Introduction

At a 2013 reception at the New York Harvard Club for newly admitted students, an event at which perhaps half of those attending appeared to be Asian Americans, because they brought their many proud relatives, an admissions officer said to me, only half joking, that since 1980 the college “had admitted and graduated thousands of second-generation Asian Americans” and added, “Where are they? Why aren’t they at the top?” In other words, why weren’t Asian Americans among the elite professionals in corporate America? Why weren’t they occupying the so-called C-suites, the traditional province of senior executives?

Harvard’s admissions team has always believed that the students admitted by the university are the cream of the crop. Based on information in alumni reunion books and other data, Harvard officials knew that virtually all of the university’s second-generation Asian American graduates were employed and were by most standards doing very well professionally. But university officials expected that after about three to four decades, many more of these graduates would have attained leadership jobs in the private, public, nonprofit, and political sectors. Yet data accumulated about these graduates showed that very few of Harvard’s Asian American graduates had ascended to these levels.

I ask similar questions in this book. What has become of these second-generation Asian Americans? And given their significant academic achievements, why can’t more of them be found at the top levels of the business and professional worlds? Is there a so-called bamboo ceiling, an invisible but powerful barrier that halts their progress at a certain point?
Perhaps there is, because for this population the problem is not simply earning a college degree or landing an entry-level job but attaining a C-suite job, the C standing for job titles that include the word “chief.”

In this book I define second-generation Asian Americans as those who were born in the United States or arrived in the country before the age of thirteen, a cohort sometimes known as the 1.5 generation. The two groups that compose this generation are socially indistinguishable from one another because all of them were raised in the United States and thoroughly Americanized by way of the school system. Those born or raised in America represent 40.1 percent of the twenty-five- to sixty-four-year-olds working full-time in the private and nonprofit sectors, according to data collected through the American Community Survey conducted by the US Census Bureau from 2013 to 2017.

Of all Asian Americans between the ages of twenty-five and sixty-four, 40.1 percent are the broadly defined second generation. And second-generation Asian Americans represent an increasing portion of younger age groups. They comprise 58.1 percent of twenty-five- to thirty-four-year-olds, 41.6 percent of thirty-five- to forty-four-year-olds, 28.7 percent of forty-five- to fifty-four-year-olds, and 19.7 percent of fifty-five- to sixty-four-year-olds.

Their general failure to attain leadership positions is evident even in fields in which Asian Americans are statistically overrepresented, notably technology. Studies of professionals in law and business indicate unexpectedly similar results. Not surprisingly, given these statistics, the so-called bamboo ceiling has in recent years been the focus of the bulk of research on Asian Americans in the workforce.¹

Industry studies focusing on the fields of not only technology but also finance and law show the same pattern. “A Portrait of Asian Americans in the Law,” a 2017 report by Eric Chung and his colleagues Samuel Dong, Xiaonan April Hu, Christine Kwon, and Goodwin Liu, published by Yale Law School and the National Asian Pacific American Bar Association, showed that despite the fact that Asian Americans have constituted the largest minority group in major law firms for nearly two
decades, they have the lowest partner-to-associate ratio among all ethnic groups. At American law firms, about 90 percent of equity partners are white, whereas Asian Americans represent just 11.8 percent of associates and 3 percent of partners.²

In technology companies located in the San Francisco Bay Area, Asian Americans, along with other minorities, have had difficulty climbing the management ladder to become executives, despite their noticeable proficiency in technical subjects. Buck Gee, former CEO of Andiamo Systems, and Cisco GM and VP, and Denise Peck, former VP at Cisco Systems and now executive advisor with ASCEND, found that by 2015 “despite being outnumbered by Asian men and women in the entry-level professional workforce, white men and women were twice as likely as Asians to become executives and held almost three times the number of executive jobs.”³

Similar statistics exist for Wall Street. Studies show that in finance Asian Americans make up only 12 percent of professionals and less than 5 percent of executives, wrote Laura Colby for Bloomberg.⁴ And there are fewer than a dozen Asian CEOs in the Fortune 500, according to Jeff Green, Jordyn Holman, and Janet Paskin for Bloomberg Businessweek.⁵

In an article published in May 2018 in Harvard Business Review, Gee and Peck point out that at Goldman Sachs, one of the world’s leading financial companies, 27 percent of the American workforce was Asian American, but only 11 percent of its US executives and senior managers and none of its executive officers were Asian American.⁶ Even though there are so few in the upper echelons, Asian Americans, including the foreign-born, compose almost 7 percent of the US population, more than 10 percent of the student population on most college campuses, and close to 25 percent of students at most elite college campuses.

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Like the Harvard admissions officers and these studies, sociologists Richard Alba and Guillermo Yrizar Barbosa from the CUNY Graduate Center, in their 2015 Ethnic and Racial Studies journal article “Room
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at the Top?,” written thirty-five years after Harvard began admitting minorities in large numbers, ask the same question: Where are the Asian Americans, especially the second generation? In response, the authors suggest that perhaps it will take more time for this generation to make its mark on the corporate world. They predict that capable Asian Americans and other minorities will move into higher-level jobs when white baby boomers retire. They contend that certain members of minority groups possess the credentials to ascend to these positions, and like many immigration scholars, they predict that as US demographics change, there will be room at the top.

Richard Zweigenhaft, a psychologist from Guilford College, and William Domhoff, a psychologist and sociologist from UC Santa Cruz, reach a different conclusion in their 2011 book The New CEOs: Women, African American, Latino, and Asian American Leaders of Fortune 500 Companies. They contend that the leadership of corporations—in other words the corporate elite—has opened up a bit, but that leadership positions will continue to be held largely by white men, with only a small group of elite women and nonwhite men included in their ranks.

For these scholars, demography is not destiny. In their opinion the elite class will reproduce itself with only a few exceptions to satisfy minimum expectations in a society that is at least in theory a meritocracy. However, belief in such a process is viewed by many scholars as overly simplistic. Seemingly opaque forces that affect the promotion pipeline can have an impact when it comes to achievement on both the individual and the institutional levels.

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This book focuses on the professional experiences of second-generation Asian American adults and their often sputtering movement up the corporate ladder. It explores such elements as diversity and affirmative action programs designed to help advancement, and examines the points at which Asian Americans fall out of the pipeline as well as the reasons why they believe they can or cannot move up.
To examine this issue, from 2014 to 2016 I interviewed a large sample of second-generation Asian Americans who were born in the United States or arrived here before the age of age thirteen. They are defined as elites by virtue of their education (at an Ivy League or similarly prestigious institution), their income (all earned well over ninety-five thousand dollars a year), and their status (they held corporate jobs in finance, media, law, insurance, and creative technology). Members of this population find it relatively easy to be hired but have considerable trouble moving to the top within an organization.

As mentioned, in an effort to explain this phenomenon, many sociologists contend that America is experiencing a period of “transition to diversity” as whites begin to retire and Asian Americans, among many different groups, become old enough and trained enough to fill leadership roles. There should be room at the top, these scholars contend, and more inclusion and diversity will be forthcoming. Just wait, they urge.

But as a sociologist, a second-generation Asian American, a first-generation college student, a beneficiary of affirmative action, a Harvard alum, a Harvard spouse, and a Harvard parent, I ask, how long does one have to wait?

I’m typical of the 1980s Chinese American cohort. My immigrant parents did not finish high school, although my dad immigrated from China at age twelve. He was fluent in English and Chinese and was a banquet waiter for most of his life. My mother also came from China, but in the 1960s, and was a garment worker for most of her life. By the time I was born in New York City, my parents had moved to Manhattan’s Upper West Side to a low-income New York City Housing Authority public housing project near Lincoln Center. I attended public schools, including Stuyvesant High School, for most of my life. It was clear to me back in 1979 when I was a high school senior that Harvard was implementing affirmative action by recruiting minority students, including Asian Americans, at a Chinatown college fair. I decided to apply to Harvard only after meeting an Asian American student.
Using their affirmative action program the university made a considerable effort to send current students to college fairs across the nation to recruit young people who otherwise never would have considered Harvard. Later, as a Harvard student, I worked for the university’s undergraduate minority recruitment program. When I subsequently learned the history of this program, I realized that I had been an early beneficiary of affirmative action since Asian Americans had only recently been included, within the previous five years, in the roster of groups whose members the school sought. I graduated Harvard in 1984.

Similarly, when trying to determine what career I would pursue, IBM gave me a chance to explore the many facets of their corporation. In each of my three summer IBM internships, I was placed with different divisions of the company. After graduation I worked at IBM for six years in marketing and was promoted several times before taking a sabbatical and returning to school to earn my master’s and doctorate degrees at Columbia University.

During interviews conducted for this study, one respondent told me that my description of my IBM experience—the summer jobs, the rotations, the promotions, and the executive education at Wharton and even the sabbatical that IBM offered me—were all part of IBM’s commitment to recruiting, training, and retaining women and members of minority groups, initiatives that were and still are part of the company’s affirmative action and diversity programs. This all made sense because the 1980s was a time when many institutions were using affirmative action to increase the numbers of women and people of color in their ranks. Most people were very optimistic about the heights that women and minorities could reach in the professional world, especially with the help of affirmative action programs. In fact I testified as an amicus witness to support race-conscious admissions at Harvard in the fall of 2018.

As I was starting my career I also watched some of my peers speed through their professional careers as editors, doctors, and partners of
law firms. However, I also noticed many more whose careers were stall-
ing. By the end of the recession in 2013, a few of my friends and even younger relatives had been laid off, and it was distressing for me to see how long it took some of them to return to work.

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The second generation of Asian America has become synonymous with dazzling education success. Not only are these Asian Americans among the first in their families to go to college or even graduate from high school, countless numbers of them have attended top-tier institutions. This story is even more remarkable given that so many of them are the children of immigrants. Indeed, Asian Americans have been widely touted as a contemporary immigrant success story—the so-called model minority.

Yet education and the rigorous parenting that supports these children—the so-called tiger mom who pushes her children almost beyond endurance—are only part of the story of what drives success in America or of the story of individual or intergenerational mobility. After college or the advanced degree comes the world of work. How do Asian American children of immigrant parents experience this critical transition from family to higher education and then into professions via various promotion ladders? And how do they understand and learn to operate the levers of success?

This book tells the seldom told story of how second-generation Asian Americans fare in the professional world and examines how their family upbringing and college and work experiences affect their trajectory in the elite corporate workforce. Attention to the multifaceted transition to adulthood of second-generation Asian Americans is long overdue. A number of these college graduates represent the elite of the Asian American second generation because a sizable number attended Ivy League colleges and other elite institutions, and have made inroads to the upper echelons of corporations and politics.
Certainly, in the opinion of the public Asian Americans are regarded as a group able to succeed in a supposedly meritocratic system through the resourcefulness and resilience that are inculcated and prized by their culture. They typically fit the model minority stereotype by skyrocketing through educational institutions and then through corporate doorways. The model minority narrative seems even more compelling given the fact that second-generation Asian Americans are so diverse in terms of their family origins; they come from upper-, middle-, and working-class families. But while this book includes examples of second-generation Asian Americans who have moved quickly up the professional ladder, they represent only a small part of the overall population.

To explore this issue, I interviewed 103 second-generation Asian Americans who graduated from college between 1980 and 2008, are in their late twenties to late fifties, and hold professional jobs. Most of the people I interviewed have worked in corporate America for over twenty years, and their experiences reveal a work world in which entrée to the upper rungs seems impossible for many and rife with racial, gender, and class inequalities that complicate and even contradict the story of the model minority’s upward path. Even though these people were selected for my study by what is known as snowball sampling, an approach in which existing subjects of a study recruit future subjects from among their acquaintances, every effort was made to find individuals at midcareer or higher senior levels to determine their trajectory in the work world.

My subjects were selected because they all had jobs that required performance reviews, which were used to determine how quickly they would be promoted and how much money they would earn. I also spoke with many professional coaches and human resources workers. I attended meetings and conferences hosted by pan-Asian and professional diversity organizations such as Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics, ASCEND Pan-Asian Leaders, the National Association of Asian American Professionals (NAAAP), the Asian American Bar Association of New York, Asian Women in Business, and other work-related con-
ferences led by organizations such as the Asia Society and the Asian American Federation of New York.

I discuss the different cohorts of the Asian American second generation as a way of explaining diversity within this demographic group. For instance, each of these cohorts has a different relationship with affirmative action and diversity programs. The oldest group was the first sizable group to graduate from college in the 1980s, and most of its members benefited from affirmative action, instituted after the 1964 Civil Rights Act to ensure greater diversity at work and in schools. By 1978, even though the Bakke Supreme Court decision set limits on affirmative action, race was still allowed to be a factor, especially in admissions.

Until the early to mid-1980s, Asian Americans, like members of many other minority groups, were rarely seen on elite college campuses. Subsequently, however, many Asian Americans, received extra consideration to bring diversity to campus, including some for being the children of laborers or the first in their families to attend college. Affirmative action programs also opened doors to college and even entry-level jobs for these Asian Americans, who represented an initial sizable wave.

The second group I look at are those who graduated from college in the 1990s, who were much more middle class and likely to have parents who had received some degree of education. Many affirmative action programs helped Asian Americans who needed them. The group itself was becoming much more diverse in terms of ethnicity, class, and parental education, and many more young Asian Americans were attending college—by 2000, 4.2 percent of the country’s college-age population, aged eighteen to twenty-four, were Asian American, compared to 3.6 percent of the US population as a whole.

The people I interviewed told me that corporate recruiting and training programs that selected women, minorities, and Asian Americans were still in place in the 1990s. Today, however, there are fewer programs that recruit Asian Americans, despite the need for such efforts. Those that remain include the Sponsors for Educational Opportunity, the Emma Bowen Foundation, and the Posse Foundation programs.
Very few studies have examined the extent to which Asian Americans can enter the higher tiers of American professional life because most people assume that those raised in America are already executives or are simply too young to attain such positions. Since census data show that Asian Americans have the highest levels of education and highest average income among all racial groups, many people assume that they must be ascending to the highest echelons in the corporate world. Still others assume that the second generation is not old enough nor sufficiently represented in the professional world to be worth studying. In addition, most of the few studies that exist combined the broadly defined second-generation Asian Americans with the foreign-born who immigrated after age thirteen.

The earliest study, *The Glass Ceiling and Asian Americans* (to become a 2000 book with a similar name), commissioned by the US Department of Labor, was completed in 1994 by Deborah Woo, a sociologist at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and suggested that Asian Americans, including immigrants who had been educated abroad, lacked the necessary language skills and that there were specific internal structural barriers—a lack of mentors, no career development or rotational job assignments, and little or no exposure to informal networks—all of which hampered their ability to move up the corporate ladder.

Would this study have reached the same conclusions if it had examined only those Asian Americans born and raised in America? Perhaps, but probably not. Sociologist Philip Kasinitz, political scientist John Mollenkopf, sociologist Mary Waters, and co-director of a policy research center Jennifer Holdaway, in their pathbreaking 2008 study *Inheriting the City: The Children of Immigrants Come of Age*, found that it was important to include the 1.5 generation in order to understand how the children of immigrants were integrated into the larger society.

I include members of this generation because they represent a sizable number of Asian Americans, and by excluding them we would miss significant aspects of the process of mobility in the professional world. My findings indicate that when it comes to job promotions, the experi-
ences of this population are very complicated. Members of this group are doing better than their foreign-born and -educated counterparts but not as well as many immigration scholars would have expected.

Why does this book offer such a complex picture of how Asian Americans fare in the US corporate workplace? Part of the answer comes from the subjects’ stories about themselves. This group is even more credentialed, skilled, and personable than any census data show. They earn more than average Asian Americans, hold degrees from highly selective colleges, and have honed their social skills at elite jobs and within select social groups. Many of their parents are highly educated and have consequently transferred social capital to their offspring.

However, some of the people I interviewed explained that despite their background, training, credentials, and social skills, they found it difficult to gain the “trust” of executives at the highest levels. Informal assessments and performance reviews tell them that they need to work on “soft skills.” They feel as if they need to stay on a “tightrope” so they don’t experience a “backlash” for not performing as expected.

Early on at the midcareer managerial level, this population has difficulty finding mentors and sponsors. They are often ignored or not invited to the table and are not given plum assignments. Taken as a group, these factors increase time between promotions and create leaks in the pipeline to the executive C-suites. This state of affairs is baffling to many of the people I interviewed, given that they attended the very same elite colleges and graduate schools as their colleagues and superiors. “We’re not all that different,” interviewees said, except for the fact that they are Asian American and their superiors are usually white.

That is the point. At the highest level, race matters more than many people would admit and certainly more than many people acknowledge. Race affects the movement of Asian Americans up the work ladder. Racial discrimination and/or implicit bias are clearly operating, especially at the top levels. Between 2014 and 2016, when I conducted my inter-
views, some expressed doubt about the success of Asian Americans, and paradoxically many organizations were beginning to be ambivalent about including this group in diversity programs on the grounds that they didn’t need such programs, being so credentialed. However, as Gee and Peck note in their 2018 article in *Harvard Business Review*, “If you do not intentionally include, you will unintentionally exclude.”

The backgrounds of the people I interviewed confirmed the findings of Lauren Rivera in her 2015 book *Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs*: when it comes to professional jobs, employers prefer to hire prestigious Ivy League graduates. About half of my interviewees have undergraduate and in some cases graduate degrees from Ivy League colleges, along with such prestigious institutions as MIT and Stanford. In these entry-level jobs, the majority earn over a hundred thousand dollars a year.

These attainments place them into a category that I label elite specialized professionals. They can be found in a variety of industries, including finance, media, law, insurance, and creative technology (as opposed to coding). When they describe their difficulties moving up through the ranks, their accounts clarify the nature of a glass ceiling—what many Asian Americans call a bamboo ceiling. Coupled with reports from the business world of the existence of few Asian American executives despite their swelling numbers in entry-level professional pipelines, there is an implication that a barrier prevents Asian Americans from moving ahead in the world of business.

I examine such issues as family background, the institutional characteristics of the colleges they attended, and a wide variety of systemic factors at the workplace—informal and formal programs such as affirmative action, training programs, and mentoring and evaluation processes—that raise issues of assignments, speaking up, soft skills, leadership, and trust.

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Still, efforts to isolate the experiences of second-generation Asian Americans in the work world are few and superficial. Rarely is this population separated from Asian Americans who came to the United States at the age of age thirteen or older. Nevertheless, while research about how the labor market is incorporating second-generation Asian Americans is still marginal, most of the studies that do exist conclude that returns on education and promotions up to management-level jobs are much lower than for their white American counterparts.

For this reason, understanding the mechanisms involved and laying a framework for how individuals move up the promotion ladder, especially past the middle-management level, are vital. Researchers in immigration and organizations need to study what happens to second-generation Asian Americans as they acquire experience and accrue responsibility at work. It is important to determine if and how educational achievement offers benefits when members of these groups enter the corporate labor market.

In chapter 1, I describe the Asian Americans I interviewed—their backgrounds, their hometowns, their parents’ occupations, where they went to college, their experiences on the job involving coworkers, and how all these factors may influence if and when they are promoted.

I grouped my respondents into three categories based on which decade—the 1980s, the 1990s, and the 2000s—they graduated from college. Though each cohort has a different relationship to policies like affirmative action and thus has different opinions on how best to move ahead in the workplace, all three of these cohorts are members of today’s workplace, with the 1980s cohort the smallest and the 2000s cohort the largest.

The people I interviewed graduated from Ivy League and other prestigious institutions. They work in finance, venture capital, law, technology start-ups, accounting firms, media companies, and nonprofits, among many other fields. The three cohorts I examine have witnessed different trends in American society and have faced a variety of situations in the corporate world. Nonetheless, they share the experience of being among
the first Asian Americans to benefit from affirmative action programs and to witness large-scale immigration and growing numbers of Asian Americans in US colleges.

In chapter 2, I discuss a “playbook”: a set of maxims forming an ever-shifting collection of oral advice handed down from generation to generation among Asian Americans. This advice, an essential if unspoken element of handed-down precepts for living from one generation to the next, is designed to instruct young people as to the best way to make their way in the world, whether by compiling an impressive academic record or achieving in various extracurricular activities designed to enhance their portfolio when it comes time to apply for college (which it’s assumed they’ll attend, graduate from, and perform well in). And it is this playbook that in many respects lies at the heart of the dilemmas and challenges that second-generation Asian Americans face when they enter the world of work.

The playbook, of course, is not literal, and its precepts are not written down, but it is pervasive. It also emphasizes the attitudes young people should cultivate—that is, aiming to achieve on one’s own, keeping one’s head down, working hard, and concealing any failure. It also prescribes the sorts of careers that Asian Americans are expected to pursue—professional work, medicine, and law. They’re not expected to pursue careers in the arts, where success is less quantifiable and failure a greater risk. The playbook is practical, instrumental, optimistic, and actually very helpful—up to a point.

While young Asian Americans don’t use the term “playbook,” it’s clear they refer to its precepts when they say, “My parents always told me . . .” or “My friends told me. . . .” It’s abundantly clear from my conversations with them that they have been raised to follow these precepts religiously, in terms of both their performance and their attitudes. Finally when one thinks of the model minority, it is likely in part because it’s assumed that young Asian Americans will follow the precepts embodied in the playbook to meet the high standard both throughout school and afterward in their work life.
In chapter 3, I examine to what extent parental encouragement, college recruiting programs, compensation, prestige, campus climate, and peers encourage Asian Americans to pursue certain kinds of corporate jobs that offer relatively risk-free employment. However, because for a variety of reasons Asian Americans often move laterally within a company, it frequently takes longer for them to earn the title and compensation they feel they deserve, if they earn them at all. This pattern explains why some Asian Americans may be hobbled from the very beginning of their time in the workplace.

In chapter 4, I explore the work world and how Asian American professionals are climbing the corporate ladder. I examine the forms of capital (social and human) acquired in college and how they are transferable to the various skills needed in the workplace, along with how professionals of different generations navigate routes to promotion and the significance of race and/or ethnicity in these processes.

In chapter 5, I examine the very mixed and often dispiriting experiences of Asian Americans who are at or near the executive level. As members of this group have discovered, the higher they rise, the fewer fellow Asian Americans they find, the result of which is a growing lack of mentors and sponsors. This lack makes it increasingly difficult for this population to move up through a corporation’s executive ranks.

In chapter 6, I discuss the unique problems Asian American women confront in the workplace. Like men, they face Asian American stereotypes, and because they are also women, they represent a double minority. They also face questions about their ability to be likable, to lead, to negotiate, to balance work and family, and to respond to sexual harassment.

In the conclusion, I examine the double-edged implications of the “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” mantra that is inferred in the playbook and that is ingrained in the vast majority of second-generation Asian Americans. I also explore why a belief in this mantra can make it hard for young Asian Americans to recognize the critical importance of constricting racial attitudes in the corporate workplace.
As my research and analysis show, the fate of Asian Americans in the corporate workplace is influenced by a complex web of factors, many of which hobble members of this group as they seek to ascend the corporate ladder. Only by recognizing this framework and of course understanding and confronting these factors will their outlook improve.