

# Meet the most influential Asian American Pacific Islanders in Boston

Topped by Mayor Michelle Wu, a new list calls attention to a group of underappreciated local leaders.

By **Shirley Leung** Globe Columnist, Updated February 2, 2023, 5:42 a.m.



From left to right: Helen Chin Schlichte, Boston Mayor Michelle Wu, and Eleanor Pao at an event honoring the city's most influential Asian American Pacific Islanders at the Boston Foundation offices on Jan. 31, 2023. BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

Consider this the new “A” list: a roster of the most influential Asian American Pacific Islanders in Boston.

Of course, Michelle Wu sits on top as the first Asian American and first woman elected mayor of Boston. She’s followed by nearly 100 people who are leaders, legends, or rising stars across academic, business, civic, media, and political circles.

The [inaugural list – compiled by public relations poo-bah Colette Phillips](#) – aims to highlight how many Asian Americans play prominent roles in the region. Our community tends to be overlooked and underappreciated, but not anymore.

“For so long — and I was one of them — my mother always said, ‘Be invisible. Do your work and keep your head down,’” said Helen Chin Schlichte, aka, “Auntie Helen,” who is on the list. “Now, we have so much more visibility. I’m just so proud of it.”



Helen Chin Schlichte at an event honoring Boston’s most Influential Asian American Pacific Islanders at the Boston Foundation offices. BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

Of course, Chin Schlichte — who turns 90 on Friday did not heed her mother’s advice. She became a fixture on Beacon Hill, as one of the few Asian Americans in state government when she started in 1949. She ultimately worked for 12 governors and rose to become one of the first Asian American women to achieve prominence as a public administrator. She went on to serve on boards, including Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, and cofounded South Cove Manor nursing home and the Asian Community Fund at the Boston Foundation.

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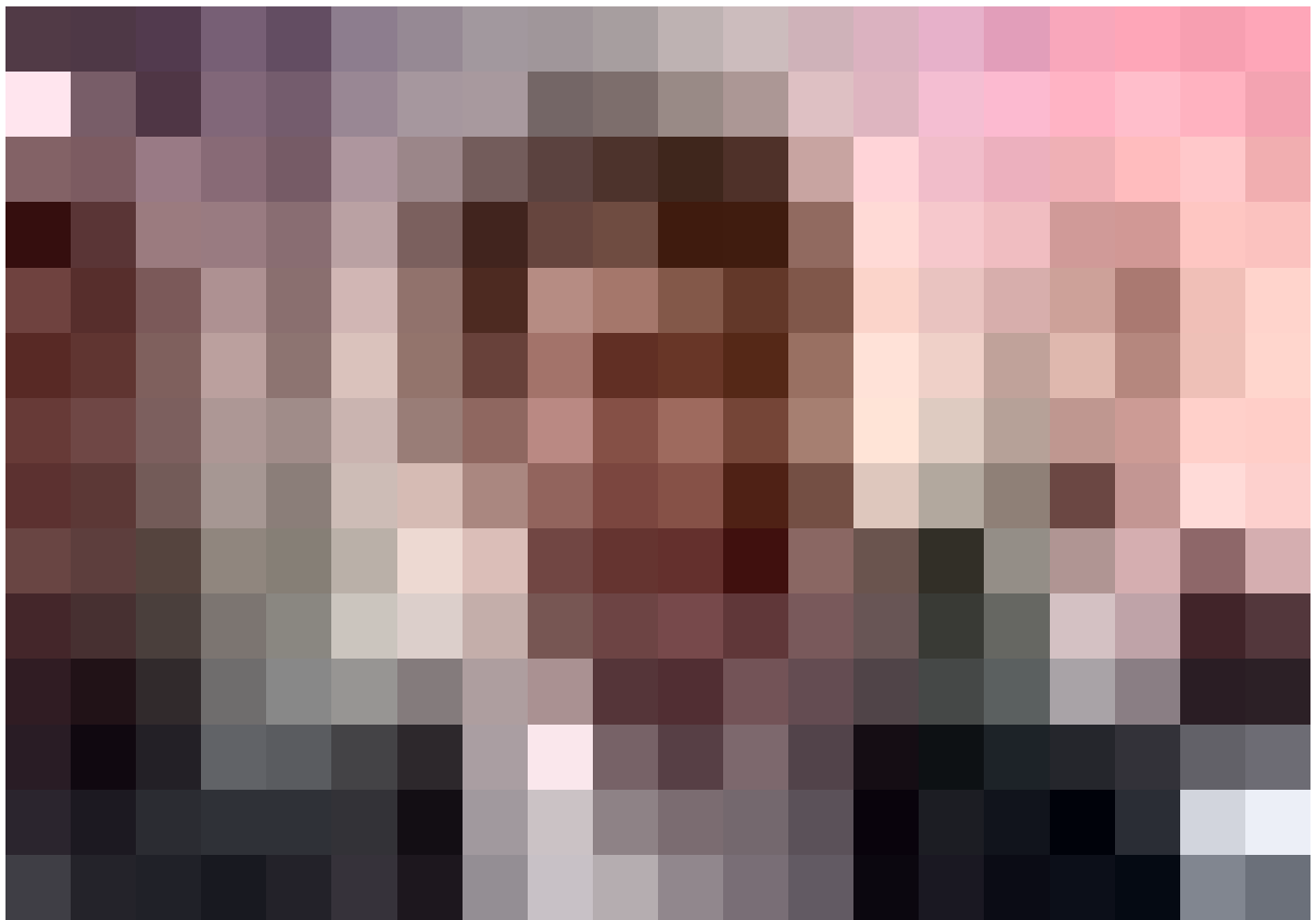


Then there’s Frank Chin. “Uncle Frank” has long been the unofficial mayor of Chinatown, and he’s had the ear of governors, mayors, and legislators for more than six decades. Indulge me a bit more to name drop other AAPI giants on the list and whose shoulders the rest of us stand on: Joseph Chow, Desh Deshpande, Atsuko Fish, Howard Koh, Bill Lee, Paul Lee, Rebecca Lee, Vivien Li, Nam Pham, Paul Watanabe, and Janet Wu.

Meanwhile, a new generation is leaving their mark. Among them: IDG CEO Mohamad Ali, University of Massachusetts-Lowell chancellor Julie Chen, Greater Malden Asian American Coalition cofounder Mai Du, Bunker Hill Community College president Pam Eddinger, Vertex CEO Reshma Kewalramani, Takeda Pharmaceutical US president Julie Kim, M&T Bank regional president Grace Lee, Social Finance cofounder Tracy

Palandjian, Wayfair cofounder Niraj Shah, and Ginkgo Bioworks cofounder Reshma Shetty, and Commonwealth Seminar executive director Leverett Wing.

In politics, Asian Americans are on the rise. Cambridge boasts a powerful pair: Mayor Sumbul Siddiqui and City Manager Yi-An Huang. Back in Boston, Tiffany Chu serves as Mayor Wu’s chief of staff, while Quincy has City Councilor Nina Liang, who recently wrapped up a stint as that chamber’s president. And up in Lowell, [Sokhary Chau](#) broke barriers as the country’s first Cambodian-American mayor when he took office last January.



Cambridge City Manager Yi-An Huang at an event honoring Boston’s most Influential Asian American Pacific Islanders at the Boston Foundation offices. BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

On Beacon Hill, state representative Tackey Chan, a Quincy Democrat, has been a tireless champion of AAPI issues, while expectations are riding high for [new state economic secretary Yvonne Hao](#).

In full disclosure, I'm on the list, too, along with Globe colleague Deanna Pan, WBUR's Meghna Chakrabarti, GBH's Liz Cheng, and India New England News founder Upendra Mishra.

More than 300 allies and honorees, including Mayor Wu, gathered at the Boston Foundation Tuesday to celebrate what was called a "historic night."

Two of the honorees — Takeda president Kim and Vertex CEO Kewalramani — reflected on what it means to be Asian American.

Growing up in Ohio, Kim recalled, it took her a long time to appreciate her Korean heritage.

"I remember feeling how it felt to be made to feel like less — less welcomed, less accepted, less included," she said. "The basis for this was simply because I look different. And I'm sure that is something that many in this room can relate to."

Kim said she worked hard to minimize her differences, but later in life, she began embracing who she is.



Julie Kim, president of Takeda Pharmaceuticals US, speaking during an event honoring Boston's most Influential Asian American Pacific Islanders at the Boston Foundation offices. BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

“It was only when I did this that I could feel like more — more energized, more capable, more respected, more normal,” she said. “I’m really proud to be female, immigrant, Asian, Korean-American, and many more things. And I acknowledge very proudly that who I am today and the leader that I’ve become today is based on the totality of all of those lived experiences.”

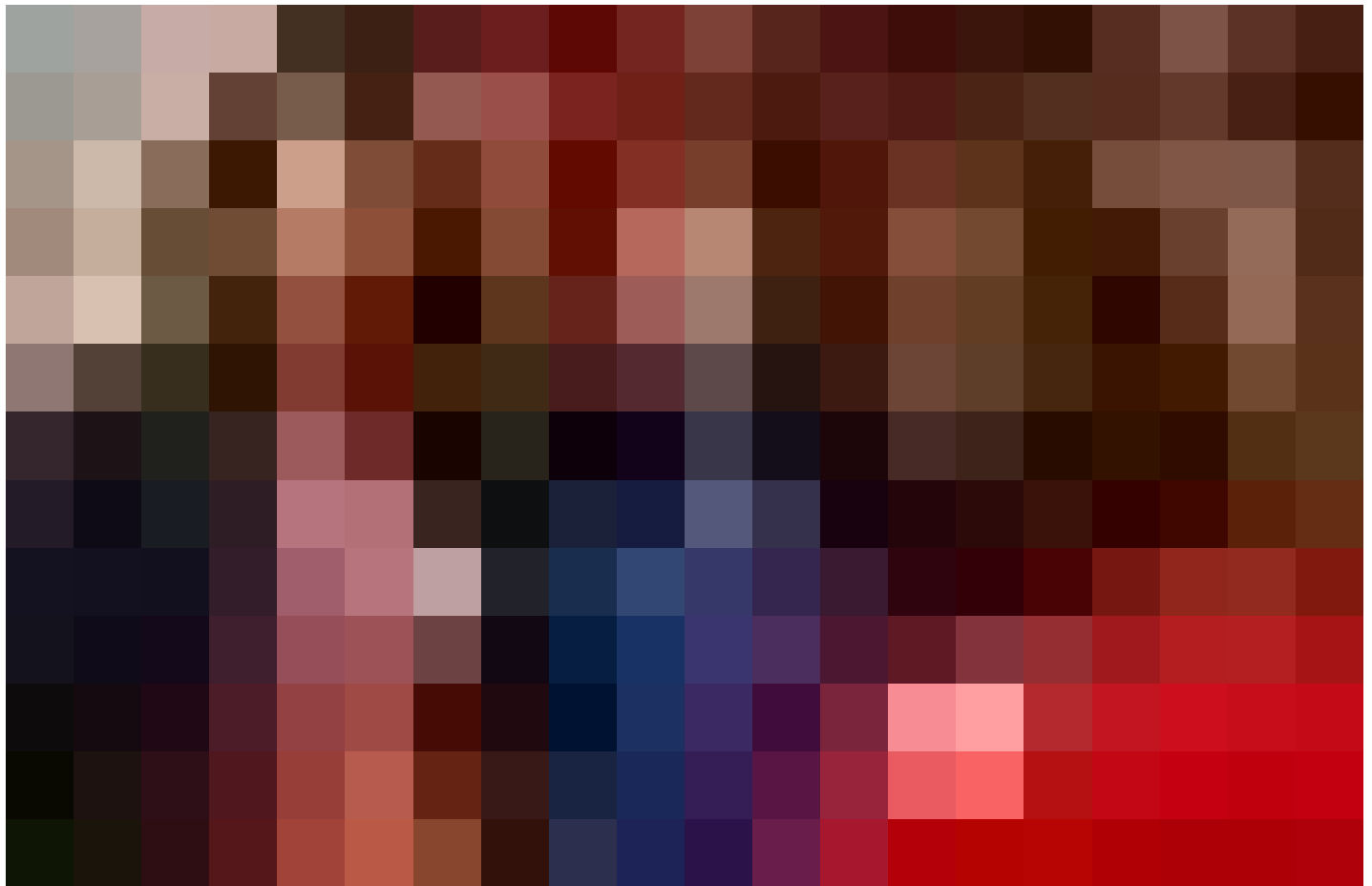
Similarly, Kewalramani talked about moving from India to the US when she was 11. Her parents wanted the family to assimilate so they settled in an outer suburb of New York City.

“There were no Indian people. There were three Asian people, and that was that. I didn’t really know which community I belonged to. And as I’ve grown up, I’ve become more aware,” said Kewalramani. “I am really moved tonight to see all of you here — to see the leaders, the legends, the rising stars, because this is happening in my beloved city of Boston.”

Two decades ago, it would have been hard to come up with a long list of influential Asian Americans in Boston. This time, there are too many AAPI luminaries to name. That's a good problem to have.

Phillips, who crafted the inaugural list, did so to honor the resiliency of the AAPI community. Yes, there have been historic breakthroughs in recent years, but also rising Asian hate during the pandemic, and a spate of deadly shootings from Atlanta to Monterey Park, Calif.

“This is an opportunity to elevate, document and celebrate this community,” said Phillips. “They have been this country’s hidden gems.”



Vertex CEO Reshma Kewalramani, Mayor Michelle Wu, and Colette Phillips during an event honoring Boston's most Influential Asian American Pacific Islanders at the Boston Foundation offices. BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

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