

Tanya Domi:

Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to The Thought Project, recorded at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences and sciences. In this space we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi:

Margaret M. Chin was born and raised in New York City and is herself a child of Chinese immigrant parents. She is currently an associate professor of sociology at Hunter College and The Graduate Center, CUNY. Margaret received her BA from Harvard University and her PhD from Columbia University.

Tanya Domi:

She is the author of two books: the award winning, *Sewing Women: Immigrants and the New York City Garment Industry*, an illuminating ethnography on the Chinese and Korean garment sectors, and *Stuck: Why Asian Americans Don't Reach the Top of the Corporate Ladder*. This book is an analysis of the need to understand how factors such as racism, a lack of trust and having few sponsors can hold second generation Asian Americans back, which is the subject of our podcast conversation today.

Tanya Domi:

Welcome back to The Thought Project, Professor Margaret Chin.

Margaret Chin:

Thank you for having me again. I enjoy speaking to you whenever I'm on or whenever I get to see you or talk to you. I enjoy speaking to you. Thank you so much, Tanya.

Tanya Domi:

You're welcome and you're a great colleague. Congratulations on your new book, *Stuck*. You developed your book based on research on a cohort of second-generation Asian Americans. You report that across industries that Asian Americans lag on climbing the corporate ladder. You introduce a term, "The bamboo ceiling," which I really thought was clever and smart.

Tanya Domi:

In your introduction this sentence really jumped out to me, "For a specific group of scholars they have determined that demography is not destiny. In their opinion the elite class, meaning white Caucasians in America, will reproduce itself with only a few exceptions, to satisfy many minimum expectations in a society that is, at least in theory, a meritocracy. However, belief in such a system and a process is viewed by many scholars as overly simplistic and there are opaque forces that seem to affect the promotion pipeline and it can have a negative impact when it comes to achievement on both individual and institution levels."

Tanya Domi:

Can you give an overview to our listeners about how you approached the research for this book and what it told you about why many Asian Americans, second-generation, are exceptionally educated at distinguished universities but yet, do not reach significant heights in corporations that are consistent across industries in American workforce and in American society?

Margaret Chin:

Yeah, certainly. I probably should tell you how I started this research and then can explain a little bit of it. I was at a reception for Harvard College admits, maybe in 2012 or '13. I'm a Harvard College alumni and I interview high school students on occasion and I was at this reception and the room was filled with Asian Americans and partially I think it's Asian American students that get in, they bring their parents, they bring their siblings. It just looked like there were tons of people in there who were Asian American. It's not more than you would expect but it just looks that way because they brought people who were proud of them, right?

Tanya Domi:

Yes.

Margaret Chin:

So there an admissions officer asked me, "Hmm, we've been admitting Asian Americans at a high rate for 30 years now, ever since we started up an affirmative action program, but do you know where Asian Americans are these days?" Kind of like cheeriness, not to say that it was anything bad or anything like that but it's just curious and then I said, "You know what? I really don't know where we all are." So that's what got me into looking-

Tanya Domi:

I see.

Margaret Chin:

... at where people are. It all started with the Asian American Harvard alums. And so I went through their alumni network and I started interviewing and then from there I did a snowball sample of their friends. So I had 103 in the end of people who were Ivy League graduates, non-Ivy League graduates, people who graduated from teeny schools all over, a mixture of people from very selective to not so selective schools, 103, and I looked at three different cohorts. People who graduated college from the 1980s, the 1990s and the 2000s.

Tanya Domi:

Yes, yes.

Margaret Chin:

And the most significant part of this is that I interviewed what I would call the broadly defined second-generation and most people when they think about and studies of Asian Americans in the corporate world or in the workforce have never really distinguished so much, only lately they've distinguished the American born.

Margaret Chin:

But what I did was, I looked at those who were born ... who were immigrants but who came here before they were age 13 and the American born and that group who were immigrants, why they're so significant is that when I started interviewing people I realized that I, myself, who am an American born and of Chinese immigrant heritage, I couldn't tell that some of these folks who were immigrants who came here as children were actually foreign born.

Margaret Chin:

I thought they were American born just like me and then I looked at some other studies and realized that this particular group, they went to school here since middle school, high school. They're all socially and culturally American and why it's so significant is that if you go into any workplace, probably 40% of the Asian Americans in that room are broadly defined second-generation. So there are no language barriers, they've gone to school here. They understand the culture here in the U.S. What is holding them back?

Margaret Chin:

I'll give you a quick figure about corporations and why I thought it was so important to study people in the work worlds. So even though Asian Americans, if you look at Harvard in particular, 25% of the admitted class, the freshman class, but even among professors they're only 11 or 10% of tenured faculty at Harvard. If you look at corporations you'll see that even 55 years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act, people in the top levels of corporations are really slow at getting up there, in other words.

Margaret Chin:

In 2018, of the Fortune 500 CEOs, there were less than a dozen Asian Americans, only three are black and only 24 are women. So that quote that you gave in the very beginning by Zweigenhaft and Domhoff, it really shows that at the very top it's majority white men, likewise in fields that you think Asian Americans should be succeeding in, especially in tech, if you look in Silicon Valley and five corporations, right? You have 27% of the professionals are Asian American but only 14% of the executives are. Likewise, in law-

Tanya Domi:

CEOs, yeah.

Margaret Chin:

... and this is a shocking number, 124 were associates but only 14 became partners. They actually have the highest attrition rates and the lowest rates to partnership out of all of the groups of color, including African Americans-

Tanya Domi:

That's very interesting.

Margaret Chin:

... and Latinos, so-

Tanya Domi:

Now when you talk about the one and a half generation, is that the people that come here, they were born outside of America and they came here or am I misunderstanding what that means?

Margaret Chin:

So the one and a half generation, specifically it was defined basically by another Grad Center colleague, a couple of them, Phil Kasinitz and John Mollenkopf, along with Mary Waters. They wrote a book on the

second-generation and they defined this group, the 1.5, meaning they were born overseas but they came here before they were age 13.

Tanya Domi:

Okay, so that's-

Margaret Chin:

So they came here really as little children.

Tanya Domi:

Right. So they assimilated very quickly as a child, probably.

Margaret Chin:

Yes.

Tanya Domi:

Yeah, okay. Well, that's-

Margaret Chin:

And psychologists have shown that they don't even have an accent with whatever home language they might have spoken when they were infants.

Tanya Domi:

Sure. Very interesting. So you came to this conclusion and you actually point out that when it came to the positions at the highest level, race matters more than many people are willing to admit and certainly more than many people acknowledge. Race affects the movement of Asian Americans up the work ladder. I want to hear your thoughts about that, I guess it's obvious after you go through the data and you look but it must have come out of your oral interviews as well and do you have a policy prescription besides the obvious one of civil rights, et cetera?

Margaret Chin:

All of the 103, I would say more than half of them, really wouldn't say it was anything systemic. So you have to remember I interviewed people between 2014 and 2016, so this is before all of the most recent anti-racism discussion or even people learning the new language, right? So a lot of them saw, if there was any kind of discrimination, they saw that discrimination happening to their parents and this includes the 1980 graduates to the youngest, 2000 graduates. And that they now, it's mostly just microaggressions or implicit bias, nothing really and moreover it wasn't systemic. It was just among individuals.

Margaret Chin:

So if somebody discriminated against you or you felt there was discrimination you thought it was an individual disagreement between you and the other person. Most of them just laughed it off, shrugged it off and tried to figure out how to deal with it individually. How to deal with that person or just fix it with themselves. Like, if they said I had something like I wasn't speaking up enough, then they'd go to

Toastmasters or something to learn how to speak better or something. Did something individually. But after interviewing all of these folks with similar stories because that's how you do ethnography, when the stories start repeating themselves, you stop interviewing.

Margaret Chin:

So some of them had similar stories, I began to see that it was definitely systemic and that it was definitely racism that was affecting these individuals, especially when they got to the level of mid management or higher. It was something much more going on and that they needed to think about how to address it, not just as an individual but more systemically.

Tanya Domi:

That makes sense.

Margaret Chin:

Do you want me to give you an example of-

Tanya Domi:

Sure. Sure. Why don't illustrate it-

Margaret Chin:

... what happens.

Tanya Domi:

... yeah, illustrate it. That would be great for our listeners.

Margaret Chin:

Yeah. One example, as people reach, I'd say almost the top level where they hit the executive suites, one thing came out clear. A lot of the people who ... and I didn't have that many. I only had seven people who were within that chief executive suite and they talked about how important trust was at that level, how their executive team needed to trust them and they needed to trust all the members of that team.

Margaret Chin:

And why that mattered was that ... I tried to look at why it was so important, why they were stressing trust so much and I looked at some of the psychology studies, research that was done, in particular ones that were done by Susan Fiske and in her stereotype content model, she talked about how people actually have stereotypes of different groups of people but they come out on two axes.

Margaret Chin:

One on competence and one on warmth and Asian Americans, in particular, fall low on warmth but high on competence and why that's so important is that if you're really competent like they believe. A stereotype of Asian Americans is that they're competent but they're not so warm, that's another stereotype. I'd have to say that the people I talked to were overwhelmingly warm and they were competent. So that was in my perspective when I talked to people.

Margaret Chin:

But going back to the book and Susan Fiske's study, she says that when people are stereotyped low in warmth and high in competence people sometimes, in the back of their minds, stereotype them, they're fearful of them because if you're not a friend, that means you're not warm, you could be a competitor and you could be dangerous.

Tanya Domi:

And a threat.

Margaret Chin:

And so for Asian-

Tanya Domi:

Yeah.

Margaret Chin:

Right, a threat.

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Margaret Chin:

And a threat. So to move up to that level, if you're seen as a threat because they stereotype you as not warm, that is very difficult for you to move to the chief executive levels, those C-suite levels and that's one thing that although my interviewees didn't mention anything about this stereotype content model, the research, they kind of felt it.

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Margaret Chin:

And those who made it up there knew that they had to gain that trust of their coworkers.

Tanya Domi:

I was just going to say, this is a-

Margaret Chin:

So it's something-

Tanya Domi:

... nice segue to my next comment, which is about you address what you call the "playbook" in the inter-generational oral lessons from family in chapter two and you talk about how these historical narratives are shared with younger people in how to guide them to success but what you also mention is that

when Asian Americans get to middle management, they want to go higher, they're devoid of mentors. This comes up a lot and also you ... just what you just addressed, the issue with trust. The trust, lack of mentoring, that comes up in your book quite a bit.

Margaret Chin:

Yeah, it does because a lot of the interviewees talk about it. So I made up this term, the "playbook", mostly because all of my interviewees mentioned this verbal advice that was given to them by their parents, by their peers, by community members and how you're supposed to succeed and almost all of it is by your individual effort.

Margaret Chin:

You had almost a checklist, to go through school, if you do well in classes, if you get great grades, if you become the first violin, if you become a leader in certain clubs or certain teams you'll get on and do well in college. And then in college, you do some of these similar things and get advice in figuring out which jobs you should take, especially the ones that your parents recommend, like being a doctor or a lawyer or an engineer, you'll do well.

Margaret Chin:

So most of these things encourage people to try to succeed on their own in this playbook. Likewise, at the mid career and above level is to try to figure out how to do this all on your own and what it's devoid of is how you can use programs and how you can have mentors or rely or trust or access mentors or use other programs that can help you.

Margaret Chin:

And so because this playbook really stresses how you can do well by yourself, I mean it's good but it's also limiting. I mean, it's good because it encourages you to practice, encourage you to say that if you practice and you try hard and you practice hard in certain things you'll do well. So it's not innate in you, right? It's not biological but if you work at it you can learn how to do better. That's a good thing to have, right?

Tanya Domi:

Of course.

Margaret Chin:

But the other thing is, because you do it so much you rely on yourself so much and it doesn't talk about how other programs and other people and it ignores that you actually need all that other stuff to help you. The other thing it doesn't talk about it what happens if you fail? And it kind of makes it so that everybody succeeds in the playbook.

Margaret Chin:

So that playbook becomes this stereotypical image of Asian Americans, as well as, it limits what you can actually do. It doesn't have any answers, when you hit that ceiling, that bamboo ceiling. It doesn't have any answers as to when you fail at something. So this is where it needs to be broadened out. How do you get to specifics about how do you gain trust? Is there a way that organizations can actually help you and not you doing it personally or in addition to you doing it personally.

Margaret Chin:

And here I talk about programs that might have existed for some of the people who made it there, like mentoring programs, like affirmative action programs that might have helped you get a job and all formal programs inside an organization that might have helped introduce you to different sectors in a corporation, introduce you to different executives in a corporation because as Asian Americans and as still relatively new immigrants without people in those levels, how will you meet people and learn information about how you can move there if you don't have access to those individuals? That's where a formal program can help.

Tanya Domi:

Sure. As you note, too, in your book about so many Asian Americans do attend elite schools, populating in Ivy League and Ivy Plus schools, have the alumni associations been any use? I mean, I would think there's a lot of alumni networking. I mean, you're a graduate of Columbia and Harvard. I've gone to alumni events and there is a lot of networking going on.

Margaret Chin:

Actually more networking could help. There are Asian American networks going on. It's limited to your group and there is networking in terms of the college network. So that helps but I think, moreover, you need more than just a network. You need to be able to move into ... a network helps but in corporations they actually need to be side-by-side with you.

Tanya Domi:

Right. Mentored.

Margaret Chin:

To work as peers.

Tanya Domi:

Mentored. Right?

Margaret Chin:

I think mentored and to work as peers.

Tanya Domi:

Sure.

Margaret Chin:

Not just, you can get information from a network but you have to be able to sit there and I think for a lot of these corporate organizations what they're missing now, even though they may have a diversity inclusion program, is that they're not really looking at people ... and I'm not talking about just Asian Americans. I'm talking about African Americans-

Tanya Domi:

In general. In general.

Margaret Chin:

... and Latinos and women. In general, you need people to always look out that at certain levels you need everybody there to learn from everybody because if you don't have that, what you'll do is, people at the very top will promote or bring up people who look just like you because they're the most comfortable with that particular group.

Tanya Domi:

That's right.

Margaret Chin:

And until you have peers there and you know that these folks are, they may look different. They may act a little differently, they may have liked different things but they actually have a lot of information and a lot of things that they contribute to the organization. And that sole idea is they're peers. They actually work with you and that's what we don't have. We don't have people at that high level.

Tanya Domi:

I see.

Margaret Chin:

We barely have anybody at that mid level, too.

Tanya Domi:

Because the second-generation hasn't been here advancing long enough. YOU've only had a couple of generations, right? I mean, that's really one of the limitations.

Margaret Chin:

That's part of it and I also think even those that did get to a certain level didn't get promoted all the way up.

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Margaret Chin:

So even those who graduated college in the 1980s or even some in the 1970s, they only got so far. Likewise, with African Americans and Latinos, they only got so far. There's still very few of them at the-

Tanya Domi:

At the very top, yeah.

Margaret Chin:

... highest level.

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Margaret Chin:

And that's where race matters.

Tanya Domi:

So, before we move on I just wanted to point out that you do point out in the playbook when young people are advised on how they can advance you talk about the ... such fields as in the humanities or in art is really not considered a good way to advance in American society. So some fields are marginalized through this playbook advice. Is that right?

Margaret Chin:

Yeah. So going back to the playbook are tenets that I think originally parents wrote up, Asian American parents, immigrant parents.

Tanya Domi:

Sure. Yes.

Margaret Chin:

Came up as a reflection of what they think will actually help their children in American society.

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Margaret Chin:

So this playbook is in response to the parents or grandparents feeling that there is discrimination in the society. So the parents really felt that if you're going to do well in American society, if you're going to fulfill that immigrant bargain, I came here as an immigrant and I want you to do better than me because I gave up everything to come here.

Margaret Chin:

So for you, as my child, to do better I don't want you to feel discrimination. I feel that you will do the best in fields where they just look at you as a doctor or as an engineer, somebody who can produce something and that can help people and that you can actually prove with them with your degrees that you are actually capable and can do well and you're protected with those degrees. Whereas, in art and in dance or in any of these other categories it's much more nebulous. There's nothing there to actually say you are the best in that-

Tanya Domi:

That field.

Margaret Chin:

... category.

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Margaret Chin:

So a lot of it is from the parents and so one joke about the playbook and I don't remember if it's in that chapter or later but you'd be a doctor, a lawyer, an engineer or a loser and that is actually typical of the playbook.

Tanya Domi:

Of the playbook, yeah.

Margaret Chin:

There's certain ... yeah, jobs that parents would actually want their children to have and people don't say it but it's because the children are actually protected. Parents or grandparents feel like their children are actually protected in those particular jobs.

Tanya Domi:

That's interesting. So, you do use the term, "bamboo ceiling." Can I ask you, is this a pivot off the glass ceiling as designated much for women. It seems it's very clever. You really give it a particular bent because it is your data and your research shows that there really is a bamboo ceiling in American society.

Margaret Chin:

It's funny you say that. Actually I didn't coin the term but actually a woman named Jane Hyun did over 10 years ago, maybe 15 years ago.

Tanya Domi:

I see.

Margaret Chin:

She wrote a book called Beyond the Bamboo Ceiling, but what I really wanted and I didn't get to put it in the book and I have to give credit to my younger sister. She said, "You should have just used the term, bamboozled" because in reality ...

Tanya Domi:

Right. Right.

Margaret Chin:

Because in reality these Asian Americans do hit the bamboo ceiling but they're doing it because they're bamboozled to believe in this myth. So really you should just use that term, bamboozled from now on, instead of saying that."

Tanya Domi:

That's a good way of using your humor, no doubt. In your book with the final chapter on Asian American women I might just say this because I know you and we're colleagues but they always say many books are memoir and you are one of the most successful young professors that I've worked with at The Graduate Center, really it's a pleasure to see somebody like you doing what you're doing.

Tanya Domi:

And yet, what Asian American women have to go through, which certainly must incorporate some of your own experiences, is that I thought it was interesting and also an interesting point of accomplishment that Asian Americans do earn a higher level of salary than white women because of their education and selectivity of specific careers that would earn more money but yet, they continue to earn less than Asian men.

Tanya Domi:

You also talk about the dual balancing, actually it's three, which I was really struck by, about being a woman and the cultural effects of growing up in America. That balancing act and the second of which is how Asian American women are perceived in the workplace and then the third like that is dealing with sexual harassment and sexual discrimination. That's a big load to carry on your shoulders. Can you talk about what you found and how maybe you even relate to it personally?

Margaret Chin:

I've been doing this for a long time and when people mentioned all the different things I can think of ... not examples like theirs. Some of them are so awful. I would never have thought about those things. But, yeah, I'd say those images do exist for Asian American women, all of them.

Margaret Chin:

I think the most shocking one I think most people have not thought about is the one about sexual harassment. I mean, they might have but nobody has really come out to say it and in the last year or two, with the Me Too movement, I think when Asian American women talk about the Me Too movement in technology in particular, almost all of the women that came out at one point, after Ellen Pao, they were all Asian American women and it was a shock for actually for me to see it because some of them didn't have Asian American names but when you saw their photos it was clear that-

Tanya Domi:

They were, yeah.

Margaret Chin:

Yeah, they were. I think, still to this day, people don't see the connection and see how little support they actually have when they do say or call out or file a suit that maybe it has to do with stereotypes of Asian American women that actually there is little support in the workplace for them from other women and definitely not men in the workplace. That's one of the ones that are ... I don't know if it's the most shocking but it's the most stark out of all of the examples that I put in that chapter.

Tanya Domi:

And this is a tremendous burden to bear and then have to deal with childcare issues and just negotiating the workplace and managing a family. I mean, these are all of the burdens that all women have to deal

with but when you're carrying such a load you must be psychically negotiating this in your mind. You can't be conscious of it continuously because it would drive you mad but I can relate to it in some ways because I happen to be gay and so there are those stereotypes about being gay and you do think about it but you don't think about it consciously every second of the day but you are negotiating the workplace, without a doubt.

Margaret Chin:

Right. Absolutely and I think what you're pointing out to is this intersectionality that we don't talk about often, right? And I think that is what's going on if you're gay or if you're a person of color because you're not just looked at as just being a female. You're actually being looked at as being a gay woman or an Asian American woman or a black woman on top of it and those other images that are associated with what it means to being an Asian American woman come along and they may be different than what motherhood is for a white woman or for a gay woman or for a black woman and I think in that particular chapter when I talk about motherhood there are all of these images that go along with, "Oh, you must be this tough Asian American mom-

Tanya Domi:

Tiger mom. Tiger mom.

Margaret Chin:

... tiger mom.

Tanya Domi:

Yes.

Margaret Chin:

Yeah. On top of balancing your work career, you must be spending all your life being a tiger mom. How can you do this? And I think one woman actually talked about that, how that stereotype actually affected her in the workplace, which I think I actually didn't come across that myself because the image is relatively recent but it affects all young Asian American moms these days, especially in terms of how and what happens to their children in school and how they are or are not supposed to react to it and of course, it comes out to the hours that you put in at work.

Tanya Domi:

Of course, that too. Well, Margaret Chin, this is a tremendous book. At some point, I've never told you this but I lived in Hawaii for five years.

Margaret Chin:

Wow.

Tanya Domi:

I've lived in an Asian dominated culture and place and I learned a lot and it was multi-ethnic, Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Vietnamese. I learned a lot, maybe some time we can talk about that but this book-

Margaret Chin:

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Yeah, I'd love to.

Tanya Domi:

Yeah, this book is a great contribution and congratulations and go out and educate the public about this important issue.

Margaret Chin:

Thank you so much for having me on. I really, really appreciate it.

Tanya Domi:

Thanks for tuning in to The Thought Project and thanks to our guest, Professor Margaret Chin of Hunter College and The Graduate Center, CUNY.

Tanya Domi:

The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering and technical assistance by Kevin Wolfe of CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.