

# Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

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## I'm the One and Only for Now, But I Will Not Be the Last

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*Dearest Higher Education,*

I begin with two simple questions: why the hell am I the only Asian full professor in my department, and why was it so hard to fight tooth and nail to get to my coveted position? I also want to know why the higher education system tried to brainwash me into feeling I was not good enough to be, let alone succeed, in academia. As you can see, I have many questions that demand answers. Know that I am one of the spiciest Asians who will not back down. My perseverance has terrified many mediocre men who felt that they could disrespect me to my face. I also thrive on spite, and the evidence of that mere fact is the many men I have outranked with great glee. For those men who told me I could not do something, I made it my mission to prove them wrong and accomplish what they said I could not. I am certainly not your Asian fetish who laughs uncomfortably at your sexist jokes or buys into your problematic stereotypes.

I write this letter to you because Asian female full professors are almost nonexistent, accounting for a measly 4.2% of all full professors in the US (CUPA-HR 2025). The lack of representation of professors of color at higher ranks is not new to anyone who works in academia. All you have to do is look. When you consider that minuscule percentage is an aggregate of all Asian women, the percentage of Chinese female full professors becomes even less. I never had a Chinese, let alone an Asian, professor. It's hard to be someone you have never seen. As a child, when I was asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, I often chose professions I saw: firefighter, postal worker, teacher, police officer. I never even thought about being a professor, even when I was in graduate school. I simply knew I loved learning about psychology and wanted to do something with that love, but I didn't realize the odds were stacked against me. As an immigrant and first-generation college student, I had no idea what I was doing or what goal I should be striving for to make my dream a reality. My professors didn't even notice me in class. I was being a good Asian, listening to my immigrant parents to go to college, but once I was in college, I had no idea what I was doing. This proved costly in many ways; I didn't realize the importance of graduating with a high GPA, getting involved in research, forging relationships with my professors, engaging in extracurricular activities, and finding a mentor. In hindsight, maybe that rocky road was the path I needed to be on, so that when I became a professor I would know how to foster those aspects of success in my own children and students.

During this journey of discovery, I also learned the most valuable tool I needed to succeed in academia. I developed imposter syndrome, believing I did not belong in higher education. I spent so many nights thinking I should just drop out of my doctoral program. All my classes seemed so hard; my peers were talking about Derrida and Foucault, and I had no idea who they were. In hindsight, it never occurred to me to tell my professors and advisors that I was an immigrant and first-generation college graduate. At the time, I didn't see this connection as relevant to my struggles in graduate school, and more detrimentally, I felt it was a deficit in me that I had to hide. When I was the only one in my cohort to fail our first doctoral exams, I was devastated and cried over the phone to my husband in the first-year office. To that younger me, it felt like evidence that I did not belong in academia. I was not smart enough. I did not have the impressive pedigree or legacy of some of my classmates. I simply did not belong, and that weight was devastating to me. It was one of my classmates who

showed me that it wasn't entirely my fault for being the only one who failed. She was incensed that my advisor did not give me the same guidance that her advisor had given her. I was too busy crying to even realize what she was telling me, but it made sense. I slowly began to feel that I deserved better. In the end, I redid my first doctoral exam and passed. That failure taught me a valuable lesson about how persistent I am, which has served me well in all my later academic struggles.

Years later, I learned that the ivory tower was never meant for people who look like me; this motivated me to succeed in every way I could. Research by Gutiérrez and Cole (2023, 78) makes an important distinction: imposterization is inherent in academia, where the fault lies not in the individual (imposter syndrome) but in the systems of micro/macro-aggressions, policies, and practices woven into higher education. The result is that many faculty of color feel they do not belong. I also witnessed how this mentality encourages us to fight amongst ourselves; these are the very microaggressive actions that are often experienced by racially minoritized women academics such as myself. I recall being a lowly adjunct, teaching advanced high school students about psychology. It was a special program in which many professors were asked to teach these gifted students. At the end of the summer, we all attended a faculty-student mixer. I remember making small talk with other professors, and there was this one Chinese female professor who would stand in front of me and take over the conversation. At first, I didn't think anything of it. I was naive and thought she just wanted to chat with that professor, so I went to speak to another professor. She followed me and did the same thing, which puzzled me because I was just an adjunct and she was not.

I've witnessed this type of behavior so many times that I co-founded AAMPOWER (Asian American Mentorship Providing Opportunities to Women for Empowerment and Resilience) to provide and model a community of practice that offers a safe, inclusive space for sharing issues related to the Asian and Asian American experience in higher education through mentorship. This work feeds my soul, and I love how my three co-founders and I are all different kinds of Asians (e.g., Cantonese, Vietnamese, South Asian, Taiwanese) who have struggled to find our positions within academia (e.g., full professor, higher education officer, chair, and dean). One day, we decided to stop waiting for a seat at the table and build our own table. This work is a labor of love for me. We provide a much-needed service to bring forth issues, such as bullying, anti-Asian sentiment, mental health, self-care, unlearning detrimental cultural upbringing behaviors, fostering a confident Asian identity, negotiating your worth, dealing with familial guilt, and surviving elder and child care, as well as strategizing ways to fight against the constant imposterization in higher education.

The rage I feel should no longer be hidden; it needs to be made visible, because we need to work on fostering real support so that we don't continue to be the lonely only. At this point, academia is still living under the illusion that if we merely increase the number of people of color, that will suffice, and racism will be over. The sad reality is that racism within the ivory tower has only gotten worse with this current administration, where some of the strongest pillars of higher education are kowtowing to the most inept president of all time, who is bent on destroying all the progress that has been made in diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. Centering this letter on my rage can inspire a collective anger that rallies others who also thrive on spite, because we have a lot to fight for. The visibility of Asian rage also dispels the stereotype that we are submissive and meek. The more we put a face to our anger, the easier it will be for future generations to stand up for what they deserve. Silence only serves to protect the oppressors. Asians who grew up with the cultural value of staying quiet and not rocking the boat are doing a disservice to all their Asian colleagues. Sticking our heads in the sand has led to the angst that is felt across our nation. The bullies seem to be winning, but as with all bullies, they will cower when people start reclaiming the power of their voices. We are living in a time of intense bullying with no end in sight. We can choose to stay silent and endure, or we can start learning how to stand up and fight.

I understand that not every Asian woman wants to take on this fight. I am learning to respect their decisions, but I still harbor hope that they will join me in this cause to create a more equitable environment where I am not the lonely only. There is much power in creating a supportive environment where we all thrive with one another's help, but we must also realize that this fight is not just for us as individuals. We need to look beyond our individual lives and work to open the door for others who will come after us. We must put ourselves on search committees, mentor junior faculty of color, and strategize when racism rears its ugly head time and time again.

I am also filled with rage that I wasted so much time falling into your trap of imposter syndrome. For so many years, I wasted my confidence thinking I was not good enough. I almost quit my doctoral program because of you! It took me years to realize that the lack was not on my part, but it was imposterization related to how academia sets immigrants and first-generation students up for failure. You thought you had me, but you underestimated me. Since I realized that it was you who created such a hostile environment, I have actively published about the many facets you use to destroy faculty of color, mentored other faculty of color at my college, given workshops on the pitfalls of imposterization that you create, and co-founded an organization to support others who look like me so we can survive and thrive in your unwelcoming environments. You thought you had me, but you didn't know how resilient and spiteful I am. You will learn now that I am inspiring so many other faculty of color, other Asian women, and junior faculty to defeat you while building an arsenal of tools to constantly chip away at your so-called powerful ivory tower. You should be afraid of losing your power because we are living through a darkness that is exposing your problematic systems of oppression. Your good old days of nepotism are limited because increasing numbers of us are on to you; we are demanding change and equity. There are growing numbers of us because of people like me who serve not as gatekeepers but as those who swing the door fully open and bring as many through as we can.

*With much rage and a tiny bit of gratitude,  
Catherine (馬嘉儀) Ma, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.*

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## About the author

**Dr. Catherine Ma** is an award-winning scholar-activist in psychology. She is the first of many, being the first in her family to earn their Ph.D., and having earned the most graduate degrees; the first Chinese full professor of psychology at Kingsborough Community College, City University of New York (CUNY); the first Asian recipient of the University at Albany's Alumni Association Cochrane Excellence in Diversity and Inclusion Award; the first Asian faculty member selected to deliver the faculty address at Kingsborough's commencement; and the first Asian faculty member to co-found a CUNY-wide mentorship circle with her three Asian sisters from other mothers, to name a few. She knows that although she is the first of many, she will not be the last.