



Asian scientists are a major presence in U.S. biomedical research labs. So why do so few hold leadership positions?

A Glass Ceiling for Asian Scientists?

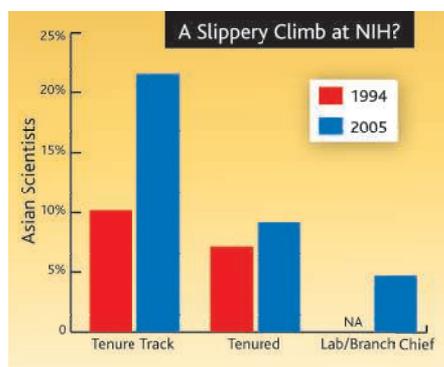
Virologist Kuan-Teh Jeang always thought it strange that his employer, the National Institutes of Health (NIH), would celebrate Asian Heritage Week each year with a cultural fair. “We’re not known for being great cooks or dancers. We’re known for being great scientists,” says Jeang about an ethnic group that, according to 2000 census data, comprises 14.7% of U.S. life scientists despite being only 4.1% of the nation’s overall workforce. So last year, he and the NIH/Food and Drug Administration Chinese American Association launched a new tradition: inviting a distinguished Asian researcher to give a scientific talk.

This May, as Asian Heritage Week approached, Jeang and his colleagues had another idea: Why not use the occasion to examine the status of Asian scientists within NIH’s intramural program? Jeang had already collected some disturbing numbers about opportunities for career advancement at NIH, and he was eager to see whether his numbers squared with an official tally by NIH officials.

To his chagrin, they did. Whereas 21.5% of NIH’s 280 tenure-track investigators (the equivalent of assistant professors) are Asian, they comprise only 9.2% of the 950 senior investigators (tenured researchers) at NIH. And only 4.7% of the roughly 200 lab or branch chiefs are Asian. (For this story, the term “Asian” includes all scientists with Asian surnames, regardless of their citizenship or immigration status. The group is dominated by scientists of Chinese, Korean, Indian, Pakistani, or Japanese origin.) Within particular institutes, the numbers were even more sobering. As of this spring, just one of 55 lab chiefs at the National Cancer Institute, NIH’s largest, was Asian. At the National Institute of Allergy and

Infectious Diseases, where Jeang works, none of the 22 lab chiefs was Asian.

To Jeang and others, the numbers point to a glass ceiling for Asian life scientists seeking to move up the career ladder. Asians are welcome in most labs, the numbers seem to say, and those who prove themselves can earn a permanent position. (Taiwan-born Jeang, who holds both an M.D. and Ph.D., came to NIH as a medical staff fellow in 1985 and was tenured in 1993.) But they



Pressure from below. Asian scientists are underrepresented among tenured staff and lab chiefs.

shouldn’t expect to enter senior management. “We feel that the field is not level,” says Jeang, who has calculated that, at NIH’s three largest institutes, Asians make up roughly 12% of the eligible pool from which lab chiefs are drawn.

NIH isn’t the only place with a glass ceiling, say some Asian life scientists. This summer, neuroscientist Yi Rao of Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, took a look at the leadership ranks of the two major professional societies in his field: the Society for Neuroscience (SfN) and the American Society for Biology and Molecular Biology

(ASBMB). What he found was even more troubling than the NIH figures.

His snapshot showed that none of the 26 ASBMB council members was Asian, nor were any of the 193 members of the society’s 11 standing committees. Asian scientists make up fewer than 4% of the 703-member editorial board at its top-tier *Journal of Biological Chemistry (JBC)*, and none of the 21 associate editors with decision-making authority. Asians are equally invisible among the leadership ranks of the neuroscience society, Rao found. They hold only two of nearly 300 seats on 18 committees, and none of the 15 elected officer and councilor posts. Looking back, Rao found that only a handful of Asian scientists have ever held such elective positions in the society’s 36-year history.

Rao says the message is clear. “However the phenomenon can be described, the underlying problem is discrimination,” he wrote in July letters to ASBMB and SfN governing officers. “Chinese Americans tend to be quiet, partly because their voices and concerns are not listened to. But should that mean obedience and subordination forever?”

Senior officials at NIH, SfN, and ASBMB don’t dispute the numbers, although some say they were surprised by them. “There’s an appearance of a glass ceiling, which is troublesome,” says Michael Gottesman, who heads NIH’s intramural research program. “It makes you wonder if there’s an inherent bias.”

Looking for factors that might help explain the gap, he and others tick off the relatively recent arrival on the U.S. scientific scene of Asian scientists, language barriers, and cultural stereotypes that prevent Asians from being more aggressive in seeking pro-

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motions and honors. But in the end, they say, their organizations have an obligation to try to improve the situation. “The solution is straightforward. We need to make their accomplishments better known,” says Gottesman, who met with Jeang and three other Asian scientists this summer to discuss how NIH could do better.

The stealth problem

For Rao, Jeang, and other Asian scientists, the recent data-gathering exercise confirms something they had long felt to be the case. “It’s an unspoken truth,” says neuroscientist Joseph Tsien of Boston University, who left China in 1986 for graduate school and later became a U.S. citizen. “We don’t fall into the typical minority group because we’re not underrepresented, especially in science. But you see so many [Asian scientists] at the bottom of the ladder and so few in the top ranks. ... It’s a funny situation.” In a letter this spring to NIH Director Elias Zerhouni that prompted NIH to gather the data, Jeang explains that “we want to disabuse you of the common mythology that Asians don’t want to be leaders.”

But the issue is also very complicated, says Yu Xie, a sociologist at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, who has studied both the behavior of scientists and the growing presence of Asians in U.S. society. “Often people look at statistics, and they jump to the conclusion that there has been discrimination,” says Yu, who came to the United States from China in 1982 for graduate school. “I haven’t seen any evidence that it is the case. It might be true, but we just don’t know enough to reach a conclusion one way or the other.” Indeed, several Asian scientists interviewed for this article say they haven’t experienced any type of glass ceiling. “I personally don’t feel that it applies to me. But I’m not very sensitive,” says Liqun Luo of Stanford University in Palo Alto, California, who earlier this year was named a Howard Hughes Medical Institute investigator.

Still, Luo says others have told him that the ceiling exists and that the issue seems to be on people’s minds. A Stanford colleague contacted him after receiving Rao’s letter, he says, and out of the blue, Luo says he was invited to be on SfN’s program committee.

Neuroscientist Eve Marder of Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts, who chairs the society’s program committee, says she and the society’s other officials believe strongly that all panels should have diverse representation. “It so happens that this year almost none of them do, and I recommended to the committee on committees that they be more proactive.” She says she also suggested to Rao a tactic that has helped women rise through the ranks: “For-

ward us lists of people who are interested, so that nobody can say that they don’t know any Asian scientists” who are willing and able to serve the society.

The head of the committee on committees, Irving Levitan of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, says he was “stunned” when he saw the numbers. “There is great consciousness about gender and underrepresented members,” he says. “But frankly, we have not paid attention to Asian Americans because they are so visible in the lab.”



Levelheaded. NIH’s Kuan-Teh Jeang wants a level playing field for Asian scientists.

For some ASBMB officials, the tone of Rao’s message was as shocking as the message itself. “It was a very insulting letter,” says Linda Pike of Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. “He was accusing us of doing something that was awful and terrible and mean without bothering to find out why. You can’t just look at the numbers.”

In her reply to Rao, Pike explored a question often asked when the issue comes up: How many Asian scientists are truly qualified to hold leadership positions? “How many of the Chinese authors of scientific papers are in a position to serve on ASBMB committees?” she asked. “How many choose to return to their country, and how many seriously try to obtain faculty positions in the U.S.?” In addition, she noted that “a lack of language skills could put a faculty member at a severe disadvantage” in obtaining funding and, thus, building the track record needed to move up the career ladder. “While I sympathize with your concerns, there is much more that needs to be examined before diagnosing ASBMB as engaging in discrimination.”

Even so, ASBMB is taking the charge very seriously, says president Judith Bond of Hershey Medical Center in Pennsylvania. Last month, Bond says, the society decided to invite “a Chinese-American member” of the *JBC* editorial board to become an associate editor, and the council plans to discuss the issue of a glass ceiling at its December meeting.

For Gottesman, inertia and a limited number of available slots are bigger obstacles to progress than the qualifications of Asian scientists. “The pool is getting bigger,” he says. “But the average age of our lab chiefs is about 10 years more than it was 10 years ago. There’s a need to turn those positions over more often.” He says it’s his job to remind the scientific directors to look at a broader spectrum of potential candidates for these jobs.

A glass ceiling doesn’t mean that no individuals have risen to great prominence in the profession. Examples abound. In fact, some Asian scientists say that the critics have gone overboard in painting a bleak picture of the United States. “They are fighting for a good cause, but they are going to an extreme,” says Mu-Ming Poo, a neuroscientist at the University of California, Berkeley, about those who claim that the data prove a glass ceiling exists. “The United States is the most tolerant society in the world, including China, for foreign scientists. In 10 years, Yi Rao will probably be holding one of these leadership positions, and so will many of his colleagues.”

Indeed, many are anticipating a rosier future. It will come, they say, both because of the graying of the current generation of leaders and because Asian scientists will become more adept at learning how to get ahead. “This is America. And you need to embrace those qualities that are appropriate for success,” says Victor Dzau, chancellor for health affairs at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, who was born in Shanghai and educated in Canada and the United States. “It will require a conscious effort. But I would predict that the disparity will narrow as the next generation moves forward.”

Jeang also believes that change is coming. Last year, he says, he was on the brink of leaving NIH when a senior colleague convinced him that history was on his side. “When I was growing up at NIH,” the colleague confided to Jeang, “every chief of medicine and every director was a WASP. But all their right-hand men were Jewish doctors. Now all our right-hand people are Asian. It just takes time.” That pep talk, plus a recent meeting with Gottesman, has persuaded Jeang that NIH means business. So he says he’ll stick around and wait for a time when the disparity disappears.

—JEFFREY MERVIS