines down on paper, and we continued to bicker for a while after that. He was late for school.

“You're still in pre-school, so being a little bit late isn't a big deal. The teacher won't punish you. But when you get to elementary school, you can't be late, okay? In elementary school you have to be on

time.”

“What am I right now? I’m still in pre-school, not elementary school! Let’s talk about that when it happens.”

“Are you talking back to me?!”

All right, so I had to be tough, and be the one who made the decisions! I wasn’t strict enough, and my rules weren’t firm; that’s why I couldn’t teach my child discipline. I gave him too much room to argue, and he started talking back to me.

“You’re lucky to have a mother who so forgiving and humane, so you better behave.”

“Mom, what does ‘humane’ mean?”

How should I put it? Being a strong, stern parent who makes no space for negotiation is hard. Setting strict rules and consistently following through is also a difficult task. After years of care, I learned what kind of things I couldn’t do. I realized I had to be human, willing to change according to the circumstances, a situation in which I often find myself. I needed to remind myself over and over to be calm and patient, especially when the fire starts burning in my heart.

## **Mother-Styling 2**

### **Parents are Raised By Their Children**

A round trip to Fu’s school and back is a little under two kilometers. Making two trips per day to send him off and pick him up makes three and a half kilometers daily.

I wake up at six in the morning, and stop what I’m doing at four in the afternoon. My schedule is set and I need to follow it.

Life with children, often referred to as a “sacrifice,” is actually a return to a scheduled life. It’s hard work because you’re rebuilding a healthy life.

The parents don’t necessarily “raise” the kids; sometimes, it’s the other way around.

## **Enraged**

When I am angry with my son, I secretly feel happy.

Secretly, I’m thinking: “All right, this is great opportunity to talk. I can resolve this problem before he becomes a rebellious teenager. Want to be shameless, spoiled, or intentionally irritating? Okay, Bring it on!”

Of course, young children and teens have different problems. I can’t resolve issues that haven’t

happened yet, but I can set the rules of engagement before they do.

I never miss an opportunity for a good quarrel or a heated discussion. I enjoy them. These moments are when my emotions and my son's emotions overlap, and it's the best time to build our personal channels of communication. I want to know how angry he can get, what kind of language he uses when he is angry. I want to know where the truth in his story lies, and if I can get him to relate it.

It's a form of enjoyment – the enjoyment of sharing my son's emotions.

When my son and I argue, my perspective allows me to speak my mind directly, and allows him to explain himself openly. As a child begins to understand his mother's intentions, he will know how much of the truth he can tell her. Once the mother understands her son, she knows that he will be as truthful as his mother is merciful.

#### **04 I Am Raising a Boy**

“One more time!”

“I need to tire him out so he'll sleep earlier!”

It's true: for a mother, raising a son is very different from raising a daughter. Though sons and daughters can be equally wonderful (or equally punishing), but the mothers of sons lead different lives than the mothers of daughters.

“The above is not actually true; it's just the *crie de coeur* of a mother of a son.”

To my envy, I once discovered that almost all mothers who published books on parenting and education were mostly mothers of daughters! Even those with sons had daughters as well.

Judy Linton has four daughters; Tsai Bubu has two daughters; Yolanda Chen, Ms. Saffron, and even the author of “Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother,” Amy Chua, all have two daughters!

I highly respect mothers who have written books about parenting. Their methods are brilliant. But I've found their point of commonality: they all have daughters.

#### **Mother of Sons Club**

“Every day is exhausting. Forget about writing books; I haven't even blogged for years.”

“You can't raise a boy like you're trying to raise a girl.”

“Boys are valiant. Girls are gentle.”

Does all of this discussion mean that girls really are easier to educate than boys? That sons are just “strange” – so strange that parents don't have the confidence to say: “My parenting works!”

“It’s ‘cause you are stupid!”

“Excuse me? How many times do I have to tell you not to call people stupid?”

“Ok! Then you’re an idiot!”

“Great. He’s already learning bad language!”

When I stated this conclusion to my aunt, she disagreed. She has three wonderfully obedient sons, and it’s her daughter who has caused her problems. “And what about Lung Ying-Tai’s two sons?” she added. “They even write books together!”

All statistical facts will have exceptions. I can’t restrict myself to evidence I find in my own little world. But I had to disagree with my aunt for taking Lung Ying-Tai’s two sons as examples.

“It’s because there’s a communication gap between you and your son that you’re trying to close by writing letters. That’s not the kind of communication I’m talking about.”

“Ridiculous!”

Girls are usually easier to manage. Teachers in girls’ schools don’t have to be as forceful as teachers in boys’ schools.

Overly strict, forceful parenting can easily become too impersonal and inhumane.

“Why is it that every time I write about child rearing I complain and whine? Can’t you just let me be the good mother who can take care of her child?”

“Mom! Overcoming obstacles makes you better able to help and comfort others.”

I remember one time where I took Fu to a friend’s house to play. They had a whole group of kids his age running around. As things got wild, I scolded them all, saying: “You guys should quiet down and clean up your toys. Jumping around like this is dangerous! Do you hear me?”

The girls that heard me settled down, but the boys seemed completely deaf to me: they kept on horsing around, like they hadn’t heard a word I said.

I grabbed Fu’s hand and told him firmly to be careful. He was completely taken up by craziness and seemed to have no idea what was going on. A friend’s daughter whispered to him knowingly: “Your mom is mad!”

“Your own mother is mad and you need someone else to tell you!”

“Don’t worry! My dad is the same way!”

That was when I realized how much more sensitive and self-aware little girls are. Little boys are like dogs. Even for the obedient ones, you need to yell to get their attention. You have to give them orders and throw bones for them to chase. Training is constant and repetitive.

When Fu hangs out with his cousins on Friday, they have to watch “Rookies’ Diary.”

“Training like this would be so fun!”

“Boys naturally like this kind of stuff!”

“They love to be yelled at and be given orders.”

Mothers of daughters often say: “Are you kidding me? We’re exhausted too. My daughter runs around just as much as a boy does.”

My sister, mother of two sons, gave her opinion: “Boys stay children for longer than girls do! Physically, they’re like animals, but their emotions mature slower than girls’. If the son is naturally stubborn, his parents will have a hard time.”

I didn’t used to exercise, but now I go to the park with my son to play soccer with him. When his friends aren’t around, I go up and down the slide with him. The family that used to go out for walks through the park ends up doing things that take a lot of energy, like playing soccer or running

“Come on, one more time!”

“I have to tire him out so he’ll sleep earlier.”

It’s best for the mother of a son to learn to love physical activity and the outdoors. Keep your thought processes simple and loosen your nerves. Don’t hold onto overly high expectations, or yearn for a refined, easy lifestyle. Just go with the flow and bid goodbye to the past.

Others may ask: what about his father? Why not just ask him to take his son to play ball?

His father – have you not realized? A father is just another son. When he’s happy, he’ll be a father; when he is tired or frustrated, he’s just like another son.

“No matter father or son, I still love you!”

Last week my niece and nephew came to stay at our house over their summer vacation. When there’s an obedient girl in the house, my son is easy to control. He’ll do everything – eat, sleep, and bathe – obediently and without needing to be told twice, because his “older sister” leads the way. So for one week, I got to feel like I was a mother who knew how to raise obedient, sensitive kids.

“You’re just wonderful. You’re always welcome at Auntie’s house !(Although... having to comb a girl’s hair is kind of a pain. Boys don’t ever seem to care!)

“OK! Thank you, Auntie!”

### **Mother-Styling 3**

#### **Secret Language**

In order to keep his father from knowing what he’s thinking, my son started talking to me in Taiwanese. He knows his father is studying Mandarin with a German friend, but he can’t understand Taiwanese, and there are some words Fu would prefer his father couldn’t understand (not that his father would react in any way – he instinctively feels the need to keep some things secret from the man who disciplines him).

This frequently happens in situations when his father demands something of him.

Dad: Sit up straight!

Fu will sit up straight, but he’ll complain in Taiwanese: I know! I know!

Me (in Taiwanese): It’s good that you know.

Dad: Eat your food and stop playing around!

Fu: I am eating! Stop nagging.

I: Alright, enough. Eat your food and Dad will stop.

Dad is clueless. He continues to watch his soccer and pays no attention to our little conversation.

Sometimes, I’m the one who rebels. When Dad’s unwillingness to do things starts to show, it really irks me.

For example, he would my name like he had something important to deal with, and I would stop whatever I was doing.....

Dad: This pizza coupon has expired. I’m going to throw it away, okay?

M: Sure, go ahead! (Do you really need to ask me?)

Then he would give me the flyer.

Me: Oh, so you want me to throw it away?

The expression of the man in front of me would say: Yeah! Aren’t you walking back to the kitchen? The trash can is in the kitchen.

Taking the coupon into the kitchen, I would complain to my son: “Your father called me over just to help him throw this thing away. What a pain.”

Mother and son would then sigh together.

Fu: What can you do? He’s just like that!

Dad walks into the kitchen for ice water, having no idea what we were just saying.

I know it’s not the right thing to do. But knowing another language helps prevent conflict and having another person to listen to can help ease frustration. That’s how humans are – at least, that’s how my son and I are.

Eventually, I’m sure Dad will hear us talking and think: “Weird. I learned Chinese, so why can’t I understand a thing they’re saying?”