

# Asian Americans: Achievements Mask Challenges

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*This article focuses on the existence of the “glass ceiling” to upward career mobility experienced by Asian Americans in professional occupations. It questions the recent portrayal of Asian Americans as a “model minority” who have “made it” in America. Instead, it shows that despite their good record of achievement, Asian Americans do not reach a level at which they can participate in policy and decision-making responsibilities. This article builds on the emerging glass ceiling literature by Asian American scholars, while examining social/cultural complexities, peculiarities, and nuances in private companies, government agencies, and institutions of higher education.*

## Introduction

In recent years, the concept of cultural diversity in the workplace has gained popularity and become a desirable goal in itself. Yet, organizational members accept cultural diversity to a much lesser extent than the ideal portrayed in the scholarly literature. The case of Asian Americans — officially classified as Asian and Pacific Islanders or Asian Pacific Americans — in the American professional labour force shows both prejudice and discrimination on the one hand, and persistence and triumph on the other hand. Asian Americans have achieved notable success in educational attainment, employment, and income; thus, they more closely resemble the non-Hispanic White lot than the other minorities. In recent years, Asian Americans have acquired the image of being a “model” for other minorities. Despite such achievements, Asian Americans are far from achieving parity in most sectors of the American economy, such as public service, private enterprise, and educational institutions. In this respect, they are more similar to minorities than to non-Hispanic Whites.

Most research on professional Asian Americans has either focused on a “brain drain” in Asian countries or on the effects of skilled labourers on the American economy (see Borjas, 1990). Others have focused on “ethnic enclaves” (see Ng, 1998). Recently, some scholars, especially those from Asian backgrounds, have begun to examine the “glass ceiling” faced by Asian Americans (see Wong and Nagsawa, 1991; Asian Americans for Community Involvement, 1993; Wu, 1997; Tang, 2000; Woo, 2000; Varma, 2002). The mainstream literature on the glass ceiling tends to concentrate on gender rather than on race segregation. When mainstream scholars do focus on race segregation, Asian Americans are rarely included. This is mostly

because in professional occupations, Asian Americans are considered an over-represented minority while Afro-Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans are considered under-represented minorities.

This article discusses cultural diversity in the American labour force by examining both the successes of and barriers to Asian Americans. The article presents a brief history of migration to show a long history of discrimination in the United States. It provides a general profile of Asian Americans in the United States, which has led to their portrayal from “yellow and brown hordes” to “model minority.” The article shows the existence of the glass ceiling, that is, Asian Americans failure to attain top managerial positions in private companies, government agencies, and institutions of higher education. It also examines the reasons behind the glass ceiling. The article concludes by making recommendations for improving cultural diversity initiatives in organizations that employ Asian Americans.

## **Immigration and the Asian American Population**

While the arrival of the first Asians (Filipinos) to the United States dates back to the mid-eighteenth century, Asians were barred from entering the country until 1965 (Cafferty, Chiswick, Greeley and Sullivan, 1984). To compensate for the shortage of labour in the mid-nineteenth century, “Chinese coolies” were brought in on a large scale to work in gold mines, on railroad construction, and on sugarcane plantations (Lee, 1976). After the completion of much of the railroad work, the Chinese increasingly became the targets of racial attacks and discriminatory practices. This culminated in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which virtually barred all immigration from China. As replacements for the Chinese coolies, Japanese labourers were brought in large numbers to Hawaii around 1890 to work on sugarcane plantations (Conroy, 1953). Like the Chinese, the Japanese faced many similar restrictions. This resulted in the 1907 Gentlemen’s Agreement, through which Japan agreed to stop issuing passports to Japanese workers for entry into America. Other Asian groups, such as the Koreans and Filipinos, eventually followed the Chinese and Japanese into the United States.

After World War II, the United States experienced a major economic boom and began to change its immigration policies. The 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act organized a variety of statutes governing immigration law in one location. It set an annual quota of 100 for each Asian country. In order to rebuild America, however, Presidents Kennedy and Johnson abolished the restrictive national origin quota and preference system passed only a decade earlier. The 1965 Immigration Act set the numerical limit of 290,000 worldwide and 20,000 per country per year. In addition to sponsorship of immediate family members, American immigration shifted to professionals, scientists, and artists of exceptional ability.

Faced with the shortage of skilled labourers and international competitiveness, the United States introduced temporary work or H-1B visas in 1990. Under the 1990 Immigration Act, 65,000 foreign skilled workers could enter the United States every year for temporary employment up to six years. In 1998, however, high-technology companies exhausted the quota of 65,000 before the end of the fiscal year, which resulted in them undertaking a vigorous lobby. Under the American Competitiveness and Workforce Improvement Act of 1998, Congress increased the number of temporary H-1B visas to 115,000 for 1999 and 2000. Again, the expanded quota was used up six months into the year 2000. Legislation was subsequently passed in 2000 to increase the limit to 195,000 per year for the next three years.

Beginning in the early 1970s, immigration from Asian countries started to skyrocket. Until 1965, the Asian American population was estimated at only one million people. By 1980, however, it had more than tripled, reaching 3.8 million; and by 1990, it was 7.3 million. Approximately 12 million or 4.2 percent of Asian Americans currently live in the United States. This number includes 10.2 million or 3.6 percent who reported their background as only Asian, and 1.7 million people or 0.6 percent who reported their background as Asian as well as one or more other race. There are 2.7 million Chinese, 2.4 million Filipinos, 1.9 million Asian Indians, 1.2 million Vietnamese, 1.2 million Koreans, and 1.1 million Japanese in the country (Barnes & Bennett, 2002:3, 9). Almost two-thirds of Asian Americans are foreign-born (Bennett, 2002:1).

Since 1965, most Asian Americans have been coming to the United States to obtain or finish their graduate education in science and engineering, which has led them to obtain employment in the country, and then a permanent stay. The 1992 Chinese Student Protection Act has made it possible for Chinese students in the United States to stay there permanently. Many Asians have been coming to the United States on family sponsorship. Since 1990, many have been entering the United States directly in order to work on a temporary work permit visa. This may be later converted to a permanent visa. Some Asian Americans, especially those from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos have been entering the United States as refugees.

Why do Asian Americans migrate to the United States? Migration studies generally focus on the supply factors, such as higher wages, broader employment opportunities, better working conditions, and more attractive lifestyles in the North in contrast to the South (Arnold & Shah, 1992). Many Asian countries continue to face economic and social problems. Yet, they have nurtured educational and economic infrastructure for decades, which has resulted in an oversupply of skilled workers. Unable to find decent employment in their home countries, many Asians move to the United States.

Yet, the supply factors alone are not the sole determinants of Asian migration. The oversupply of Asians is adjusted by the demand factors in

the United States. Despite recruitment and education funding, there is a shortage of skilled labour in the United States (Finn & Baker, 1993; U.S. Department of Commerce, 1997). Moreover, the United States is facing competition from European as well as some Asian countries (for example, Taiwan and South Korea) for Asia's best brains (Cao, 1996). Shortage of skilled labour is prevalent in many parts of the world. Many countries are competing with one another for skilled labour in much the same way they had previously competed for raw materials (Glanz, 2001).

While immigration from Asia has been the major factor in the growth of the Asian population as a whole in the United States, the majority of Pacific Islanders are native to this land (less than 15 percent of the Pacific Islander population is foreign-born). Pacific Islanders constitute a small proportion — about 5 percent of all Asian Americans (U.S. Census of Population and Housing, 2001:1). As a result, they are often lost within the Asian American population.

## **Immigrant Ethos**

In many respects, Asian Americans have done well both socially and economically. Despite having had to face laws that forbade them from emigrating from Asia, and despite the fact that 100,000 Japanese Americans were forced into detention in internment camps during World War II, Asian Americans have achieved “the American dream” by attaining good education, occupations, incomes, and lifestyles (Rose, 1985). Popular but respected American media such as *CBS 60 Minutes*, *NBC Nightly News*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, *U.S. News and World Reports*, *Fortune*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post* have portrayed Asian Americans as a “model” for other minorities. Many journalists and employers have been impressed by the Asian Americans ethics of hard work, their ability to overcome past discrimination, and their not having resorted to violence against Americans in order to succeed in the United States. It has been proposed that Asian Americans derive their social and economic success from their “immigrant ethos”, which results in a great emphasis on and effort in education.

### *Attaining High Educational Levels*

Generally, Asian Americans place very high value on education and learning. They believe that the attainment of higher education is the key to job opportunities and career mobility. It is, therefore, no surprise that educational achievements for Asian Americans are higher than for the general American population. Asian Americans are more likely to have completed a four-year high school and earned a college degree as compared with the general American population. For instance, among people 25 years and older in 1999, 42 percent of Asian Americans had a bachelor's degree or

higher, compared with 28 percent of non-Hispanic Whites, 16 percent of Afro-Americans, and 10 percent of Hispanics (Humes and McKinnon, 2000:3; McKinnon and Humes, 2000:3; Therrien and Ramirez, 2001:4). Moreover, the enrolment level of Asian Americans in higher education, especially in science and engineering courses, continues to increase. Seventy-eight percent of Asian Americans from the 1999 high school graduating class went on immediately to college; this is the highest proportion for any race group in the United States (Jamieson, 2001). In 1998, Asian American enrolment in elite universities was: 39 percent for Berkeley, 38 percent for UCLA, 28 percent for MIT, 22 percent for Stanford, 19 percent for Harvard, 17 percent for Yale, 11 percent for Michigan, and 10 percent for Virginia (Fletcher, 2000:A03).

Most importantly, the number of doctoral degrees earned by foreign-born Asian Americans in science and engineering courses has increased much faster than those earned by American citizens. For instance, from 1986 to 1999, Asian foreign students have earned over 57,000 doctoral degrees in science and engineering courses whereas American citizens have earned about 173,000 in the same period. In 1999, over 5,000 doctoral degrees in science and engineering subjects were earned by American citizens and over 11,000 by foreign students, half of which went to Asian students (National Science Foundation, 2002:2, 30). This is in contrast with Afro-Americans and Hispanics, who largely earn baccalaureates as their highest degree (McKinnon and Humes, 2000:3; Therrien and Ramirez, 2000:3). A large majority of doctoral recipients from many Asian countries, particularly China and India, often stay in the United States for employment, which leads to a permanent stay in the country (Johnson, 1998; Finn, 1999).

### *Joining the Professional Labour Force*

Asian American men and women have a high rate of labour participation. In 1999, there was little statistical difference in the proportion participating in the civilian labour force for Asian American and non-Hispanic White men (74 percent each) and women (60 percent each) (Humes and McKinnon, 2000:4). Among Asian Americans, more men than women participate in the civilian labour force. The unemployment rate for Asian Americans in 1999 was similar to that for non-Hispanic Whites (4 percent); but lower than the unemployment rate for Afro-Americans (9 percent) and Hispanics (7 percent) (Humes and McKinnon, 2000:4; McKinnon and Humes, 2000:4; Therrien and Ramirez, 2000:3).

Among employed civilians, Asian Americans are concentrated in managerial and professional specialty occupations as managers, executives, administrators, physicians, nurses, lawyers, architects, engineers, scientists, and teachers. For instance, in 1999, 37 percent of Asian Americans, com-

pared with 33 percent of non-Hispanic Whites, were concentrated in these occupations. Among men, a slightly higher proportion of Asian Americans (37 percent) than non-Hispanic Whites (32 percent) worked in such professions. There was little statistical difference among women (36 percent as compared with 35 percent) (Humes and McKinnon, 2000:4). Asian Americans are less likely to be employed as technicians, sales workers, craft workers, and labourers. Afro-Americans and Hispanics, on the other hand, are more likely to be operators, fabricators, and labourers (McKinnon and Humes, 2000; Therrien and Ramirez, 2001).

Most importantly, Asian Americans make up a higher proportion of scientists and engineers. This is in contrast with other minorities, which represent a much smaller proportion of scientists and engineers. For instance, Asian Americans make up 4 percent of the American population but constitute 11 percent of all scientists and engineers. Afro-Americans (12 percent), Hispanics (11 percent), and Native Americans (one percent) as a group make up 24 percent of the U.S. population, but only seven percent of the total science and engineering labour force. Between 1993 and 1999, the proportion of Asian Americans in the science and engineering workforce increased by about two percent, whereas the proportion of Afro-Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans remained virtually unchanged (National Science Foundation, 2002:3,15).

Asian Americans, unlike non-Hispanic White and other minorities, prefer to work for industry than for government. For instance, among employed scientists and engineers in 1999, 70 percent of Asian Americans, compared with 58 percent of Afro-Americans, 60 percent of Hispanics, 56 percent of Native Americans, and 64 percent of non-Hispanic Whites, were employed in for-profit businesses or industries. In contrast, for the same period, a lower proportion of Asian American scientists and engineers (12 percent) were employed in the government, whereas a much higher proportion of Afro-American (20 percent), Hispanic (15 percent), Native American (18 percent), and non-Hispanic White (12 percent) scientists and engineers were employed in the government sector (National Science Foundation, 2002:3,16).

### *Earning High Incomes*

As a reflection of higher levels of academic credentials and professional occupations, especially in the private sector, Asian Americans tend to have the highest household income among the nation's different groups by race. The 1999 median income for Asian Americans (\$51,205) was the highest ever recorded, compared with non-Hispanic White (\$44,366), Afro-American (\$27,910), and Hispanic (\$30,735) households. The three-year average (1997–1999) median household income for Native Americans was \$30,784 (HHES Information Staff, 2000:2). In 1998, about 33 percent of Asian

American and 29 percent of non-Hispanic White families had incomes of \$75,000 or more (Humes and McKinnon, 2000:4).

The overall poverty rate for Asian Americans is somewhat higher than for non-Hispanic Whites, but lower than for the other minorities. The poverty rate for Asian Americans decreased to 10.7 percent in 1999 from 12.5 percent in 1998. Afro-Americans and Hispanics also experienced a decline in the poverty rate for the same year. However, in 1999, the poverty rate for Afro-Americans and Hispanics remained at a high 23.6 percent and 22.8 percent, respectively. The three-year average (1997–1999) poverty rate for Native Americans was 25.9 percent. The poverty rate for non-Hispanic Whites was at a low 7.7 percent in 1999 (HHES Information Staff, 2000:1–2). The average poverty threshold for a family of four in 1999 was \$17,029 in annual income.

## The Myth of the Model Minority

Historically, Asian Americans have been perceived as “yellow and brown hordes” that filled the economic niches the Whites did not want in factories and farms. Only recently have Asian Americans been viewed as a “model” for other minorities. Political commentator Dinesh D’Souza has suggested that Afro-Americans should emulate the actions and ethos of Asian Americans. Although aggregate statistics, as pointed out in the previous section, suggest that Asian Americans have performed as well as non-Hispanic Whites and outperformed other minorities, they do not tell the whole story. The reality of Asian Americans is much more complicated than what the image of a model minority suggests.

First, there are variations among Asian Americans. The term “Asian American” refers to those who trace their roots to the Asian continent or the Pacific Islands. Though grouped together as a single category, the make-up of Asian Americans is rather complex. They incorporate more than 50 different groups who differ in their language, religion, culture, history, the duration of their presence in the United States, educational level, economic status, and so forth. Generally, the Asian American category includes Chinese, Filipinos, Asian Indians, Vietnamese, Koreans, Japanese, Cambodians, Hawaiians, Guamanians, Samoans, and others from Asia and the Pacific Islands. The numbers within the Asian American population simply show that they are not all alike. Not all Asian Americans have made it in America.

Although the educational achievements of Asian Americans are high, they vary widely by group. The proportion that completes high school is higher for Asian Indians, Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans but lower for Cambodians, Laotians, and the Hmong (Kim, 1997). A smaller percentage of those from the Pacific Islands are college graduates. The illiteracy rate is also high among Southeast Asian Americans. Doctoral degrees obtained by foreign-born Asian Americans do not reflect the same education mobility for Asian

Americans born in the United States (Tang, 2000). Similarly, Asian Indians, Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans fare better in income and employment, whereas Cambodians, Laotians, the Hmong, and Pacific Islanders fare far worse. Many recent immigrants from Southeast Asia are refugees and live below the poverty level (American Council on Education, 1997).

Similarly, Asian Americans' economic success does not take into account their geographic concentration in high-income and high-cost areas, as well as the large number of wage earners per family. Over 50 percent of Asian Americans live in six metropolitan areas: Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, Honolulu, Baltimore/Washington, and Chicago (Barnes and Bennett, 2002:7). In these areas, incomes and the cost of living are very high. Therefore, if many Asian Americans earn more, they also have to spend more. Also, Asian Americans live in larger family households than other groups in the labour force (Humes and McKinnon, 2000). Higher household incomes for Asian Americans merely reflect more wage earners per family than in other groups. Per capita income, on the other hand, shows that Asian Americans earn less than non-Hispanic Whites, but more than Afro-Americans and Hispanics. For instance, in 1998, the per capita income for non-Hispanic Whites was \$21,394 whereas it was \$18,709 for Asian Americans. Figures for Afro-Americans and Hispanic were \$12,957 and \$11,434, respectively (Le, 2003:1). In other words, income comparisons with other groups are somewhat inconclusive. Further, the image of Asian Americans as an economic success diverts attention away from those within the population who need financial help.

Asian Americans have achieved higher levels of education in order to succeed in American society. Yet, they trail behind non-Hispanic Whites even though they have more years of education. Their returns on education — how much more money a person earns with each additional year of schooling completed — show that for each additional year of education attained, a non-Hispanic White earns another \$522. In contrast, returns on each additional year of education for Japanese Americans is \$438 and for Chinese Americans, \$320 (Le, 2003:1). In other words, Asian Americans have to obtain more years of education in order to earn the same amount of money as non-Hispanic Whites with less education.

Most importantly, despite their very high representation as professionals, Asian Americans are significantly under-represented in positions of authority, leadership, and decision-making in the private sector, government agencies, and institutions of higher education (Wong and Nagsawa, 1991; Asian Americans for Community Involvement, 1993; Watanabe, 1995; Wu, 1997; Tang, 2000; Woo, 2000; Varma, 2002). In this regard, Asian Americans are more similar to Afro-Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans than to non-Hispanic Whites.

In the government sector, fewer Asian Americans, as compared with non-Hispanic Whites, undertake management as their primary or secondary

activity. Former Commissioner of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), Joy Cheria, has noted: "In public employment at all levels of government, Asian Americans are employed as officials and administrators at the rate of only one-third of their representation in professional jobs with the same employers" (Woo, 2000:60). For instance, in 1998, the average General Schedule or GS grade for Asian Americans in the federal civilian labour force was 9.3, which is equivalent to the 9.4 for all federal employees. Yet, Asian Americans were under-represented in high-level administrative supervisory positions in grades 14–15 and above (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 1998). At Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in 2000, nearly one in 10 members of the professional staff was Asian American, but only one in 25 was a manager. Similarly, at Los Alamos National Laboratory in 2000, one in 25 professionals was of Asian heritage, but just one of 99 top managers at the laboratory was Asian American (Lawler, 2000:1075; Locke, 2000:3; Glanz, 2000:B5). Age differences do not explain such variations in managerial responsibility.

The story is not different in institutions of higher education in which Asian Americans are over-represented among faculty. For instance, in 1997, Asian Americans comprised over 12 percent of science and engineering faculty in universities and four-year colleges (Kang, 1999:52). Yet, they seldom hold the positions of department chairs, deans, or provosts. Only in the early 1990s did Chang-Lin Tien of the University of California Berkeley become the first Asian American university chancellor (Tang, 2000). Similarly, till the late 1980s, the National Scientific Board of the National Science Foundation did not have a single Asian American on it (Philipkoski, 2000). There are so many Asian Americans who still hold post-doctoral appointments — a temporary position awarded in academia, industry, or government for the primary purpose of obtaining additional research training — even in their 40s. In 1997, only 37 percent of Asian American faculty in science and engineering departments in four-year colleges or universities, as compared with 57 percent of non-Hispanic Whites, were tenured. Similarly, 37 percent of Asian Americans, as compared with 47 percent of non-Hispanic Whites, were full professors (National Science Foundation, 2000:60).

In the corporate world — a sector preferred by Asian Americans — they are under-represented as CEOs, board members, and high-level managers. They are less likely than non-Hispanic Whites to be engaged primarily or secondarily in the management tier. Furthermore, the median number of direct and indirect subordinates is lower for Asian Americans than for non-Hispanic Whites. For example, Asian Indians, Chinese, and non-Hispanic Whites account for 45 percent, 41 percent, and 27 percent of Silicon Valley's professionals, respectively. However, only 15 percent of Asian Indians and 16 percent of Chinese are managers, as compared to 26 percent of non-Hispanic Whites (Saxenian, 1999:table 2.5). A survey of Fortune 1000 industries and Fortune 500 service industries in the mid-1990s dis-

closed that only 0.3 percent of senior-level managers were Asian Americans (Wu, 1997:166). Among 35- to 44-year-old scientists and engineers in the private sector in 1997, 33 percent of Asian Americans, compared with 48 percent of non-Hispanic Whites, were engaged in management or administration in industry (National Science Foundation, 2000:61).

The proponents of the model minority thesis believe that the glass ceiling is a diminishing problem for Asian Americans. If Asian Americans are qualified, they can make it to the top regardless of their ethnicity or race. However, this section has shown that in most sectors of employment, qualified Asian Americans continue to face artificial barriers that block their advancement into decision-making positions within their organizations.

## **Why Is the Glass Ceiling Impenetrable?**

The Federal Glass Ceiling Commission (1995:7–8) has identified three levels of artificial barriers to the advancement of women and minorities:

1. Societal barriers, outside the direct control of businesses
  - The supply barrier related to educational opportunity and attainment.
  - The difference barrier as manifested in conscious and unconscious stereotyping, prejudice, and bias related to gender, race, and ethnicity.
2. Internal structural barriers within direct control of businesses
  - Outreach and recruitment practices that do not seek out or reach or recruit minorities and women.
  - Corporate climates that alienate and isolate minorities and women.
  - Pipeline barriers that directly affect opportunities for advancement.
    - Initial placement and clustering in staff jobs or in highly technical and professional jobs which are not on the career track to the top.
    - Lack of mentoring.
    - Lack of management training.
    - Lack of opportunities for career development, tailored training, and rotational job assignments that are on the revenue-producing side of the business.
    - Little or no access to critically develop mental assignments, such as memberships on highly visible task forces and committees.
    - Special or different standards for performance evaluations.
    - Biased rating and testing systems.
    - Little or no access to informal networks of communication.
    - Counterproductive behaviour and harassment by colleagues.
3. Governmental barriers
  - Lack of vigorous, consistent monitoring and law enforcement.
  - Weaknesses in the formulation and collection of employment-related data, which makes it difficult to ascertain the status of groups at the managerial level and to disaggregate the data.

- Inadequate reporting and dissemination of information relevant to glass ceiling issues.

Unlike Afro-Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans, who may not apply to organizations that are interested in hiring them, the recruitment of Asian Americans does not present a problem. Most organizations know where to find Asian Americans for professional positions. Once they have been recruited though, their differences to non-Hispanic Whites and prevalent organizational values inadvertently create barriers for advancement to Asian Americans. As a result, Asian Americans languish in non-managerial jobs. Nonetheless, there is a tendency to ignore structural conditions or institutional policies that create obstacles for those in the workforce, and instead find problems among Asian Americans for their lack of representation in managerial positions. For instance, Christopher Daniel claims differences in linguistic abilities, cultural backgrounds, and occupational choices between Asian Americans and non-Hispanic Whites, rather than job discrimination, explain many statistical disparities (Lewis and Kim, 1997).

Generally, the impenetrable glass ceiling is attributed to language difficulties and poor communication styles of Asian Americans. While education is one of the more important factors in labour market success, English-speaking ability also plays a key role (U.S. Department of Labor, 2000). English is a first language only for United States-born Asian Americans; for others, English is their second language. A report from the American Council on Education (1997:2) found that almost 50 percent of Asian Americans did not speak English “very well” and 35 percent, especially among the Cambodians, Hmong, and Laotians, lived in linguistically isolated settings. Some Asian Americans are so concerned about their mastery of the nuances of English that they let others present their work to upper management (Cox, 1993).

With their limited proficiency in English, Asian Americans may not be able to climb to high-ranking managerial positions. However, not all Asian Americans lack linguistic abilities and communication styles. For instance, most Asian Indians in the professional workforce are educated in a distinctly British educational system and are proficient in English. Similarly, many Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Americans are of the seventh or eighth generation and have been educated in the American school system. They speak English with an American rather than an Asian accent. Still, the occupational status of Asian Americans with a high level of education and good grasp of English remains lower than that for non-Hispanic Whites with similar qualifications. The Federal Glass Ceiling Commission (1995) found that foreign-born Whites with poor language and communication skills do not face problems in promotion and mobility. In other words, “language capital” is required of Asian Americans, and not of foreign-born Whites employees. This suggests the existence of stereotypes and bias against Asian Americans.

A related argument has been that the relatively lower representation of Asian Americans in managerial positions might be due to a bias among them toward technical, as opposed to management, positions. Some Asian Americans may view their social skills as being inadequate in Anglo-dominated settings compared to their non-Hispanic White counterparts. Other Asian Americans may not be familiar with American culture and colloquial English. As a result, they tend to converge in professions where technical and quantitative skills, rather than colloquial English and communication skills, are the primary requisites.

This, however, does not mean that Asian Americans view themselves as technically competent and administratively incompetent. Surveys among Asian Americans show that they are interested in managerial positions, but are not optimistic about their chances of attaining them (Wong and Nagasawa, 1991; Asian Americans for Community Involvement, 1993). If Asian Americans feel that they will be denied promotions, they are less likely to apply for managerial positions and more likely to work in technical positions (Tang, 2000). Furthermore, different occupational choices do not explain lower grades, rank, and promotion.

When language, communication, and preference for technical over managerial positions are not the issues underlying promotion for Asian Americans, cultural differences are highlighted. Indeed, there are cultural differences between Asian and Western societies. While Western culture is viewed as promoting achievement, individualism, and equality, Asian culture is seen to value ascribed status, collectivism, and hierarchy (Alder, 1997; Trompenaars, 1998). Modern Western cultural values are viewed in direct contradiction with traditional Asian cultural values. For instance, Asian Americans are perceived as being hard-working, highly educated, low-key, patient, polite, passive, non-confrontational, law-abiding, detail-oriented, as allowing their work to speak for itself, and as being good at science and mathematics. Such perceptions have enabled Asian Americans to enter the professional workforce in the United States. These same perceptions, however, also work against them; Asian American employees are viewed as unsuitable for the decision-making roles and leadership qualities demanded by American organizations.

Generally, successful managers in American organizations ought to employ people with: (1) technical skills — the ability to perform specific functions such as accounting, programming, engineering, planning, organizing, and data analysis; (2) human relations skills — the ability to understand, effectively interact, and communicate with personnel at all levels; and (3) conceptual skills — the ability to see the big picture, relate parts to the whole, identify problems, make decisions, and generate strategic planning (Wu, 1997:174). Asian Americans are seen as good “technicians” who can successfully perform repetitive tasks given to them in advance; they are not seen as leadership material, as people who can perform unpredictable tasks and make quick decisions that demand risk-taking.

It should be noted that cultural explanations tend to confirm popular stereotypes and assume that whatever applies to a society necessarily applies to the individual. Further, national cultural categories tend to be dichotomous; in reality, they are likely to show contradictions. For instance, many professional Asian Americans tend to be Westernized. Many are trained in American graduate schools and, thus, are in tune with the American system. Still, one important question is whether Asian Americans are prepared for leadership positions in American organizations. As pointed out earlier, Asian Americans, as a whole, are above the national average in terms of educational achievement. As a group, they are over-represented as professionals in many occupations. Most managers tend to come from the professional workforce. There is no reason why Asian Americans should not emerge from this same professional category.

In frustration at the lack of prospects for promotion, some Asian Americans have left the workplace to start their own businesses. According to the Dun and Bradstreet database of technology firms started in 1980, nearly 24 percent of firms in Silicon Valley in 1998 had Chinese or Indian Americans as executives. In the same year, these companies collectively accounted for over \$16.8 billion in sales and provided 58,282 jobs. These numbers understate the scale of Asian American leadership in this region, because many firms started by Chinese and Indian Americans but with non-Asian CEOs are not included in the count. In Silicon Valley, venture capital financing has often been tied to the requirement that non-Asian senior executives be hired (Saxenian, 1999: tables 2.6, 2.7). There are several high-profile Asian Americans with success in business: David Lam, Narpat Bhandari, Lester Lee, Vinod Khosla, Suhas Patil, Steve Tran, Quang Pham, Tung Dung, David Lee, Rajendra Singh, N.D. Reddy, Winston Chen, and Wen Chen.

Colour-based differences, a history of racism, bias, prejudice, and stereotypes are an inescapable barrier even though people seldom like to discuss them. The unarticulated but ever-present notion is that Asian Americans are “foreigners”, “outsiders”, or “strangers”; thus, they are different from non-Hispanic Whites (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995; Wu, 1997; Glanz, 2000; Lawler, 2000; Woo, 2000; Stober and Hoffman, 2001). The image of a non-White foreigner does not appeal to many organizations or to the American public. Asian Americans are accepted when they direct and supervise other Asian Americans, but not when they do so with non-Hispanic White co-workers and managers (Tang, 2000). As a result, Asian Americans are generally promoted in order to supervise offices in Asia. Such liaison jobs link the private sector to Asian customer and the public sector with the Asian community, but they also channel Asian Americans into “ethnized” jobs.

Even when many managers agree to promote Asian Americans to top levels, they seldom actively seek them out or are reluctant to do so. The “old boys’ networks” that are prevalent in many organizations simply

exclude Asian Americans for positions in upper management. Getting ahead in professional occupations depends on both “human capital” (what you know) and “social capital” (who you know) (Etzkowitz, Kemelgor and Uzzi, 2000). Many managers prefer to interact with those who share similar backgrounds. Since Asian Americans are perceived as being different, they are overlooked when high-ranking positions need to be filled (Tang, 2000; Woo, 2000). The Federal Glass Ceiling Commission (1995) found that CEOs rarely think of Asian Americans when prospecting for managerial candidates.

When Asian Americans do receive promotions to administrative and management positions, they are seldom given formal training. Without this, Asian Americans may face several problems in successfully fulfilling managerial tasks. If they subsequently fail in their positions, it is taken as further proof of their inability to be managers.

The end result is that the promotion sequence in many American organizations remains a non-Hispanic White sequence. Due to the difference barrier as manifested in accent, communication style, appearance, stereotyping, prejudice, and bias related to race/ethnicity, employers rank non-Hispanic Whites ahead of Asian Americans in the professional labour force. Once Asian Americans are segregated from professional occupations, non-Hispanic Whites compete freely among one another for high-ranking supervisory positions.

Finally, Asian Americans face governmental barriers because only the public sector has the resources to gather national, regional, and state data on education, status in the workforce, and compensation. The categories used by governmental data collection agencies do not provide the information that is needed to track and accurately monitor the progress of Asian Americans. Lack of information on Asian Americans in general, and on different Asian American groups in particular, contributes to many stereotypes (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995).

## **Conclusion: What Can Be Done?**

Asian Americans appear to have succeeded in the American labour force because the statistics of their success resemble those of non-Hispanic Whites much more than they do the other minority groups. Yet, Asian Americans still face an impenetrable glass ceiling for promotion to high-ranking positions, as do the other minority groups. Asian Americans are largely allowed to work in those occupations that non-Hispanic Whites do not have to compete with them for. Asian Americans face a number of structural barriers, such as language deficiencies, racial prejudice, the old boys’ network, lack of mentoring and management training, and limited access to informal networks of communication.

The image of the model minority needs to be corrected. Such an image

conceals the problems that many Asian Americans continue to face. Politically, the image of the model minority shifts the blame to other minorities for their under-representation in industry. The hidden message is that if Asian Americans, against all odds, can succeed in American society, then why not the other minorities? In other words, Afro-Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans should follow the path taken by Asian Americans instead of making demands for organizational or government assistance to improve their status.

A strategic plan to recruit Asian Americans in decision-making positions needs to be developed and implemented. Few programmes have been established specifically to address the needs of Asian Americans; affirmative programmes are geared towards Afro-Americans and Hispanics. The strategic plan should have measures that remove the influence of stereotypes in prospects for promotion among Asian Americans. The role of managers, supervisors, or administrators needs to be broadened and made sensitive to the great diversity in the American labour force. Yet, instead of emphasizing cultural differences between Asian Americans and others to create sensitivity to the former, common elements need to be highlighted. This will unify employees.

Training programmes must include language and communication components. Asian Americans have to overcome anxiety about their accented English, and Americans need to be sensitive to different communication styles. Organizations should offer tuition credits and reimbursements for English language courses.

Management training and mentoring needs to be made available to those who need it in order to move beyond the technical class. If Asian Americans need to learn to be aggressive, assertive, and outspoken to succeed in high-ranking positions, they need to be taught and encouraged in such managerial values. There is no reason why organizations should not create new communication systems in which Asian Americans can get together with others on Friday evenings for sharing, networking, and learning. Voluntary discussion groups between Asian Americans and managers would serve a pivotal role in upgrading the managerial skills of the former and minimizing the stereotypes in the minds of the latter.

Many Asian Americans have developed extensive "ethnic networks" on the basis of shared language, culture, and professional experience. These networks provide information, resources, know-how, venture capital, self-confidence, role models, risk-taking skills, negotiation skills, mentoring, English communication skills, and so forth. Some prominent associations or organizations include the Asian American Government Executives Network (AAGEN), Asian Pacific Americans in Higher Education (APAHE), Association of Asian American Studies (AAAS), National Association of Professional Asian American Women (NAPAW), Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA), the Organization of Chinese Americans (OCA), Chinese American

Engineers and Scientists (CAES), Chinese American Semiconductor Professional Association (CASPA), Chinese Institute of Engineers (CIE), Silicon Valley Indian Professionals Association (SIPA), and Indus Entrepreneur (TiE). These and many other organizations foster the professional and technical advancement of their members. American organizations can learn from such ethnic networks to enhance collaboration between Asian Americans and others.

The issue is not whether organizations include many people of very diverse backgrounds, as this is inevitable due to demographic realities. The real issue is to put the diversity of Asian Americans to the best possible use.

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