Chinese and Indian Americans on the rise

Wallace Loh, president of the University of Maryland; David Chang, former president of Polytechnic Institute of New York University, and Phyllis Wise, former chancellor of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. In the business front, there are John Chen, CEO of BlackBerry, and Harry Shum, executive vice president of Microsoft’s artificial intelligence and research group.

The rise of Indian and Chinese Americans today in the West owes in no small part to the Asian tradition which emphasizes education above all. This, together with China and India’s push on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) education after World War II, laid a strong foundation for their children.

The Chinese and Indians were both living in poverty in the 1960s and ’70s, and most knew that they had to give it all if they were to achieve a better living.

In those times, it was simply unthinkable that an immigrant would one day rise to be president of a top US university. I still remember the startled eyes of the Caltech interviewers 40 years ago at Star House in Tsui Sha Tsui, when I told them in my interview that I wanted to become a professor in a US university after graduation – they must have thought I had a big head!

Step by step, I worked toward that dream, and became one of the first Chinese Americans to rise to the administrative ranks in a US university.

When I was dean of physics at UCLA, only two of the 15 deans were Chinese Americans. In 2006, I became the second Chinese American to serve as assistant director of the National Science Foundation (the first was Eugene Wong of UC Berkeley, who was HKUST’s vice president for research and development in the ’90s). I remember that some Chinese American professors would tell me that they considered me one of their role models, and I was very flattered.

A recent report points out that today, one-third of engineers working in Silicon Valley are from India, and there are just as many, if not more, from China. Indian and Chinese Americans today are both thriving in the US, but at the same time they are very different peoples. From my observation, Indian Americans are a tight-knit group, and they are much more open and expressive when it comes to speaking their minds. Their English ability has helped them mesh into US society seamlessly.

In comparison, Chinese Americans are more conservative, and that sometimes puts them at a disadvantage. In my view, Chinese Americans have to be more assertive and bold if they want to take the next step.

The prosperity of the United States today owes much to its open society, which attracts the best talents from all over the world.

For Hong Kong to continue to grow and thrive as an international city, we must keep an open mind and a modest heart.

Going backward will do nobody any good.