

Next Generation Leaders 2023 Service Project: Actionable Insights from Asian Leaders on Breaking Career Ceilings and Feeling Comfortable in Your Own Skin

Welcome! We are delighted to share the output of our roundtable discussion on “Breaking Career Ceilings and Feeling Comfortable in Your Own Skin,” hosted by Committee of 100’s Next Generation Leaders. In March 2024, we convened a diverse panel of five experts from the fields of government, business, performing arts, and academia to discuss cultural identity and professional advancement. Our panelists shared their stories, experiences, and strategies for breaking through career ceilings faced by Asians in the U.S. workplace. We hope that you can apply their insights and actionable takeaways to your own career as we collectively seek to break barriers, challenge assumptions, and create a more inclusive and equitable future for all.

Launched in 2014, Committee of 100’s Next Generation Leaders program convenes an exceptional group of change-makers and rising leaders from diverse sectors. Currently, there are over 180 NGL alumni across a multitude of sectors, making up a vibrant and diverse network. This white paper is the product of the Next Generation Leaders Class of 2023’s year-long Service Project.



Jackson G. Lu Moderator

Sloan School Career Development Associate Professor, MIT Sloan School of Management; senior editor, Organization Science



Jennifer Lee Panelist

Julian Clarence Levi Professor of Social Sciences, Columbia University; Chair of the Board of Trustees, Russell Sage Foundation



Yinuo Li Panelist

Co-founder of ETU Education; former partner, McKinsey; former director, Gates Foundation's China Program



Gary Locke Panelist

First Chinese-American U.S. Ambassador to China; former U.S. Secretary of Commerce; Committee of 100 Chair



Brian A. Wong Panelist

Chinese American entrepreneur and investor; founder of RADII Media; author of the book *The Tao of Alibaba*



Mari Yoshihara Panelist

Professor of American Studies at the University of Hawaii at Mānoa; author of *Musicians from a Different Shore: Asians and Asian Americans in Classical Music* and *Dearest Lenny: Letters from Japan and the Making of the World Maestro*

ASIAN CAREER CEILINGS

Well-educated and prosperous, Asians are often called the “model minority” in the United States. However, a growing body of research suggests that some Asian groups experience a career ceiling across different domains:

- **CEOs** Lu et al.’s (2020) 8-year study on S&P 500 CEOs found that East Asians are disproportionately underrepresented and that the few East Asian CEOs are mostly founders of their companies. This leadership underrepresentation was even more pronounced when adjusted for the relevant U.S. population size: (a) the CEO-to-general-population ratio (per million) was 0.59 for East Asians, 2.82 for South Asians, and 1.92 for Caucasians; (b) the CEO-to-working-population ratio (per million) was 1.12 for East Asians, 5.75 for South Asians, and 3.60 for Caucasians (Lu et al., 2020). Such disparity can be similarly observed in consulting: Yinuo Li shared that when she was elected Partner at McKinsey’s North American offices, she was one of just two East Asian partners.
- **Law firms** According to a 2022 study (Dang et al., 2022), although Asians are the largest minority group at major U.S. law firms, they have the lowest partner-to-associate ratio. Specifically, only 4.3% of equity partners are Asians, in contrast to nearly 90% Caucasians.
- **Music** According to the 2016 League of American Orchestras diversity report, although there were numerous Asian musicians, there were so few Asian executives that they were not even included in the relevant figure (Doeser, 2016). This is consistent with Mari Yoshihara’s research and experience as a musician.

The metrics of professional success and the career challenges that Asians face are not only about climbing up the ladder of an organization, industry, or profession. People in different fields have different values and goals, not limited to pursuing leadership positions. Given the prevalence of such Asian career ceilings, what can we do to break them while feeling comfortable in our own skin? We recommend actionable steps tailored to individuals, mentors, and organizations.



BREAKING CAREER CEILINGS

Actions for Individuals

- **Develop assertiveness.** In American culture, assertiveness is a highly valued leadership trait. However, this stands in contrast to the values of East Asian cultures, which emphasize humility and harmony. This cultural difference in assertiveness has been shown to contribute to East Asians' underrepresentation in leadership roles in the U.S. workplace (Lu et al., 2020). Thus, it is important for East Asians to consciously develop assertiveness.
 - **Recognize your unique voice.** Coming from a different culture than the predominant American culture, East Asians bring unique perspectives and values to the table. Recognizing your unique voice empowers you to understand your significance within the U.S. workplace, encouraging you to share your ideas more freely. For example, Gary Locke became more assertive after recognizing the unique perspective he gained from growing up in a low-income East Asian family. The recognition motivated him to actively engage in and contribute to policy discussions.
 - **Build cultural pride.** Embracing and taking pride in your cultural heritage can empower you to be more assertive. Brian Wong noted, "Confidence has to be based on something internal – a belief that you have something important to offer and your opinion matters. As East Asians, we need to feel comfortable in our own skin, embrace our cultural heritage, and document our contributions. Start building confidence through studying and understanding of where we come from and what we have contributed to the community throughout history. America is our home as much as any other group's; we are not temporary guests here." Similarly, Gary Locke said, "East Asians have given their blood, sweat, and tears for this country." This rich historical legacy can serve as a source of strength, enhancing your confidence and presence in the U.S. workplace. Let your cultural pride empower you to actively engage, share your unique ideas, and make impactful contributions to collaborative discussions.
 - **Prepare to speak up in each meeting.** Preparing in advance can help you become more comfortable with speaking up in front of large crowds. For example, Jackson Lu encourages his graduate students to prepare at least one insightful comment or question before each seminar. Similarly, you can benefit from preparing before meetings and discussions. Take the time to investigate the topic, anticipate potential questions, and think through your contributions. This strategy



- not only enhances your confidence but also ensures that when you speak up, your input is valuable and well-received.
- **Develop a valuable viewpoint.** Rather than speaking up for the sake of speaking up, it is important for you to develop a valuable viewpoint, which involves understanding and synthesizing diverse perspectives. Gary Locke demonstrated this by taking a bipartisan approach to legislation during his time as an elected official, reaching across the political aisle to support Republican amendments as a Democrat when he believed that it would serve the greater good. This ability to think independently and consider different opinions established him as an open-minded leader and an effective legislator who delivered results for his constituents. Remember, you do not have to talk over others to be heard. Listening to others will make others more likely to listen to you.
- **Build networks.** Research indicates that East Asians are often perceived as unsociable in the U.S. (Lin et al., 2005). By putting more effort into building networks, East Asians can showcase their engagement and interpersonal skills, thereby reducing the perception of being unsociable. Networking is not just about collecting contacts; it is about building meaningful relationships that demonstrate your sociability, your willingness to engage, and your capability to contribute to diverse circles.
 - **Balance work and networking.** Invest time to get to know your colleagues personally, participate in conversations after work, and interact with other professionals in the field. Gary Locke shared that his success and respect among colleagues as a prosecutor and a politician were enhanced by his participation in conversations ancillary to the job itself. Feel empowered to build bridges with colleagues beyond just the assigned job or task at hand. This insight highlights the importance of building relationships that transcend mere professional obligations. Engaging on a more personal level with colleagues can foster a sense of community and trust, open doors to collaborative opportunities, and enhance the overall success of your career.
 - **Cultivate meaningful connections with others.** Establish yourself as an empathetic and collaborative leader by going beyond the surface to truly understand others and build deep connections. Throughout his career, Gary Locke broadened his focus from human rights and immigration issues to encompass social concerns such as disability rights and the economy of farmers. This diversification not only broadened his horizons but also made it easier for a diverse range of people to support him. Brian Wong added that developing trust-based relationships enables “colleagues to feel they know us so well they can trust us in their absence to do what is required.” To cultivate such relationships, start with the



- basics: actively listen and take a genuine interest when others share their experiences and perspectives. Engage in conversations with thoughtful questions and provide sincere advice when appropriate. These interactions are the building blocks of meaningful networks that can enhance both personal and professional growth.
- **Feel comfortable in self-promotion.** Self-promotion is an effective strategy to increase one’s visibility, essential for professional growth and recognition. While hard work and excellence are foundational, they must be complemented by effective self-promotion to ensure one’s efforts are acknowledged and rewarded. However, this concept can be particularly challenging for East Asians due to their cultural emphasis on humility, harmony, and collectivism over individual recognition. East Asians encounter cultural barriers that make self-promotion feel unnatural or even shameful. It is thus crucial for East Asians to showcase their achievements and ensure that their hard work does not go unnoticed.
 - **Focus on social contributions rather than personal motives.** Differentiate the notion of self-promotion from personal motives and instead focus on recognizing the distinct professional values that you can contribute. Jackson Lu shared research on the “Mama Bear effect,” where women, typically less inclined to negotiate for themselves compared to men, become more assertive when advocating for other people (Amanatullah & Morris, 2005). Adopt this strategy in your professional life by focusing on the value that your work brings to others. When negotiating, presenting, or contributing to projects, think about how your actions support your colleagues or the collective goals of your organization. This mindset not only positions you as a team-oriented leader but also makes it easier for others to recognize and appreciate the value you bring.
 - **Ease into self-promotion by starting small.** Practice self-promotion within smaller, familiar networks. For instance, Jennifer Lee advises her PhD students to begin networking within smaller clubs and associations, which are less intimidating spaces to develop networking and self-promotion skills. For East Asians looking to build their confidence in self-promotion, such spaces can serve as a valuable training ground. By starting with a smaller audience, you can practice articulating your achievements and aspirations in a supportive environment, gradually increasing your comfort level. Lee also added that it may be useful to reframe the idea of self-promotion as one of building relationships and sharing ideas rather than simply promoting oneself.



Call To Action for Mentors, Sponsors, & Allies

- **Create a supportive networking community.** Besides individual efforts, mentorship, sponsorship, and allyship play an important role in helping East Asians to break career ceilings. Senior leaders have the opportunity and responsibility to advocate for junior members and foster a supportive community. Creating a supportive environment can enable the exchange of knowledge and resources, thereby supporting the professional growth of junior members. For example, to encourage everyone to contribute to the discussion, managers could use “warm calling” by posting discussion questions in advance and informing less assertive individuals that they would be called upon to share their insights during the meeting. Such strategies cultivate a sense of belonging and confidence among all team members, creating a more collaborative and innovative organizational culture.
- **Share resources and opportunities.** Keeping power and resources within small, exclusive circles creates a barrier to the advancement of junior members. Instead, senior leaders who share access to resources, introduce valuable contacts, and communicate career opportunities can play a transformative role in the professional growth of their junior counterparts. Yinuo Li’s reflections on her early consulting career at McKinsey underscore the positive impact of senior colleagues who broke the hierarchical barriers and engaged her in decision-making processes. If you are in a position of power, recognize that even minor gestures can open doors for junior members and significantly impact their career development. Representation is not a zero-sum game.
- **Be a role model.** Senior leaders hold a significant role in molding the future of their junior colleagues through coaching, development, and role modeling. Assertiveness and effective leadership demonstrated by senior leaders serve as a guiding light for the next generation, aiding them in developing their own set of skills and leadership styles. Jennifer Lee’s experience of attending a single-sex high school, where she was inspired by female role models and would later become one to younger students, underscores the impact of having mentors who encourage speaking up and foster a belief in one’s own leadership potential. If you are a senior leader, remember the power of leading by example. Share your own experiences and actively coach and generously support junior colleagues as they grow into their own leadership styles.



- **Challenge the system.** East Asian leaders should try to make changes to the current system rather than just assimilating into it. Mari Yoshihara pointed out that by changing who we are and adapting to the system, people only reinforce the status quo. East Asian leaders should play an active role in reshaping the system, thereby benefiting the broader society.

Call To Action for Organizations

- **Diversify what leadership should look like.** Research shows that the underrepresentation of East Asians in leadership roles in the U.S. is partly due to perceptions of them being low in assertiveness and creativity, which are valued leadership attributes in U.S. organizations (Lu et al., 2020; Lu, 2024). Challenging assumptions of who makes a suitable leader and diversifying the prototype of leadership are crucial for U.S. organizations to foster inclusiveness (Lee, 2023). As Gary Locke noted, during his governorship, he sometimes took a chance to hire hard-working individuals who might not fit the typical leadership image. Many of these individuals ultimately led their organizations to national distinction. Therefore, when hiring and selecting leaders, organizations should re-evaluate leadership criteria to acknowledge and appreciate a wider array of cultural perspectives and strengths. By embracing diversity in leadership styles and qualities, organizations unlock untapped talent pools, enriching their decision-making processes and enhancing their competitiveness on a global scale.
- **Foster genuine inclusivity, not just tokenism.** Inclusiveness is more than just a superficial gesture; it involves integrating minority members into all levels and segments of an organization. Organizations should empower minority members by involving them in decision-making processes and promoting their presence in leadership positions.
- **Differentiate Asian subgroups in diversity metrics.** Research emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and understanding the differences within the Asian umbrella (Lu et al., 2020; Lu, 2022). Understanding the cultural differences between Asian subgroups is key to identifying the unique challenges and needs specific to each subgroup. In addition, Mari Yoshihara noted that it is important to understand the intersectionality of ethnicity with other axes of power, such as gender, sexual orientation, class, disability, language, and citizenship status. To efficiently support and leverage the diverse talents within the Asian community, organizations should refine their diversity metrics to include detailed information about each subgroup.



- **Transparency in decision-making processes.** Transparency is important in fostering inclusiveness, as it can break down the hierarchical barriers of power and privileges. In organizations, some formal decisions are made within informal social networks that rely on personal relationships and unofficial communication channels. Racial minorities, women, and people from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds do not have equivalent social capital. Making the decision-making process more transparent will make the organizational culture more positive and inclusive.

CONCLUSION

Despite the perception of Asians as a “model minority” in the U.S., their journey in professional spheres is fraught with challenges, as evidenced by their underrepresentation in leadership roles. This disparity underscores deeper systemic issues that need to be addressed. Individuals can navigate these hurdles by cultivating assertiveness, embracing their cultural identity, and strategically networking. Moreover, mentorship and organizational support are crucial in fostering inclusive environments that value diverse perspectives, challenge norms, and promote transparency, leading to a more equitable professional landscape where everyone’s talents are recognized and valued.

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