

## **Dance Represent/Asian: Surveying Asian Americans in Professional Dance**

Keywords: dance, ballet, race, Asian, Asian American, hiring, promotion, bamboo ceiling

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### **Abstract**

Data about Asian Americans in dance is considerably lacking. Researchers present the results of a survey focused on the Asian American experience in professional US dance organizations, although ballet was of particular interest due to its high status and sociohistorical power. A short survey was distributed to professional dancers. Participants were asked a series of multiple-choice questions about how they identify, their dance training, and professional experience and status. The next section included a Likert-type scale to indicate whether participants agreed with statements about their experiences in dance. Lastly, participants could respond to open-ended questions. Despite overrepresentation of Asian groups in professional dance, survey findings indicate a prevalence of microaggressions, scrutiny in casting, challenges of intersectionality, and negative effects of race on career progression. Furthermore, results suggest a bamboo ceiling, employment-related discrimination, and limited resources and opportunities to voice concerns. While this survey was an important first step in understanding Asian American representation in professional dance companies across the US, additional studies are recommended to improve our understanding of training, ranks, promotion rates, and experiences of Asian American dancers.

## Introduction

Representation in professional dance promotes the visibility of diverse populations, integrating unique narratives, themes, and physical vocabularies. Although the junction of dance and race has maintained a longstanding presence in dance research,<sup>12345</sup> Asian American issues have only recently gained momentum.<sup>678910</sup> Nonetheless, insufficient data persists. Sparse data exist regarding Asian American dancers.<sup>111213</sup> Information about the Asian American professional dance experience is considerably lacking with no demographic studies previously reported to our knowledge. A rapidly growing population in the United States and in dance, Asian Americans face unique challenges. We took a phenomenological approach with the presented survey—building upon theories<sup>14</sup> that perceptions influence reality; understanding others' perceptions can shift perspectives; and addressing both perceptions and perspectives can impact individuals'

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas F. DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey's Embodiment of African American Culture* (Oxford Academic, 2006), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195301717.001.0001>.

<sup>2</sup> Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Lynn Fauley Emery, *Black Dance from 1619 to Today*, 2nd ed (New Jersey: Princeton Book Company, 198).

<sup>4</sup> Julie Kerr-Berry, "Peeling Back the Skin of Racism: Real History and Race in Dance Education," *Journal of Dance Education* 16, no. 4 (2016): 119-121, doi: 10.1080/15290824.2016.1238708.

<sup>5</sup> Nyama McCarthy-Brown, "Dancing in the Margins: Experiences of African American Ballerinas," *Journal of African American Studies* 15, no. 3 (2011): 385–408, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12111-010-9143-0>.

<sup>6</sup> Phil Chan, *Final Bow for Yellowface: Dancing between Intention and Impact* (New York: Yellow Peril Press, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Jennifer Gerson, "What It Means to Be Asian American in Ballet— and What Barriers Stand in the Way," *19th News* (Austin, TX), May 16, 2023, <https://19thnews.org/2023/05/ballet-dancing-barriers-stereotypes-aapi-women/>.

<sup>8</sup> John Peter Viernes, "Op-Ed: Why is Ballet So Bad at Representing Asians Onstage? Look at The Choreographers," *Dance Magazine*, June 1, 2018, <https://www.dancemagazine.com/asian-american-ballet-2574229069.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Yutian Wong, *Choreographing Asian America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Wong, Yutian. *Contemporary Directions in Asian American Dance*. Edited by Yutian Wong. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> "Dancers & Choreographers," Data USA, 2020, accessed November 5, 2021, <https://datausa.io/profile/soc/dancers-choreographers#demographics>.

<sup>12</sup> Sunil Iyengar, "Tracking Demographic Differences Among U.S. Artists and Arts Managers," *National Endowment for the Arts Blog*, August 4, 2022, <https://www.arts.gov/stories/blog/2022/tracking-demographic-differences-among-us-artists-and-arts-managers>.

<sup>13</sup> Jason Yeung, "Where You From?," Data Pointes, May 3, 2019, <https://datapointes.com/2019/05/03/where-you-from/>.

<sup>14</sup> Edward N. Zalta, ed. "Phenomenology." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Last modified December 16, 2013, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/?fbclid=IwAR2CAfqinW69rOPE14LjubTjCOq1TtMHsr aL5V41Scosh6FIPeKQBT0dq50>.

daily lives and outcomes. We propose increased research about Asian American achievement in professional dance could identify areas of improvement, opportunities for advocacy, expand awareness of phenomenological experiences, and provide a broader examination of race in dance. As previous research about Asian Americans in the workplace have focused on corporate settings<sup>15161718</sup>, this study provides insights into Asian Americans employed in creative spaces and the arts—thereby exploring implications in relation to hiring, employee pipeline, and related human resources issues.

We recognize the term Asian American can be simultaneously unifying, flattening, and incomplete. Thus, our research focuses on both broad commonalities and pluralistic nuances in professional dance. The survey was designed to allow participants to identify specifics regarding nationality, ethnicity, and generational context. Despite the myriad of individual backgrounds, we are utilizing the term “Asian American” to indicate commonalities of this demographic<sup>1920</sup>. Likewise, we are using the term “Professional Dance,” notwithstanding the innumerable facets of paid dance employment. Considering the wide-ranging definitions of professional dance in the US, we acknowledge our own research leanings toward professional ballet companies. This proclivity toward ballet is a manifestation of the social, economic, and historical enculturation that uniquely positions ballet above other dance genres<sup>2122</sup>. Ballet is consistently elevated as an elite dance form with power and privilege punctuated by Eurocentric aesthetics and White-

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<sup>15</sup> Allan Chen, “Experiences of Underrepresentation in Corporate America: Chinese American Stories of Tackling the Bamboo Ceiling,” Doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2022, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2720360773?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true>.

<sup>16</sup> Sylvia Ann Hewlett, “Breaking Through the Bamboo Ceiling,” *Harvard Business Review*, August 3, 2011, <https://hbr.org/2011/08/breaking-through-the-bamboo-ce>.

<sup>17</sup> Daan Struyven, Hui Shan, and Daniel Milo, “Asianomics in America: Contributions and Challenges,” *The Bigger Picture* (UK: Goldman Sachs Global Investment Research, May 2, 2022), <https://www.goldmansachs.com/intelligence/pages/gs-research/asianomics-in-america/report.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> Chris Westfall, “Battling Discrimination and the Bamboo Ceiling: The Bias Facing Asian American Managers,” *Forbes*, September 14, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/chriswestfall/2021/09/14/discrimination-and-bamboo-ceiling-the-unconscious-bias-facing-asian-american-managers/?sh=330702c323dc>.

<sup>19</sup> “Discrimination Experiences Shape Most Asian Americans’ Lives,” Pew Research Center, November 30, 2023, accessed January 27, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/race-and-ethnicity/2023/11/30/discrimination-experiences-shape-most-asian-americans-lives/>.

<sup>20</sup> “Key Findings 2023,” Stop AAPI Hate, November 2023, last accessed January 27, 2025, <https://stopaapihate.org/2023/11/14/key-findings-2023/>.

<sup>21</sup> Sarah E. Fried-Gintis, “Elevated: Ballet in the United States, World War II to the National Endowment for the Arts.” Doctoral Dissertation, University of Southern California, 2011, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/847227469?fromopenview=true&pq-origsite=gscholar>.

<sup>22</sup> Tobin James, “Calling for Cultural Humility in Ballet Academies and Companies,” *Journal of Dance Education* 20, no. 3 (2020): 131-135, doi: 10.1080/15290824.2020.1781864.

normativity<sup>23</sup>. The positionality and preeminence of ballet is evident in funding<sup>24</sup>: “Ballet companies receive the most from private funding for dance, followed by contemporary dance companies<sup>25</sup>.” It is evident in the predominance of dance research and reports, such as the reputable Dance Data Project releasing the *English-Speaking Company 2023-2024 Season Programming Report* that transparently focuses only on “programming at ballet and classically influenced companies<sup>26</sup>.” It is evident in language choices, such as the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) report on arts engagement that lists a variety of art forms but only delineates one main dance genre: “...activities include art museum or gallery visits, and attendance at jazz, classical, or Latin/salsa music performances, musical and non-musical plays, craft fairs and outdoor performing arts festivals, opera, and ballet and other dance forms<sup>27</sup>.” In our experience, ballet is often the default presumption when discussing professional dance at an administrative level. For the purposes of the survey, we accepted responses from all Asian American-identifying respondents who reported experience in the US professional dance setting in order to cast our net widely for this initial study. We were interested in the findings from this niche and finite group, and suspected responses would reveal a preponderance of ballet experiences. Although we resist using dance as synonymous with ballet, we hypothesized a ballet lens would provide a strong measurement of experiences in the field at large. Recent Dance Data Project<sup>28</sup> findings support our hypotheses:

The report finds that in FY2022, the **Largest 125** contemporary and modern companies operated with a total aggregate expenditure of \$177,888,176. However, when compared to the **Largest 125** ballet and classically based companies, which reported expenses 3.99 times higher than the **Largest 125** contemporary and modern companies, a marked difference emerges in the operating scale between the two sectors.

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<sup>23</sup> Michael Morris, “Standard White: Dismantling White Normativity,” *California Law Review* 104, no. 4 (2016): 949–78, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24758741>.

<sup>24</sup> “The Largest Ballet and Classically Based Companies 2024,” Dance Data Project, accessed January 27, 2025, <https://www.dancedatapoint.com/ddp-research/the-largest-ballet-and-classically-based-companies-2024/>.

<sup>25</sup> “Fundraising for Dance,” Inside Philanthropy, accessed January 27, 2024, <https://www.insidephilanthropy.com/find-a-grant/fundraising-for-dance#:~:text=Ballet%20companies%20receive%20the%20most,by%20contemporary%20ance%20companies>.

<sup>26</sup> “English-Speaking Company 2023-2024 Season Programming Report,” Dance Data Project, accessed January 28, 2025, <https://www.dancedatapoint.com/ddp-research/english-speaking-company-2023-2024-season-programming-report/>, 2.

<sup>27</sup> “Arts Participation Patterns: 2022 Highlights from the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts,” National Endowment for the Arts, accessed January 29, 2025, <https://www.arts.gov/impact/research/publications/arts-participation-patterns-2022-highlights-survey-public-participation-arts>, 2.

<sup>28</sup> “2024 Largest Contemporary and Modern Companies Report,” Dance Data Project, October 2024, <https://www.dancedatapoint.com/ddp-research/2024-largest-contemporary-and-modern-companies-report/>, 2.

Considering its dominance in the dance sector relative to other genres, ballet currently prevails as the largest, highest funded, and potentially most influential genre impacting professional dance administration in the US. Thus, our query and findings tend to highlight the ballet realm.

We present the results of an anonymous survey focused on Asian American phenomenological experiences in professional US dance organizations. We designed the survey to shed light on hypotheses about perceived representation, casting, discrimination, bamboo ceilings, and expectations in professional dance in the US. Participants self-identified their race, countries/cultures of origin, first-generation (or more) American, dance training, professional experience, and rank. They also responded to Likert scales and open-ended questions regarding topics such as promotion, microaggressions, and discrimination. After obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the anonymous survey was distributed. We collected multiple details of identity to gain insights into the Asian American experience, unpack monolithic presumptions, and galvanize further research.

## **Methods**

The premise of this study is to determine how Asian American dancers are represented in professional dance companies, and to gather initial findings on the types of experiences, opportunities, and/or limitations that Asian American dances face when they seek to progress within their respective companies and throughout their professional careers in dance. To answer this question, we conducted an anonymous, one-time, 10-minute survey which was distributed to professional dancers across the US via Qualtrics, an online survey creation tool. Participants were given a statement of informed consent before beginning the online survey and were required to indicate their agreement with the statement before accessing the remaining survey questions. In this statement of informed consent, subjects were informed that their responses were anonymous and will not be linked to them or their company. Participants were then asked a series of multiple-choice questions about how they identify, their dance training, and their professional experience and status. Additionally, participants were asked to use a Likert-type scale to indicate whether they agreed with statements about their experiences in dance, such as “My race positively impacts casting decisions.” Lastly, participants were asked to answer open-ended questions to either contextualize or add to their previous responses. The subjects were thanked for their participation in the survey, but no compensation and incentives were offered. The survey contained 33 questions, with 14 of these questions being conditional upon a respondents answer to a previous question. A complete list of survey questions can be found in Appendix A. The survey was available to participants for a period of six weeks during spring of 2022.

Distribution of the survey took place across a variety of social media and online platforms, (including posts, feeds, and stories), and information posted on websites of organizations invested in Asian American dance issues such as Gold Standard Arts. Each social media post contained a graphic created by our team of researchers, along with a link to the Qualtrics survey

and a short summary of the project. Additionally, we worked to contact professional dance company personnel directly via contact information listed on professional dance company websites. Pertinent Asian and Asian American organizations were also contacted via information listed on their websites.

## Results

Before launching the survey, we collected preliminary data by accessing the public websites of top professional dance companies in the US. As previously mentioned, we focused primarily on ballet companies at this initial stage due to the prevalence of ballet and ease of identification from sources such as Dance Data Project<sup>29</sup>, Yeung<sup>30</sup>, and Dance Magazine<sup>31</sup>. We identified “top tier” companies based on annual expenses, performance season schedule, number of employed dancers, and overall name recognition and reputation. For the 2021-2022 season, 150 out of 1500 dancers, a 10% representation as opposed to 5-7% US population representation<sup>32</sup> were externally identified as having Asian descent based on a mix of headshots, pictures, biographies, interviews, and names when available. The authors acknowledge the limitations of these methods, potentially misclassifying individuals. Nonetheless, this overview of websites in 2020 indicated an overrepresentation of Asian dancers in the US professional dance realm relative to their demography in the general US population. The potential over-representation of Asian/Asian American dancers in professional ballet companies impacted our research queries.

## Demographic Questions

There were 170 survey responses. Of these, there were 87 responses by individuals who identified as having some Asian descent as well as experience in professional dance. Out of those who identified as Asian, 25 indicated they are two or more races; with 22 of those identified as Asian and White (Table 1).

*Table 1: Characteristics of Survey Respondents*

Characteristic	N = 87 <sup>1</sup>
Gender	
Cis female	60 (69%)
Cis male	21 (24%)

<sup>29</sup> “Research,” Dance Data Project, accessed January 27, 2025, <https://www.dancedatapoint.com/research/>.

<sup>30</sup> Yeung, Jason, “Where You From?”

<sup>31</sup> “Dance Annual Directory.” *Dance Magazine*, accessed January 27, 2025, <https://danceannualldirectory.dancemagazine.com>.

<sup>32</sup> “20.6 Million People in the U.S. Identify as Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander,” United States Census Bureau, May 25, 2022, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2022/05/aanhpi-population-diverse-geographically-dispersed.html>.

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>N = 87<sup>1</sup></b>
Nonbinary	3 (3.4%)
Prefer not to say	1 (1.1%)
Prefer to self-identify	2 (2.3%)
Race	
Asian (people in, descending from, or with cultural ties to Asia)	60 (70%)
Pacific Islander	1 (1.2%)
Two or more races (or Multiracial/multiethnic)	25 (29%)
Unknown	1
First-Generation	12 (14%)
1.5-Generation	14 (16%)
Second-Generation	45 (52%)
Immigrant Family?	
No	37 (43%)
Prefer not to say	4 (4.6%)
Yes	46 (53%)
Expatriate or International Artist?	
No	63 (73%)
Prefer not to say	1 (1.2%)
Prefer to self-identify	1 (1.2%)
Yes	21 (24%)
Unknown	1
Years of Formal Dance Training	
0 to 2	1 (1.1%)
10 or more	72 (83%)
4 to 6	3 (3.4%)

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>N = 87<sup>1</sup></b>
6 to 8	5 (5.7%)
8 to 10	6 (6.9%)
Percent Formal Dance Training in US	
0-25%	10 (11%)
25-50%	8 (9.2%)
50-75%	7 (8.0%)
75-100%	62 (71%)
Company Tier	
A Tier I Ballet Company	26 (31%)
A Tier II Ballet Company	10 (12%)
A Tier III Ballet Company	12 (14%)
A Tier IV Ballet Company	10 (12%)
A Tier V Ballet Company	8 (9.5%)
Other	18 (21%)
Unknown	3
Company Role	
Apprentice	9 (11%)
Artistic or Administrative Leadership	10 (12%)
Corps de Ballet	11 (13%)
Other	31 (37%)
Principal	8 (9.5%)
Production and Design Staff	1 (1.2%)
Soloist	14 (17%)
Unknown	3
Choreographic Experience	



Characteristic	N = 87 <sup>1</sup>
1-5 works in a Tier I or Tier II Ballet Company	7 (8.6%)
1-5 works in a Tier III or Tier IV Ballet Company	8 (9.9%)
10+ works in a Tier III or Tier IV Ballet Company	1 (1.2%)
5-10 works in a Tier I or Tier II Ballet Company	1 (1.2%)
5-10 works in a Tier III or Tier IV Ballet Company	1 (1.2%)
N/A, I do not consider myself a choreographer	55 (68%)
Some work in a Tier V Ballet Company or other (please clarify)	8 (9.9%)
Unknown	6

<sup>1</sup>n (%)

Respondents were predominantly second-generation (52%) and children of immigrants (53%). Our survey had limited response rates for first-generation (14%), 1.5-generation (16%), or expatriate dancers (24%). We cited the work of Lee and Zhou<sup>33</sup> to distinguish generational identification: first-generation refers to individuals born outside of the US and arriving in the US after the age of 13. Whereas, 1.5-generation refers to individuals born outside of the US and arriving in the US before the age of 13. A seemingly small distinction, the differentiation between first-, 1.5-, and second-generation invites nuanced considerations and insights about Asian American dance training paths, internalized assumptions, race-based socialization, and professional outcomes.

We speculate that limitations with language proficiency impacted our results which will be elaborated upon in the discussion section. Consequently, our survey results are more suited to address the challenges Asian American dancers experience. In line with this, 71% of dancers completed 75-100% of their training in the US with most dancers (83%) training for more than ten years, indicating long periods of time spent in the US.

A pie chart of all cultures listed is depicted in Figure 1. Respondents had heritage or cultural ties to 15 unique cultures. Many dancers (22) had multicultural backgrounds – each separate culture listed for these dancers is added to that culture’s tally in Figure 1B. Respondents were most likely to have ties to East Asian cultures (China, Japan, South Korea), followed by Southeast Asian (Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia) and South Asian (India). Respondents with

<sup>33</sup> Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou, *Asian American Achievement Paradox* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2015).

multicultural backgrounds either identified as more than two races or as Asian only, indicating dancers from Asian diaspora populations. Notably, only 12 respondents had ties to Japan and three respondents had ties to South Korea. As some of the largest groups of Asian dancers in the United States,<sup>34</sup> these low numbers indicate limited surveying of these populations, perhaps tied to English language proficiency.

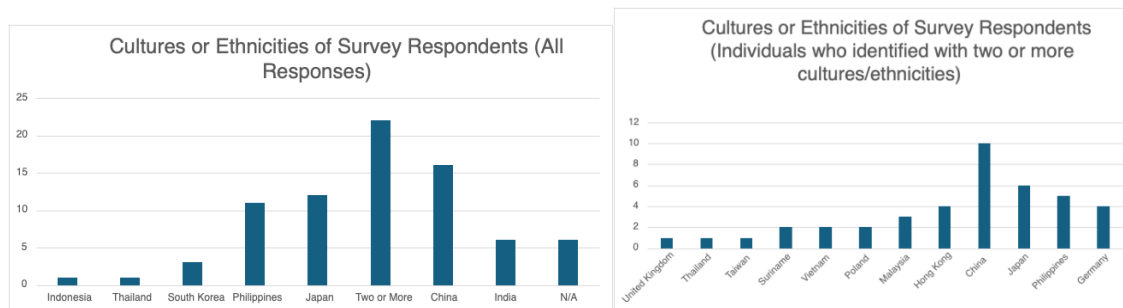


Figure 1: Cultures or Ethnicities of Respondents. Counts and percentages for cultures and ethnicities respondents self-identified. A) All responses and B) further disaggregation from individuals who identified with two or more cultures/ethnicities.

Survey respondents were majority cis-female (69%). However, how this compares to the actual proportion of male and female Asian dancers in the US is unknown. The percentage of female dancers from a sample of 26 US-based ballet companies has been stable at roughly 54% female<sup>35</sup>.

Respondents were also asked about company rank and company tier. Company tiers were defined as follows: "Tier I Company: a professional company with established seasons, annual expenses over \$10,000,000, and ~40 dancers or more. Tier II Company: a professional company with established seasons, annual expenses over \$5,000,000, and ~30 dancers or more. Tier III Company: a professional company with established seasons, annual expenses over \$1,000,000, and ~20 dancers or more. Tier IV Company: a professional company with established season, annual expenses over \$50,000, and ~10 dancers or more. Tier V Company: a regional company with established seasons, annual expenses over \$25,000." We acknowledge that there may have been some errors in responses for company tier, leading to misclassification. Data on company budgets can be difficult to locate publicly and dancers' pre-existing knowledge of these figures may have been limited.

### Likert Responses

Percentages for responses to all Likert questions can be found in Figure 2.

<sup>34</sup> Yeung, Jason, "Where You From?"

<sup>35</sup> Jason Yeung, "The Gender/Rank Breakdown," Data Pointes, May 3, 2019, <https://datapointes.com/2019/05/03/the-gender-rank-breakdown/>.

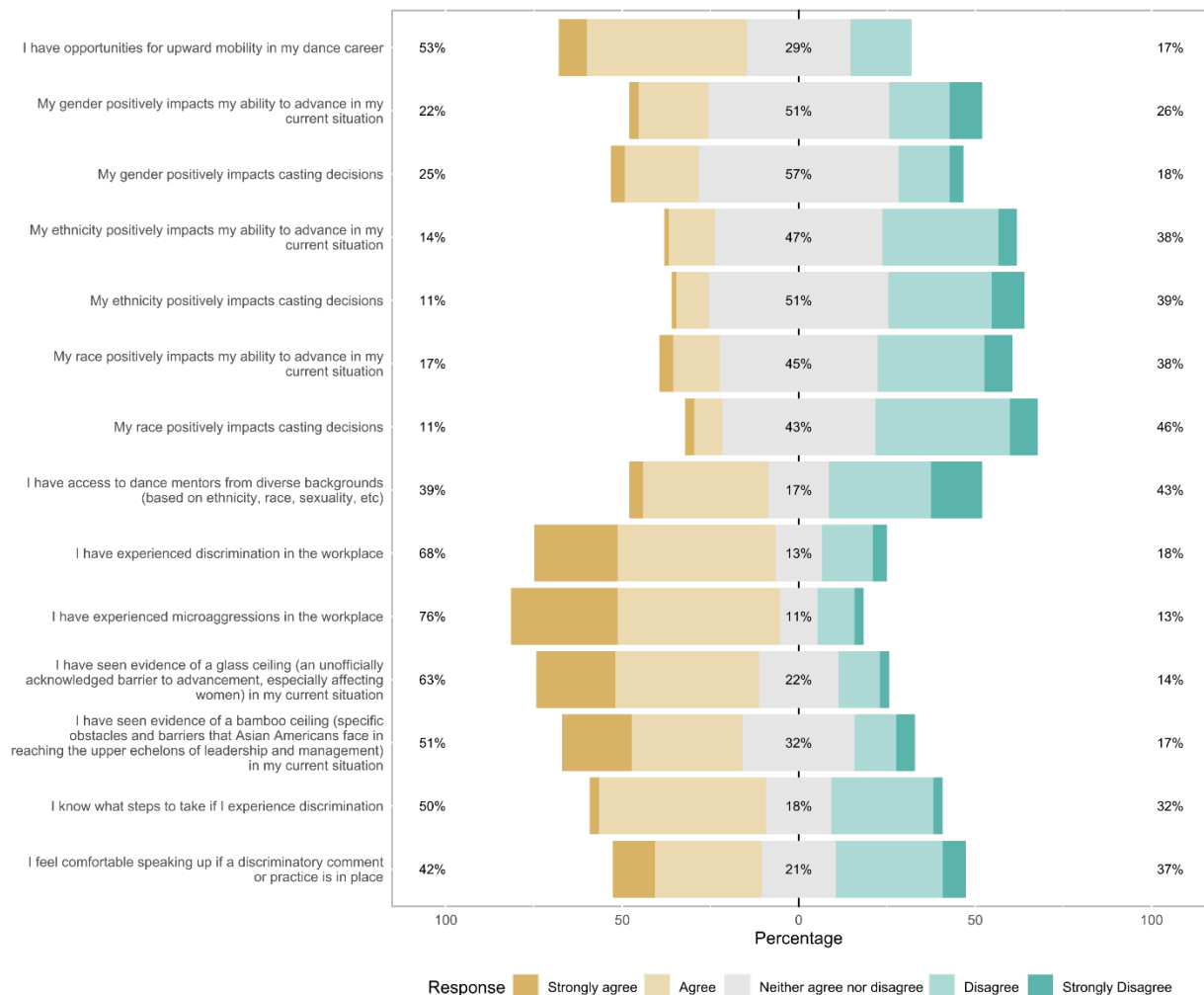


Figure 2: Responses to all Likert questions. The percentage to the left is the percent of all affirmative responses (Strongly Agree and Agree) while the percent to the right is all negative responses (Strongly Disagree and Disagree).

We also examined Spearman correlations between all pairwise combinations of Likert responses with significant correlations ( $p$ -value  $< 0.05$ ) reported in Figure 3. This demonstrates question pairs that received similar or dissimilar responses from survey respondents.

Question 5 “My ethnicity positively impacts casting decisions” and Question 7 “My race positively impacts casting decisions” demonstrated the highest correlation among pairs of questions ( $r_s = 0.76$ ). Dancers responding positively to Question 1 “I have opportunities for upward mobility in my dance career” had a tendency to respond positively to Questions 4, 6, 13, and 14: (“My ethnicity positively impacts my ability to advance in my current situation”, “My race positively impacts my ability to advance in my current situation”, “I know what steps to take if I experience discrimination”, “I feel comfortable speaking up if a discriminatory comment or practice is in place”). On the other hand, modest negative correlations between Questions 10-12 (“I have experienced microaggressions in the workplace”, “I have seen evidence of a glass ceiling [an unofficially acknowledged barrier to advancement, especially affecting women] in

my current situation”, “I have seen evidence of a bamboo ceiling [specific obstacles and barriers that Asian Americans face in reaching the upper echelons of leadership and management] in my current situation”) and Question 13 (“I know what steps to take if I experience discrimination”) may indicate dancers who encounter these negative experiences feel they have limited means of reporting or preventing these incidents. Finally, responses to Question 9 (“I have experienced discrimination in the workplace”) and Question 10 (“I have experienced microaggressions in the workplace”) were highly correlated ( $r_s = 0.7$ ).

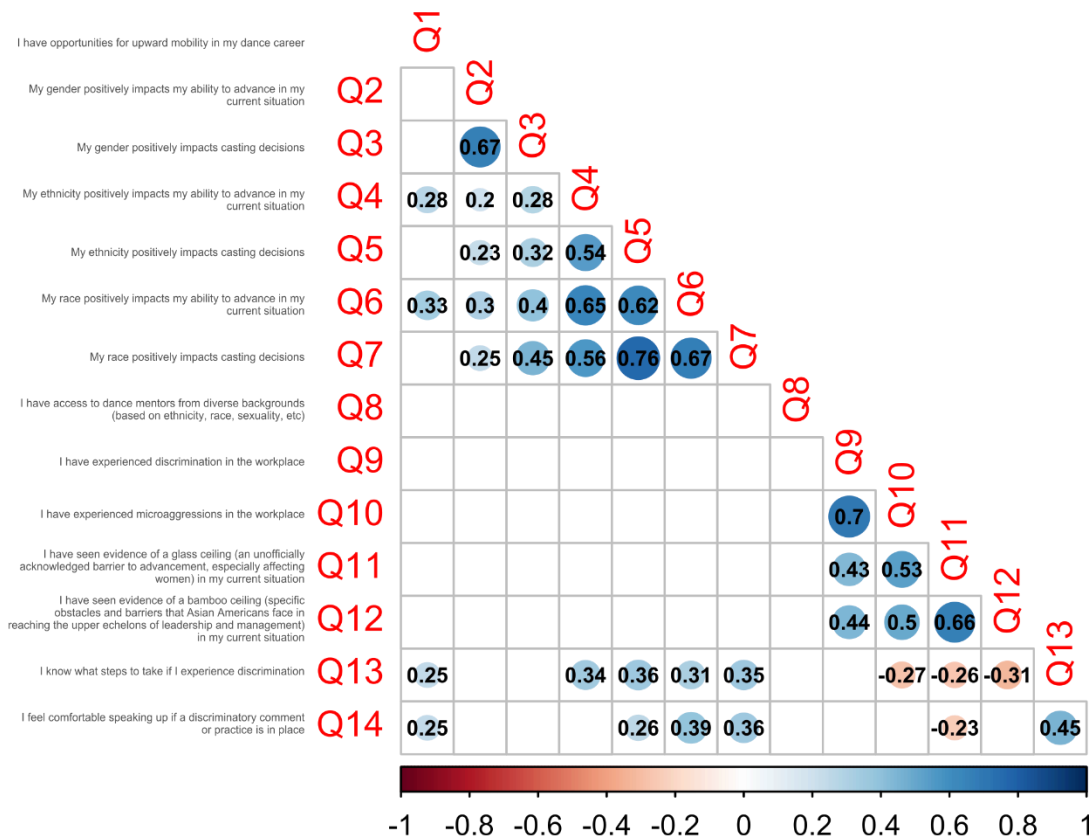


Figure 3: Spearman Correlation Plot Between Responses to Likert Scale Survey Questions. All pairwise correlations between Likert survey questions. Numbers in boxes are Spearman correlation coefficients. Only coefficients with  $p$ -value  $< 0.05$  are displayed.

Responses to questions highly correlated with other related questions (Questions 2, 5, 10, and 13) were broken down further by gender and race (Figure 4). Responses broken down by gender exclude one respondent who preferred not to specify their gender. Note that there are three and two respondents in the non-binary and prefer to specify categories respectively. Due to these low numbers, it is difficult to generalize these groups. The two respondents who preferred to specify their gender identity were gender-fluid and gender-queer. For race, there was one respondent who identified as Pacific Islander.

In terms of gender, cis females more often disagreed with positive effects of their ethnicity and gender on casting. They also reported experiencing microaggressions and not knowing how to respond to discrimination at higher percentages than cis males.

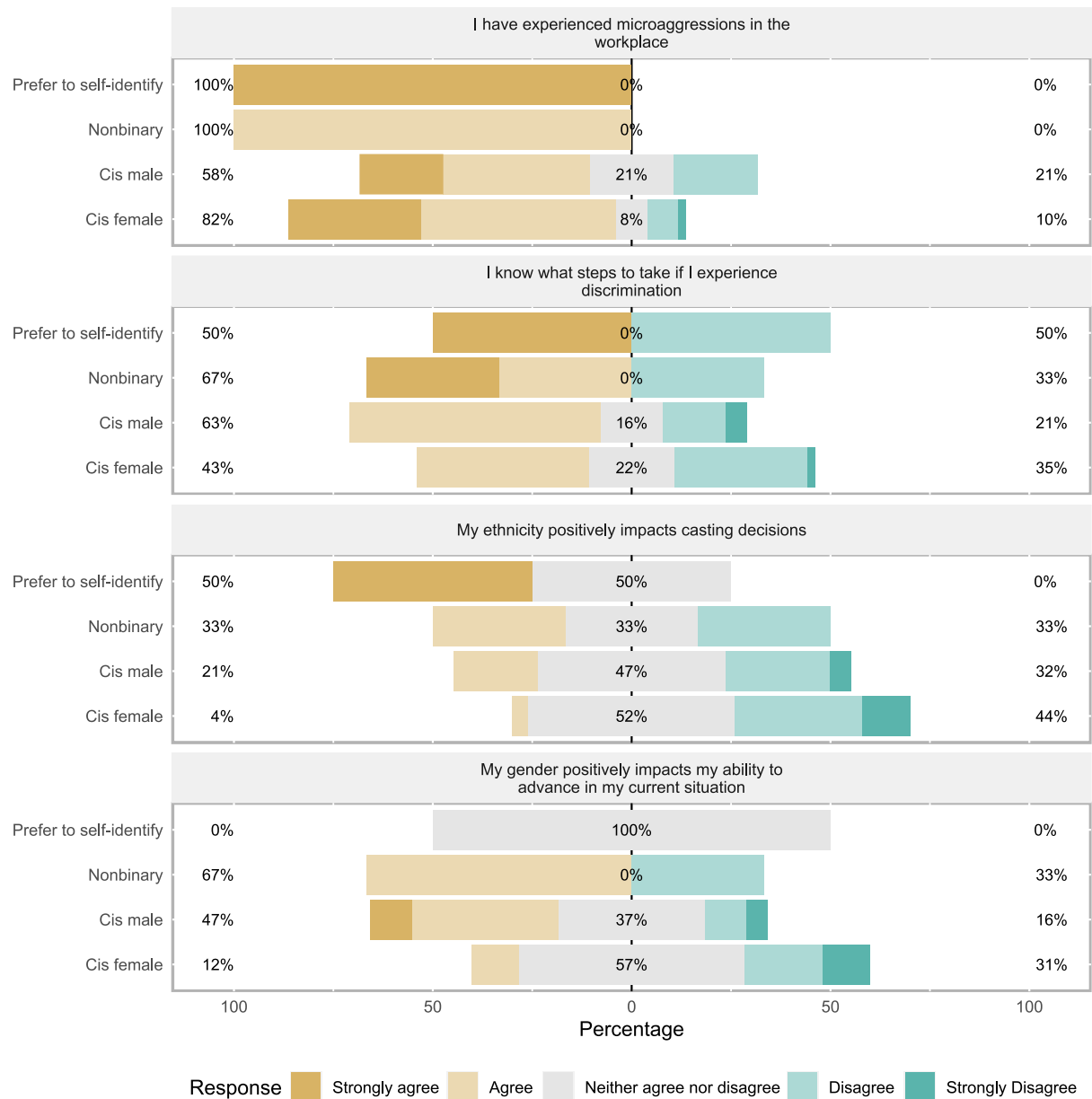


Figure 4: Likert Responses Broken Down By Gender and Race. Likert responses disaggregated by gender identity and self-identified race.

Note 1: There are three and two respondents in the non-binary and prefer to specify categories respectively. The two respondents who preferred to specify their gender identity were gender-fluid and gender-queer.

Note 2: There was one respondent who identified as Pacific Islander.

Microaggressions are a significant issue for multiracial dancers and those who are visibly assumed to have Asian heritage. Nearly 63% of participants either Agreed (34) or Strongly Agreed (21) that they have experienced microaggressions in the workplace. Interestingly, a higher percentage of individuals in the multiracial group reported experiencing microaggressions in the workplace compared to the Asian group. This finding may be related to a higher percentage of multiracial respondents working in environments where microaggressions occur. Alternatively, this could be linked to differences in perspectives on microaggressions across various cultures and immigration status. Six out of 10 negative responses (Disagree or Strongly Disagree) were from first- or 1.5-generation individuals, 5 of which were Asian (not multiracial). 7 first- or 1.5-generation Asians (not multiracial) did not respond to the question.

Respondents also were given opportunities to include open-ended comments about their experience in the industry. These quotes touch on a variety of themes centered around representation. From the 17 comments, four were coded as informationally neutral, such as explaining a participant's training or geographical area. Three comments had hopeful and positive sentiments, such as, "Never encountered racism for my ethnicity. Doesn't mean ur [sic] doesn't exist though," and "I feel that there is an upward trajectory for opportunities in the current moment. I have felt the lack of representation in Asian mentors in the past." The majority (10) of comments were critical, questioning, or discouraging. Elaborating upon Asian American mentors, leadership, and representation, the following comment asks the compelling question of why:

Currently, there are few Artistic Directors of ballet companies that are of AAPI background. Why is that? I also notice the majority of audience members, even when diverse, are not of AAPI descent. Something needs to change if we are to have representation in the upper echelons of the field. Either the opportunity or platform is provided or have a grassroots effort in pulling more audience members of AAPI backgrounds to become more interested in ballet in general.

Knowing how to communicate with and influence the "upper echelons" of the field is a recurring theme in the comments (5). One participant articulated, "I do not feel supported/educated in voicing the ethnic and ageist discrimination that I have experienced in my dance career." Another response revealed, "I find that if I speak up, the staff will gaslight me." Three additional comments blended the issues of speaking up with casting: "Forever question- How to avoid retaliation on 'artistic decisions (ex: casting)' after speaking up on micro aggression or simply asking respect to an artistic director/staff;" and "I consider myself an Asian-American woman and feel this led to some discrimination or microaggressions throughout my dance career. It is a fine line to balance, but there are definitely times where you don't know what to say or do when you get passed up on a role because of how you look and not how you dance." In contrast to the respondents who did not know how to—or if—they should speak up, this participant reported negative outcomes after taking the initiative to voice concerns: "I have voiced my concerns about

my racial identity [affecting] my ability to be cast in principal roles and the treatment of other Asian-identifying dancers within my company to leadership to which they responded with disdain.”

One casting-specific comment touched on the content of choreographic works: “Sometimes ballets are chosen which are going to highlight white characters or stories so you know there isn’t a place for you to shine as an Asian dancer.” The choice of ballets that predominantly feature white characters or stories as well as the representation of Asian cultures in such stories can contribute to feelings of exclusion among Asian dancers as demonstrated by the comment. These issues are tied to the sparse representation of Asian choreographic voices in ballet’s canon and seasonal programming.

One respondent notes that while their company appears to be making an effort to promote diversity, the actions taken are superficial and do not address deeper, systemic issues:

My Company’s trying very hard to be progressive but only focused on letting the world know that they’re trying and making [the] quickest progress on the matter (ex: Featuring people of color) but actually no long-run practices are made (ex: Accepting upbringing difference[s], or practicing extra [patience] with dancers they hired that aren’t used to speak[ing] up in English) Especially from our white privileged male company director I see no effort in actual practices in studios. Only on...paper.

This performative allyship can create frustration and disillusionment among dancers of color, who may feel that their concerns are not being genuinely acknowledged or addressed.

The following comment punctuates the premise of this research study: “Some organizations I have been a part of have been accepting of my race. However most have not and I feel that it is used against me.”

Although outside the scope of this research study, each comment contains complex issues worthy of intense investigation and evaluation.

## **Discussion**

Our study focuses on the representation and discrimination of Asian American dancers in the world of professional dance. Previous research on Asian American employment, hiring, and

promotions has primarily centered around white-collar professions.<sup>363738394041</sup> Of studies focused on Asian American employment in the arts and entertainment sector, our study provides the first published estimates on Asian and Asian American representation in US professional dance companies to our knowledge.

We found that, as a whole, Asians have higher representation in US classical ballet companies than their demography in the general population might suggest. While these statistics may satisfy some claims that Asian representation has been achieved (or even exceeded expectations), the authors believe there are several additional issues to consider.

Equality or over-performance in certain metrics does not necessarily mean there is equity for Asian American dancers. These dancers may still encounter unique barriers that disproportionately affect their career progression or job satisfaction. Importantly, this demographic is not homogeneous and subgroups within Asian and Asian American dancers may face different sets of challenges.

Firstly, specific countries of origin contribute disproportionately to the representation of Asians, specifically in professional ballet companies. In our survey, we identified dancers with cultural ties to China and Japan as prominent cultural subgroups, which aligns with qualitative evaluations of American ballet companies. By disaggregating Asian and Pacific Islander groups, we can better understand the unique barriers and levels of representation faced by each subgroup.

Secondly, the data suggests a substantial portion of Asian and Asian American dancers currently working in the US are first-generation or expatriate workers, which may limit their position, rank, and power within companies. Factors such as work visa pressures, amplified foreigner status, and language barriers could potentially temper the outward representation of this subgroup. This can restrict both their visibility and their ability to influence policies, procedures, and systems.

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<sup>36</sup> Allan Chen, "Experiences of Underrepresentation in Corporate America: Chinese American Stories of Tackling the Bamboo Ceiling," 2022. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2720360773?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true>.

<sup>37</sup> Sylvia Ann, Hewlett, "Breaking Through the Bamboo Ceiling," 2011.

<sup>38</sup> Ludmilla Nunes, "Lessons from the Bamboo Ceiling," *Observer*, June 28, 2021, <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/bamboo-ceiling>.

<sup>39</sup> Daan Struyven, Hui Shan, and Daniel Milo, "Asianomics in America: Contributions and Challenges," 2022.

<sup>40</sup> Tanvi Misra, "Asian-American Leadership Programs Tackle the 'Bamboo Ceiling,'" Code Switch, NPR, July 4, 2014, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2014/07/07/328206747/asian-american-leadership-programs-tackle-the-bamboo-ceiling>.

<sup>41</sup> Chris Westfall, "Battling Discrimination and the Bamboo Ceiling: The Bias Facing Asian American Managers," 2021.



Thirdly, Asian American dancers who train in the US may face unique challenges within the professional dance pipeline. A combination of cultural values, systemic biases, and competition with foreign-born dancers could contribute to low participation in Western forms of dance, such as ballet, at the professional level.

Lastly, many respondents were of mixed heritage, coming from diverse cultural backgrounds. Our survey demonstrated that discrimination and microaggressions are significant and pervasive issues for this group. A wide range of attitudes regarding their race was seen from multiracial respondents. As a visual artform, being more visibly Asian may impact dancers' experiences in US professional dance. On one hand, they may be able to avoid some of the stereotyping and discrimination that more visibly Asian dancers might face. On the other hand, they may struggle with feelings of not being fully recognized as part of the Asian community.

Participants responded to questions about casting and used a Likert scale to rate how strongly they agreed with the following statement: "My race positively impacts casting decisions." Although 29 Disagree and six Strongly Disagree responses outweigh the six Agree and two Strongly Agree responses, important nuances should be unpacked with this survey question. Of the six who Strongly Disagree that their "race positively impact[ing] casting decisions," all identified as cis female, with five identifying as Asian and one participant identifying as a multiracial (Asian and White). Whereas, out of the six Agree and two Strongly Agree responses, five of the eight respondents identified as cis male, one as genderqueer, one as nonbinary, and one as cis female. Additionally, five of those who agreed with their "race positively impact[ing] casting decisions," also identified as multiracial. This speaks to the intersectionality of being both Asian and female. A majority of cis male-identifying participants agreed with the positive impacts of their race on casting. The one exception is with the two cis male dancers who are in Tier 1 companies where competition, rank, and status may be more fierce and revealing of biases. In a profession highly saturated with cisgender female performers, there is a need to address perceptions of disparities. It is also important to note that a majority of responses that agreed with positive impacts on casting came from individuals who identified as multiracial and who specifically identified White as one of their two or more races (6/8). Although not definitive, the multiracial element is important. Those who are multiracial may be White-passing or have enough White-proximity that may impact their responses here.

Overall, the interplay between gender, heritage, and generational status likely plays a role in attitudes surrounding race.

These barriers also tie into broader demographic trends for the general US population. It is important to note that despite having a higher median household income compared to other races in the US, Asian Americans exhibit a "bipolar" economic status, as a significant number of Asian

American households also live in poverty.<sup>42</sup> This disparity is particularly prevalent among certain Asian ethnicities, such as Hmong Americans, who may have arrived in the US as refugees. Income disparities among Asian American households can also be attributed to the hyper-selectivity of Asian immigrants based on U.S. immigration law, which prioritizes professionals with advanced degrees or exceptional abilities, leading to an overrepresentation of Asian Americans in professional fields.

Income disparities are especially pertinent when considering training. For example, the ballet training pipeline presents various barriers to entry for classical dance training, particularly in terms of cost. The high cost of classical ballet training can prevent individuals without the means to support this type of training from participating – for example, top-tier ballet schools can charge tuition fees as high as \$53,000<sup>43</sup>. This economic barrier further highlights the need for a more inclusive and accessible ballet industry, ensuring opportunities for talented dancers regardless of their socioeconomic background.

Jane Hyun popularized the phrase “bamboo ceiling” in work focused on the corporate world.<sup>44</sup> The bamboo ceiling relates to the stereotypes and assumptions about Asian Americans, focusing on the invisible barriers they face in reaching the upper echelons of corporate organizations. Despite plenty of representation, and in many cases, overrepresentation at lower working levels, Asians and Asian Americans rarely reach executive status – a “ceiling” on their career advancement. Despite overrepresentation of Asian groups in professional classical dance, our survey findings indicate the presence of microaggressions and discrimination. Many surveyed dancers believe in the existence of a bamboo ceiling and a negative effect of their race on career progression.

Survey respondents were majority cis-female (69%). Asian American women not only face a “bamboo ceiling” but also a “glass ceiling” as well that has placed them at a disadvantage in the workplace because of their race and their gender. In comparison to their White women counterparts, Asian American women were less likely to be promoted to supervisory

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<sup>42</sup> Pawan Dhingra and Robin Magalit Rodriguez, *Asian America*. 2nd ed (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2021), 182.

<sup>43</sup> Abrams, Abby, “Raising a Ballerina Will Cost You \$100,000: The High Price of Training is Keeping Ballet’s Top Ranks From Being Diverse,” *FiveThirtyEight*, August 20, 2015, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/high-price-of-ballet-diversity-misty-copeland/>.

<sup>44</sup> Jane Hyun, *Breaking the Bamboo Ceiling: Career Strategies for Asians* (New York: Harper Business, 2005).

positions.<sup>45464748</sup> Our survey findings parallel several aspects of these phenomena in the business world, an example of intersectionality.

Asians and Asian Americans are often seen as great technicians—the stereotypical “worker bees”—but may struggle to reach higher positions, such as principal dancer, director, choreographer, or executive where they will be given opportunities for significant decision-making. These positions are particularly significant because those roles are not only visible and impactful within the walls of the daily workplace (the studio), but also evident on stage. Out of all respondents, ten indicated an artistic or administrative leadership position with few respondents discussing choreographic opportunities. Survey respondents also pointed to the anecdotal lack of Asian directors and choreographic voices on stage. Furthermore, representation through characterizations, casting, and roles indicates a need to address Asian representation in professional dance—both in the studio and through onstage portrayals. Our work demonstrates a common feeling of being discriminated against and limited due to race.

### Limitations

While we believe our study is useful in identifying certain demographics and attitudes among Asian American dancers in the US, we acknowledge several possible limitations that may affect the generalizability of our study.

First, the survey was distributed via social media and word of mouth, and Asian American dancers may not have been informed about the survey or may have chosen not to participate. This may have occurred because the dancers did not follow the accounts and websites that we used to post on social media or may not have interacted with the individuals that we reached out to about the survey.

Although anonymity provides a platform for candidness and low risk honesty, we were unable to follow-up on any responses and comments for clarifications.

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<sup>45</sup> ChangHwan Kim and Yang Zhao, “Are Asian American Women Advantaged? Labor Market Performance of College Education Female Workers,” *Social Forces* 93 no. 2 (2014): 623-652, <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/sou076>.

<sup>46</sup> Leyi Cao, “Asian American Women Face Bamboo Ceiling in American High-Tech Workplaces—Based on a case study of Ellen Pao v. Kleiner Perkins,” In *Proceedings of the 2019 International Conference on Management Science and Industrial Economy Conference*, Atlantis Press, 2020. 10.2991/msie-19.2020.8.

<sup>47</sup> Helen H. Yu, “Revisiting the Bamboo Ceiling: Perceptions from Asian Americans on Experiencing Workplace Discrimination,” *Asian American Journal of Psychology* 11, no. 3 (2020): 158–167, <https://doi.org/10.1037/aap0000193>.

<sup>48</sup> Jessica Gynn, “It’s Called the ‘Pao Effect’—Asian Women in Tech are Fighting Deep-Rooted Discrimination,” *USA Today*, Last modified July 9, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/news/2017/09/19/ellen-pao-asian-women-tech-glass-ceiling-bamboo-ceiling/665822001/>.

The survey was only available in the English language, and dancers who do not speak English or for whom English is not their first language may not have been able to complete the survey or may have chosen to complete the survey but did not fully understand the questions. Japanese dancers comprise the largest group of dancers born in Asia for US ballet companies<sup>49</sup>.

Within our study, it is possible some respondents were professionally active in countries other than the US. Additionally, respondents also included dancers who have since retired from performance and have adopted other roles or are no longer involved with dance. These factors may also contribute to differences in demography between respondents and datasets of dancers in US dance companies.

Although there was strong evidence that Asian American dancers face microaggressions, scrutiny in casting, a bamboo ceiling, intersectionality challenges, and are limited in their resources and opportunities to voice concerns, our current study was unable to directly characterize the bamboo ceiling and impacts of first-generation (and more) status. Further work focusing on the training, hiring, ranks, promotion rates of Asian Americans in US companies would fill this gap. Similar work for artistic directors and choreographers could be pursued.

It is equally important to look at the experiences of other minority groups, across ballet and other dance professions, to better understand discrimination and lack of representation in professional dance. Additionally, comparing how non-American dance companies address discrimination and representation may be helpful as we look to improve representation and equity in the dance world.

While this survey was an important initial step in understanding Asian American representation in professional dance companies across the US, additional studies could substantially improve our understanding of the phenomenological experiences of Asian American dancers. Based on the respondents to the conducted survey, we primarily looked at Asian American dancers in professional ballet in the US. We recommend the following branches of inquiries to continue to illuminate the Asian American experience in dance: engaging respondents in interviews; identifying specifics of various subdivisions of professional dance, such as genres, funding levels, and tiers of companies; further delineating impacts of demographic representations such as gender, nationality, generational status, etc.; investigating training, access, and equity in the field.

## **Conclusion**

We aim to address the dearth of data about Asian American experiences in professional dance. Our survey findings indicate a prevalence of microaggressions, scrutiny in casting, intersectionality complexity, and negative impacts of race on professionals in the dance field.

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<sup>49</sup> Jason Yeung, "Where You From?"

Furthermore, results signal a bamboo ceiling, increased intersectionality challenges for those who identify as both Asian and female, and limited resources to voice concerns. While this survey was a sound starting point in understanding Asian American representation in professional dance companies across the US, we recommend further research.

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