

## **Breaking the Bamboo Ceiling** by Max Millard

Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders make up 6.2% of the U.S. population and are the best-educated racial group in the country. 54 percent of Asian Americans have earned at least bachelor's degree, compared to 33 percent of American adults overall. But only 1% of college and university presidents are of Asian descent.

Why is this? Some of the answers can be found in this new book, published in December 2023, "The Rise of Chinese Leaders in U.S. Higher Education: Stories and Roadmaps."

The book consists of 36 essays, most of them written by educators who were born in China and overcame great obstacles to become top administrators, professors, deans, chancellors, and university presidents in the U.S.

Sulin Ba, now a dean at DePaul University in Chicago, recalls her struggles to learn conversational English after arriving in Texas. A fellow student approached her and said, "Hey! What's up?" She didn't know what to answer, so she said, "Um, the ceiling?"

Later she joined a group of Americans who met at a bar every Friday afternoon. "After a whole semester of 'Happy Hour,'" she writes, "my ability to speak English far exceeded more than 10 years of studious effort of learning English in a classroom in China!"

Ching-Hua Wang is the first woman immigrant from China to head a four-year university in the continental United States, Samuel Merritt College in Oakland, California. She tells that during the Cultural Revolution of 1966 to 1976, she was among 17 million students taken from their homes and families to be "reeducated" as manual laborers on farms and in factories.

"For six years in Inner Mongolia," she writes, "I lived in a tiny mudroom in a village that had no running water, no insulation, and no electricity. During the long-dreaded winter season with snowstorms and blizzards, the temperature would sometimes plunge to 40 degrees below zero Centigrade. Two years into my exile, I received a package from my father containing an Oxford English Dictionary that literally changed my life path, leading me to medical school, to the United States, and eventually to my presidency."

The first Chinese American to break the bamboo ceiling was Chia-Wei Woo, who in 1983 was chosen over 175 candidates to become president of San Francisco State University. Like many who followed him, he never aimed to be anything but a college professor. But his seven-day work weeks and bilingual mastery helped propel him beyond his ambitions.

He spent five years leading San Francisco State, a campus of 26,000 students. Afterward he returned to Asia and spent a decade as the first president of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.

Sharon Guan arrived on the campus of Indiana State University with “my parents' life savings sewed in my underwear and a letter of conditional admission to the Master's Communication program in my pocket stating that if I couldn't keep my grade average above a B, I would be expelled.”

She kept up her grades, but she also learned that to be an effective leader, she had to become “fluent in American culture.” Today she's the assistant vice president of DePaul University.

Dr. Joanne Li was shocked by the racial harassment she encountered while serving as dean of Florida's largest business school. Shortly after taking the job in 2017, “anonymous letters started to arrive in the mailboxes of the whole business school, attacking my race, gender, and faith.”

Yet, like all the educators in this volume, she persevered, and in 2021 was appointed chancellor of the University of Nebraska at Omaha, the first woman of color and the first Asian American to hold that post.

Dr. Ding-Jo Hsiu Currie immigrated to the U.S. at 16, where she learned that “American higher education is a mirror reflection of the American society. ... The dominant culture of white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestants manifests itself in every aspect of the system, from faculty, leadership profiles, curriculum, policies, and practices, to program designs and institutional culture.”

Despite this, she later became chancellor of the Coast Community College District in Orange County, California.

Out of the 36 writers, just 12 are women, but to me, their stories are more compelling because they had to overcome both racism and sexism.

This volume is not designed to be read straight through, but rather to be savored, one essay at a time. Some long, technical passages can be skipped without much loss. The book's title describes its goal: to present the stories and road maps of pioneers who blazed the trail for others to follow. Taken as a whole, it is an inspiring guidebook for anyone who seeks a brilliant career in higher education.

International Perspectives on Social Policy,  
Administration, and Practice

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Wenying Xu *Editors*

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

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