

Celebrating Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month

The History of AAPI Judges on the Federal Bench and the Path Forward

05/31/2024

As we wrap up Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Heritage Month, Cowan Liebowitz & Latman looks back at the history of AAPI judges on the federal bench.



The first federal Asian American judge, Herbert Young Cho Choy, was confirmed by the U.S. Senate in 1971. His appointment as a Circuit Judge for the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 9th Circuit was a testament to his resilience and determination. Judge Choy was not a stranger to making history. He was the only Asian American in his class at Harvard Law and became the first Korean American admitted to practice law in the United States.



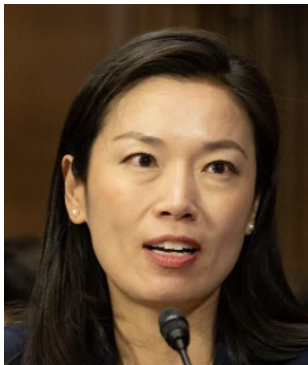
It wouldn't be until 1998, nearly 30 years later, that an Asian American woman reached the same milestone. Judge Susan Oki Mollway became the first AAPI woman nominated to the federal bench. Judge Mollway, having grown up in Hawaii, was surprised to learn that she was, in fact, the first Asian woman to serve as an Article III federal judge. She said that "*surely by the 1990s somebody must have been ahead of me ... [b]ut once [it] happened, I became conscious that I was going to be a role model for many people.*" Judge Mollway serves in Honolulu for the U.S. District Court for the District of Hawaii.



The large majority of AAPI federal judges have sat and continue to sit in the 9th Circuit, which covers both Hawaii and California. It was not until 2010, when Judge Denny Chin served in the 2nd Circuit, that there were AAPI judges in any circuit other than the 9th.



Since then, progress continues to be made with more AAPI judges having been nominated to the federal bench. In 2022, the U.S. Senate confirmed Judge Cindy Chung, a former federal prosecutor in Pittsburgh, to serve on the 3rd Circuit, making her the first Asian American judge on the Philadelphia-based court.



Most recently, in 2024, the U.S. Senate confirmed Judge Jasmine Yoo's appointment to the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Virginia. This appointment makes her Virginia's first Asian American federal judge. Judge Yoo will take the bench in July.

Cowan Liebowitz & Latman celebrates the Judges who have paved the path and looks forward to those who will follow in their footsteps.