

TEXAS LAWYER

Breaking the Bamboo Ceiling: Rethinking Equity Partnership in a Globalizing Texas Legal Market

By Viking Tao

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In many large law firms, the data tells a familiar but underexamined story. Asian American attorneys are well represented in associate classes and often among the most technically strong members of their teams. Yet at the level of equity partnership—where compensation, client origination credit, and firm governance converge—their representation drops off sharply.

This disconnect, often described as the “bamboo ceiling,” reflects a gap between performance and advancement. The disparity is even more pronounced for Asian American women. The issue is not access to the profession, but advancement—specifically, the transition from strong contributor to equity partner.

From Execution to Ownership: Where the Gap Emerges

The pathway to equity partnership is not a linear extension of associate success. It is a transition from execution to ownership—of client relationships, revenue generation, and influence within the firm.

Asian American attorneys are often well positioned in the first phase. They are frequently among the most technically strong and reliable members of their teams, entrusted with complex matters and demanding clients.

Early in my practice, I was often staffed on matters requiring precision and responsiveness. That



Courtesy photo

Viking Tao, partner with Bradley Arant Boult Cummings LLP in Dallas, TX.

experience is common. What is less common, however, is the shift into roles that build client ownership—leading calls, managing relationships, and developing independent business.

Without that transition, even the most capable attorneys can remain highly valued, but not fully positioned for equity partnership.

Available data reflects this pattern. Asian Americans comprise more than 12% of associates at large firms, yet only about 5% of partners and roughly 4% of equity partners, according to data from the National Association for Law Placement and related studies. The gap is even clearer when measured by progression, with Asian American

attorneys having one of the lowest ratios of partners to associates, highlighting a drop-off at the point where ownership, origination credit, and governance converge.

The implication is straightforward. The challenge is not entry into the profession, but advancement within it—particularly into roles tied to business generation and firm influence.

Visibility and the Economics of Partnership

Equity partnership is, at its core, an economic decision. Firms evaluate candidates not only on legal skill, but on their ability to generate, sustain, and expand client relationships.

Visibility plays a central role. Attorneys who are consistently in front of clients—leading discussions and shaping strategy—are more likely to be viewed as future partners. Those working primarily behind the scenes often face a steeper path.

The same qualities that drive early success—diligence and execution—can unintentionally limit exposure to client-facing opportunities that build origination over time.

Assertiveness and Communication Style

Research highlighted by the Committee of 100, a national nonprofit organization of Chinese American leaders across business, government, and academia, including studies comparing East Asian and South Asian Americans, offers a more nuanced view of the bamboo ceiling. These studies show that East Asians are less likely than South Asians to attain leadership positions, despite comparable qualifications. A key differentiator is assertiveness.

For Asian American women attorneys, this dynamic is often compounded by what researchers have described as a “double bind.” Behaviors associated with leadership in U.S. professional environments—such as assertiveness, direct communication, and self-advocacy—may run counter not only to cultural expectations, but also to gender norms. When Asian American women do not speak up, they may be perceived as lacking leadership presence; when they do, they may be viewed as overly aggressive or not fitting expected norms of communication. This tension can make it more difficult to develop a leadership style that is both authentic and recognized within traditional partnership frameworks.

This dynamic is further shaped by cultural upbringing. Many Asian American attorneys, particularly those from East Asian backgrounds, are raised to value humility, respect for hierarchy, and letting work speak for itself. These are strengths that support discipline and teamwork. These strengths, however, may not always align with U.S. professional expectations, where advancement often depends on visible self-advocacy and projecting confidence.

In law firms, this can translate into fewer opportunities to speak up, challenge ideas, or claim ownership—all of which are informally evaluated in partnership decisions.

For Asian American attorneys, this often requires a more intentional approach: speaking up, articulating viewpoints clearly and directly, and viewing business development as an extension of client service rather than self-promotion. Assertiveness, importantly, does not require abandoning professionalism. One can be both assertive and polite at the same time. The most effective advocates combine clarity with respect.

Developing this balance requires deliberate effort. It is not always natural, and it does not happen overnight. It is something many attorneys, myself included, work on continuously. In environments where visibility shapes opportunity, silence—even when accompanied by excellent work—can come at a cost.

Firms, in turn, should ensure that leadership pathways are not calibrated to a single communication style.

From Mentorship to Sponsorship

Mentorship is important, but it does not by itself create partners. Advancement depends on sponsorship—senior lawyers who create opportunities for visibility and client engagement and who advocate within the firm.

In my own career, at my first law firm, this was not a one-time opportunity. Senior partners consistently encouraged me to speak up and gave me the chance to lead portions of client discussions early and often. Over time, that exposure shifted my role from execution to engagement and shaped how clients perceived me. On one occasion, a client referred to me—still an associate—as the lead counsel on a

complex transaction. The partner laughed, but also encouraged me to step into that role.

I was also fortunate to have mentors and sponsors who actively supported my advancement. Their advocacy led to my mid-year promotion to partner, recognizing my contributions in real time.

Just as importantly, the culture of my first firm encouraged associates to engage in business development early in their careers. That early exposure to client development, combined with meaningful sponsorship, can significantly accelerate the path to partnership. Later, I was invited to serve on the firm's board of directors, reflecting a culture that valued trust, professional growth, and leadership development.

Without these opportunities, the path remains narrow, regardless of capability.

Texas as a Global Market

Texas is increasingly a global business hub, with significant inbound investment from Asia. As a result, law firms are operating in more cross-border and cross-cultural environments.

In this context, attorneys are often doing more than negotiating deals—they are navigating differences between a client's head office overseas and U.S. business practices. Representing Asian clients frequently involves bridging expectations around hierarchy, communication, and decision making. In many cases, the work involves negotiating not only the deal, but also the cultural context in which the deal is being done.

In my practice, cultural fluency and the ability to translate these differences have been critical to building trust and successfully closing complex cross-border transactions. These skills are not peripheral—they are increasingly central to client service and business development. For law firms seeking to represent Asian clients, investing in attorneys who can bridge these cultural and business expectations is not just good client service—it is a strategic business advantage.

Practical Steps Forward

Addressing the partnership gap requires both firm-level and individual action. For firms, this

includes creating client-facing opportunities earlier and actively supporting sponsorship for Asian American attorneys.

Small actions matter. For the reliable attorney who may not speak up first, simply asking for their input can surface valuable perspectives. In many cases, the ideas are already there—they may simply need a nudge to share.

For Asian American attorneys, intentionality is key. This often requires stepping beyond what feels natural, taking risks, and actively seeking visibility, speaking up, and developing leadership skills.

Many attorneys benefit from leadership roles outside the firm—through nonprofit boards, bar associations, or structured programs such as the Dallas Bar Association's WE LEAD, a leadership development program for women attorneys, from which I have benefited tremendously. These environments provide practical opportunities to develop voice and presence in lower-risk settings.

Closing

The bamboo ceiling is often framed as a question of barriers. In practice, it is a question of alignment—between how talent is developed and how leadership is recognized.

Law firms have no shortage of capable Asian American attorneys. The challenge is whether they are positioned to convert that capability into client ownership and influence—a gap that is often more pronounced for Asian American women.

Firms that address this gap will not only expand opportunity, but also strengthen their ability to compete in an increasingly global and sophisticated market.

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