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Honggang Yang
Wenying Xu *Editors*

The Rise of Chinese American Leaders in U.S. Higher Education: Stories and Roadmaps

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Honggang Yang • Wenyang Xu
Editors

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American Leaders
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Stories and Roadmaps

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¹“The stories are compelling, moving, and inspiring. The book is a timely publication that enhances the visibility of an important aspect of Chinese American contributions to the US society despite hardships and systemic racism.”

– Min Zhou, Ph.D., Distinguished Professor of Sociology & Asian American Studies, UCLA

“These Chinese Americans are role models of present and future generations of leaders. They have brought a unique leadership perspective from their cultural backgrounds and are dedicated to the success of students. I have personally benefited from their wisdom and advice at the crucial moments of my own career.”

– Ming-Tung “Mike” Lee, Ph.D., President, Sonoma State University, 2016 Recipient of Chang-Lin Tien Leadership in Education Award

“The ‘bamboo ceiling’ is pervasive but not impenetrable. The authors’ personal reflections and professional insights will inspire Chinese American readers, as well as members of diverse communities everywhere. This book is a groundbreaking contribution to the fields of cross-cultural leadership development and ethnic studies.”

– Jenny J. Lee, Ph.D., Interim Vice President of Arizona International and Dean of International Education, Professor of Higher Education, University of Arizona

Foreword

The estimated 24 million Asian Americans living in the United States in 2023 represent the fastest-growing, highest-earning, and best-educated racial group in the nation. Yet, while 54% of Asian Americans have earned at least a bachelor's degree, compared to 33% of Americans overall, members of this group comprise only 1% of college and university presidents. The misalignment between the success of Asian Americans in academia and their underrepresentation in higher education's top leadership roles is influenced by a variety of factors, including persistent biases, rooted in the legacies of racism and White supremacy.

As a matter of fact, from the time immigrants of Asian descent began arriving in the United States more than 160 years ago, they have been subjected to acts of bigotry, violence, and discrimination, often sanctioned by the legal system. For instance, when Chinese workers came to America in the 1850s to support westward expansion by undertaking high-risk, low-wage jobs in mining and construction and were subsequently accused of “stealing White jobs,” a variety of xenophobic legislation was enacted. These laws ranged from taxing Chinese workers at higher rates and preventing them from owning land to forbidding Asians from marrying outside their race. One of the most egregious examples of racial discrimination in the legal system can be found in the 1854 California Supreme Court decision *People v. Hall*, which resulted in George Hall escaping a murder conviction in the shooting death of Chinese immigrant Ling Sing when the justices ruled that individuals of Asian descent, including the three witnesses in this case, could not testify against a White person in court.¹

This precedent created a new permission structure for open violence by Whites against Asian Americans. The anti-Asian sentiment underlying the Court's decision in *People v. Hall* served as a prelude to one of the largest mass lynchings in the US history, which took place in Los Angeles in 1871 when 19 Chinese Americans were killed by a mob of 500 White and Hispanic rioters. The incident unfolded after a White rancher was shot while coming to the aid of a police officer who was trying

¹ Brockell (2021).

to break up a gun battle between rival Chinese factions. Chinese homes and businesses were ransacked and 15 people were lynched, with their corpses left hanging across the downtown business district. Only 10 individuals were tried for the massacre, and while 8 were convicted of manslaughter, the California Supreme Court overturned their convictions.²

A similar attack, spurred by racist accusations that White miners were losing their jobs to Asian immigrants, occurred in 1885 in Rock Springs, Wyoming Territory, where more than 100 White vigilantes attacked Chinese mineworkers. Though 28 innocent people were brutally murdered—some burned alive—and 79 homes were destroyed, a grand jury refused to indict a single White person involved, claiming there was insufficient evidence. The lack of accountability under the law for these horrific acts catalyzed further violence against Chinese miners and railroad workers in the Washington and Oregon territories over the next few years.³

The racist ideology of a “Yellow Peril,” as posing an existential threat to the Western world, had already begun to emerge, leading to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which remained in effect through 1943, and the 1917 and 1924 Immigration Acts that prevented the immigration of laborers from Asia through 1965. Alongside the internment of 120,000 Japanese American citizens during World War II, these policies and practices, entailing the suppression of individual and group constitutional rights, reinforced the notion of Asian Americans as outsiders.

They simultaneously demonstrate how racism has shaped the Asian American experience and how the stories of Asian Americans’ triumphs, trials, and tribulations are frequently left untold. The erasure of Asian American history as central to the American story has contributed to the continued “othering” and scapegoating of individuals of Asian descent in times of crisis and economic scarcity, starkly illustrated over the past half century by the high-profile bludgeoning death of Chinese American Vincent Chin at the hands of two Detroit auto workers who blamed the Japanese for taking their jobs and by targeting of Vietnamese American shrimp boat operators by the Ku Klux Klan in Texas in the 1980s; the destruction of Korean owned businesses during the LA riots in the aftermath of the acquittal of police officers whose beating of African American Rodney King was captured on video camera in the 1990s; the surge in hate crimes against members of the South and East Asian communities following the terrorist attacks on 9/11 in 2001; and the recent 150% spike in anti-Asian violence since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, fueled by a president who consistently referred to the illness as “the China virus” and “Kung Flu.”⁴

It is against this backdrop of structural racism and systemic discrimination that barriers to Asian American leadership in higher education must be assessed and understood. The stereotype of Asian Americans as the model minority—intelligent, hardworking, quiet, humble, and deferential to authority—belies the fact that rather

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

than being a monolith, those in the United States with ethnic ties to Asia are from over 57 distinct groups.⁵ In addition, the trope of the model minority ignores the racism and prejudice Asian Americans have endured. As a result, diversity initiatives in academia often fail to countenance and prioritize the need for greater representation among Asian Americans in higher education leadership. Yet, while denying them status as people of color, Asian Americans are nevertheless positioned as perpetual foreigners.

Evidence of hidden biases that both create and fortify the “bamboo ceiling,” preventing Asian American advancement in higher education administration, is showcased in research conducted by Thomas Sy and his colleagues. Their studies detail the hidden biases of participants asked to rate the credentials of prospective employees. Differing only in the ethnicity assigned to the individual, the leadership qualifications and potential of those identified as Asian American were rated lower across all occupations than those with the exact same credentials assigned a Caucasian identity.⁶ However, one of the key findings emerging from this research is that leadership perceptions of Asian Americans are higher when race-occupation, such as engineering, is perceived as a good fit, rather than when race-occupation is regarded as a poor fit, as with leadership in academic administration.

The agentic qualities of confidence, control, assertiveness, emotional toughness, and achievement-oriented aggressiveness posited as necessary for effective leadership are considered incompatible with Asian American styles of leadership. And in a Catch-22, even when individuals act counter to stereotypical expectations and conform to dominant norms, they are seen to be less effective as leaders because of the incongruity between group stereotypes and the social roles in which members of the group are engaged. This results in Asian American leaders being judged more harshly.⁷ In fact, the perception of Asian Americans as less vocal, less assertive, and lacking in social skills and leadership potential works against those seeking leadership roles, inside and outside of the academy, and fosters the exclusion of Asian Americans from informal power networks tied to promotion into the leadership ranks. Further, the prospect of being negatively stereotyped and being judged or treated stereotypically, as well as fear of conforming to racist stereotypes, can lead to reluctance to take on leadership roles in the first place. The dearth of Asian American role models in the highest ranks of academia exacerbates this challenge, making it even more difficult to redress.

To celebrate and sustain diversity, equity, and inclusion on and off campus, academic leadership must strive to be a mirror of student demographics. However, if progress is to be made toward greater Asian American representation in higher education leadership, persistent biases must be unveiled, and White masculinist norms of what it means to be a strong leader must be upended. This is particularly crucial at a time when increasingly partisan views of higher education have led to rising

⁵The U.S. Census Bureau (2022).

⁶Sy et al. (2010).

⁷Hoyt and Blascovich (2007).

anti-intellectualism, anti-elitism, and mistrust of the academy. In response to these trends, political philosopher Michael Sandel has argued in his book *The Tyranny of Merit* that humility is the civic virtue most needed right now. Indeed, humility is an essential leadership characteristic, especially in academia, where no one can be an expert in every discipline or field of study, and where shared governance is a necessary condition for institutional success. Asian Americans' socialization is often embedded within a deep-rooted cultural expectation to exercise humility, and adopting an equity-minded approach to reimagining what it means to be an effective leader would reposition a leadership style valuing humility as a strength rather than a weakness.

Creating pathways for Asian American college and university presidents is imperative for all institutions of higher education committed to a future in which racial justice is fully realized and in which students are prepared to thrive in a globally interconnected world. The authors in this volume provide a roadmap for doing so by employing a strength-based approach that examines their innate strengths and motivations as leaders in an adverse environment. Through their stories of resilience, resourcefulness, and moral courage, they provide models of excellence while offering a foundation for the next generation of Asian leaders who will shape higher education in profound and lasting ways.

Bio: Dr. Lynn Pasquerella was appointed President of the American Association of Colleges and Universities in 2016, after serving as the 18th President of Mount Holyoke College. She has held positions as Provost at the University of Hartford and Vice Provost for Academic Affairs and Dean of the Graduate School at the University of Rhode Island, where she taught for more than two decades. A philosopher whose work has combined teaching and scholarship with local and global engagement, Pasquerella has written extensively on medical ethics, metaphysics, public policy, and the philosophy of law. Her most recent book, *What We Value: Public Health, Social Justice, and Educating for Democracy*, examines the role of higher education in addressing some of the most pressing contemporary issues at the intersection of ethics, law, and public policy. Pasquerella is the immediate past President of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and the host of Northeast Public Radio's *The Academic Minute*. She is a graduate of Quinebaug Valley Community College, Mount Holyoke College, and Brown University. Her awards and honors include receiving the William Rogers Alumni Award and the Horace Mann Medal from Brown University; the STAR Scholars Network North Star Lifetime Achievement Award; Mary Baldwin University's Algernon Sydney Sullivan Service to Humanity Award; Quinebaug Valley Community College Champions Award; and the Mount Holyoke Alumni Association Elizabeth Tophan Kennan Award. Pasquerella holds honorary degrees from Elizabethtown College, Bishop's University, the University of South Florida, the University of Hartford, the University of Rhode Island, Concordia College, Mount Holyoke College, and Bay Path University and was named by *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education* as one of America's top 35 women

leaders. She serves on the boards of the Lingnan Foundation, the National Trust for the Humanities, the Olin College of Engineering, and Handshake.

Lynn Pasquerella
President
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Washington, DC, USA

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Preface

The Pacific Ocean serves as an apt symbol for the fluid intercontinental ties between East Asia and North America. For centuries, it has provided a reliable route connecting people to people, business to business, and nations to nations. Millions of Chinese travelers braved the Pacific Ocean to pursue a better life, opportunity, and freedom, determined to overcome the challenges ahead.

Yung Wing, the first Chinese student to graduate from an American university (Yale 1850-1854), traveled across the Pacific Ocean. “At Yale, Yung Wing was a member of the choir, played football, was a member of the Boat Club, and won academic prizes for English competition” (“Yung Wing”). As a Chinese American diplomat, educator, and businessman, he contributed to developing bilateral relations at the time.

Since the mid-1800s, Chinese students and scholars have continued to arrive in the United States, even during the Chinese Exclusion era (1882–1965). Many of them have become US citizens and have been instrumental in advancing their adopted country’s economy, education, art, scholarship, science, technology, and infrastructure. There are many books devoted to academic leadership. However, none has centered on subjects most relevant to Chinese Americans. The history of Chinese Americans in higher education is both inspiring and complex. On the one hand, Chinese Americans have made significant contributions to the development of US higher education, and on the other, they have faced numerous challenges and barriers, including discrimination, prejudice, and the “bamboo ceiling.” From humble beginnings, Chinese Americans have risen to the highest ranks of academia, serving as presidents, provosts, deans, chairs/directors, and faculty members at colleges and universities across the United States. Their stories are a testament to the transformative power of education and the enduring value of perseverance and determination.

We live at a time that not only witnesses an increase in Chinese American leaders on US campuses but also mounting incidents of discriminatory treatment of this group. In the past few years, a significant number of Chinese American scholars, scientists, and academic leaders have become victims of racist attacks, racial profiling, stereotyping, harassment, bigotry, hatred, demonization, Sinophobia,

scapegoating, and accusations of espionage and intellectual theft. We believe this is the right moment to assemble a collection of writings to represent leaders of this targeted group and their tortuous journeys in US higher education.

In the past years, these challenges have been compounded by an intensifying widespread xenophobia, amid which the government's "China Initiative" has targeted scientists, scholars, and students of Chinese descent in the name of national security. Beginning in late 2018, "the U.S. National Institutes of Health sent emails to 100 institutions to investigate allegations that one or more of their faculty had violated NIH policies designed to ensure federal funds were being spent properly" (Mervis, 2023, p. 1180). "103 of those scientists—some 42% of the 246 targeted in the letters, most of them tenured faculty members—had lost their jobs" (Mervis, 2023, p. 1180). These developments have further complicated the landscape for Chinese Americans in higher education, raising questions about academic freedom, justice, diversity, and inclusion.

Against this backdrop, *The Rise of Chinese American Leaders in US Higher Education: Stories and Roadmaps* seeks to provide a multi-dimensional perspective on the experiences and achievements of Chinese Americans in higher education. The book includes personal narratives, reflections on leadership and innovation, and critical analyses of the political and socioeconomic contexts in which these narratives unfold. These stories represent leaders holding different ideological values in various academic fields, positions, stages of careers, professional trajectories, Chinese ethnic groups, generations, and geographical locations, making a timely contribution to the body of literature that has assisted countless academic leaders in navigating their careers, bringing to the forefront a distinct group of academic leaders who have been underrepresented.

This collection consists of 36 stories and reflections from past, present, and future leaders, including 5 historical narratives published earlier. Among the contributors and editors, 17 are or were chancellors and presidents, 3 provosts, 10 deans, 5 assistant/associate vice presidents/chancellors or assistant/associate provosts, 1 director, and 1 vice president. Among them, 15 are in STEM-related fields while the rest are in business administration, education, humanities, law, library, and social sciences. This book celebrates these remarkable individuals and their contributions to higher education and showcases their personal experiences and insights into leadership, innovation, and social justice in higher education.

The chapters in this book cover a wide range of topics, from building community partnerships to navigating tradition and transformation, from enhancing research capacity to internationalizing campuses, and from leading with passion and purpose to advocating for civic outreach. Each chapter offers a unique perspective on leadership and its challenges, drawing on the author's own experiences and the lessons he/she has gained along the way.

As editors, we are indebted to the contributors who have generously shared their journeys and wisdom. We also want to thank Dr. Lynn Pasquerella, President of the American Association of Colleges and Universities, for her thoughtful "Foreword." We hope that this book will inspire and inform current and future leaders in higher education, particularly those who are underrepresented or marginalized. We also

hope that it will encourage more conversations and collaborations among different communities of scholars, students, and practitioners, leading to greater understanding, equity, and inclusion in higher education.

Honggang Yang

Wenyong Xu

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About the Editors



Honggang Yang served in 1999–2020 as Dean for the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences and the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences at Nova Southeastern University. Earlier in the 1990s, he was on the McGregor School of Antioch University faculty, chairing the individualized graduate program in conflict resolution. He also had the honor serving as Research Associate and Internship Coordinator for the Conflict Resolution Program at the Carter Presidential Center of Emory University. He is on the Editorial Boards of *American Review of China Studies* and Lexington Books/Rowman & Littlefield Book Series for Conflict Resolution and Peace Building in Asia. Dr. Yang is a Senior Advisory Editor of *Peace and Conflict Studies*, past President and Co-founder of the Council of Chinese American Deans and Presidents, and Co-founder of NSU’s Council for Inclusion and Diversity. He received the 1997 Distinguished Alumnus Award from the Department of Anthropology at USF, the 1998 SOCHE Faculty Award for Teaching Excellence from the Southwestern Ohio Council for Higher Education (SOCHE), the 2002 NSU Academic Dean of the Year in Student Life Achievement, and the 2021 Innovative Leadership in Higher Education Award from the Florida Distance Learning Association. He co-edited with Dr. A. Wolfe *Anthropological Contributions to Conflict Resolution*. He was bestowed Dean and Professor Emeritus in 2021.



Wenying Xu is a Professor of English at Jacksonville University in Florida. She received her Ph.D. in English from the University of Pittsburgh specializing in nineteenth-century American literature. She has taught American Literature, Multiethnic Literature of the United States, World Literature, and Literary Theory at Truman State University, Sichuan University in China, Florida Atlantic University, Xiamen University in China, Chatham University, and Jacksonville University. She is the author of numerous journal articles, book chapters, fiction, poetry, and scholarly books including *Ethics and Aesthetics of Freedom in American and Chinese Realism* (2003), *Eating Identities: Reading Food in Asian American Literature* (2008), and *Historical Dictionary of Asian American Literature and Theater* (2012 & 2022), whose 2nd edition was chosen by the *Library Journal* as the Best Reference Book of 2022. She has served in such leadership roles as Department Chair, Ph.D. program Director, Associate Dean, Vice President for Academic Affairs, Provost, and President of the Society for the Study of Multiethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS). Additionally, she is the recipient of many honors, including a senior Fulbright Lectureship to China, the MELUS Award for Lifetime Achievement, Arthur Vining Davis Fellow for Aspen Ideas Festival, Readers' Choice Award for fiction from *Prairie Schooner*, and Andrew Mellon Predoctoral Fellowship.

Building Community Partnerships and Strengthening Business Education



Sulin Ba

The hallways were full of excited kids running around on this balmy April evening. It was school concert night. The orchestra and the jazz band consisting of fifth- and sixth-grade musicians were performing. Proud parents had gathered early to get prime seats in the auditorium. I ran into a mom who worked at UConn Health Center but whom I hadn't seen for a while. After some chitchat to catch up, she asked:

“Who is the right person to contact in the business school? I run this summer intern program at UConn’s TIP (Technology Incubation Program) and would like to partner with the business school. But my emails to multiple people there have gone unanswered.”

“Oh? Tell me more about this.”

“Well, as you know, TIP hosts startups pursuing R&D in STEM areas including biotechnology, engineering, chemistry, and computer sciences. Over the summer, we partner with various UConn schools/colleges to place student interns at these startup companies to learn firsthand entrepreneurial skills for a career in biosciences and STEM. The startups and the schools/colleges jointly fund these internships. I would like to attract more business students to the program as they offer unique perspectives students from a STEM background might not have. Who do I need to talk to in the business school to get some traction for this?”

“Well, I think you are talking to the right person right now!” A month earlier, I had become the first Associate Dean of Academic and Research Support at the University of Connecticut School of Business. In addition to faculty and research-related issues, my portfolio of responsibilities also included external partnerships and collaborations. In the short amount of time since I assumed the role, I had heard from multiple sources that the business school liked to “go it alone,” was not a

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