

China's 'Eagle Dad' renews debate on strict parenting

By Jimmy Guan and Maxim Duncan

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Aug 30 (Reuters) - "Tiger mother" became a buzzword last year for tough love and parenting in the United States, but in recent months across the Pacific a Chinese "Eagle Dad" has sparked a new furore with his own brand of discipline.

He Liesheng created a storm in February when a video of him making his 4-year-old son run nearly naked in the snow while on holiday in New York went viral on the internet, leading to talk about whether He was teaching toughness or being abusive.

Recently he has encountered similar criticism in the media and on China's Twitter-like microblogs for forcing his son to sail a dinghy single-handed. Some said his parenting style risked leaving lasting scars.

In 2011, the book "Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother" by Chinese American Amy Chua similarly prompted furious debate about ultra-strict parenting. Chua has said she meant much of the book to be parody.

But He, who comes from Eastern China and has been branded "Eagle Dad" by the Chinese media, has said his extreme parenting is serious and meant to prepare his son for the future.

"The big eagle pushes the young eagle off the cliff. As it falls, the little eagle has no choice but to spread its wings, and learns how to fly," He explained, quoting a Chinese proverb.

He also brushed off comparisons with Chua.

"She educated her children by threatening and scolding them," He said. "I would never do that. I use the environment, like the waves, to do it instead."

But Jessica Ho, director of Against Child Abuse in Hong Kong, said the video made her feel uncomfortable.

"At his age these activities are not appropriate ... From the clip, it is clear he is very scared," she said. "The father is very achievement-oriented and the psychological well-being of the child may have been overlooked.

"The father says he wants to push the boy to his limits and that if the boy is pushed off the cliff, he will fly - but if he hasn't yet grown wings, how can he?"

On Sina Weibo, one of China's hugely-popular microblogs, indignation far outweighs support. "This 'Eagle Dad' is clearly mentally unstable after a dark childhood. Poor little Duoduo," wrote MumaoXX.

RELUCTANT SAILOR

In February, the Eagle Dad's video showed tiny He Yide - known as Duoduo - in his underpants doing push-ups, crying and begging his father to hug him in temperatures well below zero.

Now, He is training Duoduo to sail, hoping the rough sea and natural elements of the ocean will strengthen his young son.

"I think that after Duoduo has been through around half a year of this kind of training, he should have the ability to sail out into the open sea, with the coach nearby," He said as he watched the small boy tack and jibe with obvious reluctance around a marina in the coastal city of Qingdao.

"He is wearing a life-jacket, and he can swim, so although there is still danger, it is greatly reduced."

Duoduo was born prematurely at seven months, and suffered from illnesses such jaundice and pneumonia, He said, citing this fragility as a major reason for his strong parenting style.

He also is keen to see that Duoduo is not pampered like many only children born under China's one-child policy.

But Duoduo is unconvinced. "Sailing is a bit boring," he said with a frown, when prompted by his dad. "It's really slow."

He has taken full advantage of his "Eagle Dad" moniker, promoting what he calls "eagle education" and even writing a book, "I am Eagle Dad."

Anita Chan, an expert in child education in Hong Kong, said if a child does not have the talent and is forced him to do these things, "there will come a day when he will defy and resist".

"Even if the child forces himself to do as you say, that would result in a personality that is distorted and extreme." (Reporting by Max Duncan and Jimmy Guan, additional reporting by Tan Ee Lyn in Hong Kong, editing by Elaine Lies, Bob Tourtellotte and Jeremy Laurence)

Reference: <http://in.reuters.com/article/2012/08/30/china-dad-idINL4E8JS02V20120830>

