

FIONA MA

Fiona Ma resembles a flicker that bounces into a blaze, creating a ripple and leaving everlasting streaks which define her purpose to serve, to help, and to advocate. Fiona's prelude depicts her perennial mission: public service.

Writer: GERALDINE ZIALCITA @geraldineauthor
HMUA: ETHEL M.H. REDDY @e.the.look

Creative Director and Featured Fashion Designer: MONIQUE ZHANG @moniquezhang

Editorial Assistant: BESS GOTINGCO @besser8tiv

Production Assistant: ALICE MONTGOMERY @alicemontgomery

Art Director: NIGEL JOHN DEL MUNDO @nigeldelmundo

Photographer: VINCENT GOTTI @vinniegotti

Location: Lion's Den Lounge and Bar in San Francisco, CA





THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SERVICE

by Geraldine Zialcita

When Fiona was in 5th grade, her father suggested she run to be the banker of their school's Snake River Valley Project. Fiona's mother wrote an encouraging letter to her teacher claiming that her daughter was diligent, ambitious, good at solving Mathematical problems, at par with games involving trading and dealing, and an honest person who gets along with everyone. Little did Fiona know she would be the State Treasurer of the 5th largest economy in the world. "My parents encouraged my siblings and me to pursue one of the LEAD professions which stands for lawyer, engineer, accountant, or doctor. The good news is that my parents are finally very proud of me and do not hint about being an accountant to make more money," she shares.

Since Fiona excelled in Math, her parents gave her the responsibility to handle the bills, balance their checkbooks, and help them with their taxes. She chose to attend the Rochester Institute of Technology because they had a specific CPA track where she was required to complete two paid internships, which she completed at the Manhattan office of Ernst & Whinney. After her undergraduate degree, Fiona moved to San Francisco with her parents and worked at Ernst & Whinney in the real estate tax group. She acquired her Master's degree in Taxation from Golden Gate University and her MBA in Finance from Pepperdine University. "After launching my own accounting practice at twenty-eight years old, I became the president of the Asian Business Association where I advocated for more business opportunities for women and minority-owned businesses. This opened my eyes to see how difficult it was for small business owners to grow and thrive and how the government impacts people's lives. I also saw the need for more women and minorities to get elected and *be at the decision-making table* and this sparked my interest in public service. Shortly thereafter, I was fortunate to get my first political job with Senator John Burton as a part-time District Representative. He taught me to *remember who brought you to the dance*, to be a voice for those who don't have one, and to stand up for what is right even if you're the only one standing. Up to this day, I continue to live by the John Burton credo," she relays.

This versatile woman wears multiple hats and has accomplished many achievements. From 2002 to 2006, Fiona was designated to be in the San Francisco County Board of Supervisors who represented District 4. She also represented California's 19th Assembly District from November 2006 to November 2012. Being a member of the Democratic Party, Fiona became the first Asian American woman to serve as California Assembly Speaker Pro Tempore. She is also the only second Certified Public Accountant (CPA) to be elected for the Board of Equalization. She was chosen to be the chairperson of the California Board of Equalization in 2016 where she regulated three external audits of the agency. Fiona was also an assemblywoman responsible for the ban of toxic chemicals in baby products. Since 2019, Fiona has been serving the public as the State Treasurer of California.

As a critical thinker and goal-oriented woman, Fiona draws inspiration in challenges and issues that seem impossible to attain. "During the legislature, I passed sixty bills signed by two different governors during the Great Recession. Two of my hard-fought bills are etched in my memory. One of the first bills I authored when I positioned myself in Sacramento, was to ban Phthalates and Bisphenol A chemicals in baby products. While sitting on the Board of Supervisors, I had successfully passed a similar law in San Francisco to follow the *Precautionary Principle*. However, I encountered a lot of opposition and lobbyists against the bill when I situated myself in Sacramento, so I decided to tackle Phthalates believing that the available *science* and studies carried more weight. Assemblywoman Wilma Chan had tried to pass a similar bill two years earlier but failed, and being a freshman, people doubted my capability to capture the governor's attention and gain his approval. This proved to be an uphill battle in every committee and both Houses but I managed to obtain the minimum required votes. First Lady Maria Shriver was also an avid supporter who weighed in with her husband, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger to sign my bill. Senator Dianne Feinstein accelerated my bill language in a Federal Consumer Protection Bill and now Phthalates are banned from all baby products in the US," she informs.



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The second instrumental bill that Fiona passed was derived from her *Golden Girls* women who were convicted with *Life Without Parole* for killing their abusive husbands or boyfriends in an act of self-defense. “These women had been in prison for twenty to forty years with no hope or freedom. One woman had served for twenty-seven years and developed a documentary called *Sin By Silence* which features the plight of these women before the *Battered Women Syndrome* was accepted as a legal defense in court. These women couldn’t discuss their past and the events that led to the altercation/death. My staff and I watched the documentary together and committed to changing the course of history for these women. Since no other state had passed this specific law, we had to start from scratch. During that time, our prisons were overcrowded and they faced a court order to better handle healthcare for inmates. To help alleviate the prison crisis, Governor Jerry Brown pardoned the prison inmates with less serious crimes. After many seemingly distressing hours, there was a glimmer of hope. We gained the strong backing of Governor Brown and he signed AB 593 and AB 1593 to allow these women a second chance to have their cases heard before the parole board or judge. As a result of this bill, over a hundred women are free today. Each day they are grateful for the little things in life that most of us take for granted. We have built our first *Home Free* house on Treasure Island in San Francisco which offers a transitional housing program for domestic violence victims to rebuild their lives. We hope to raise more money so we could expand to Southern California,” she conveys.

Fiona has developed eight core principles that seek to serve as the foundation for her office which is as follows:

1. Treat everyone with dignity and respect. We must consciously choose to be positive, especially in our communications with one another and with the public; we must seek to understand as well as to be understood.
2. Be honest and have integrity.
3. Find a solution and path forward instead of putting up roadblocks.
4. Work independently and proactively, but towards the team’s goals.
5. Mentor - We stand on the shoulders of those that came before us. Let us commit to becoming the shoulders of the future generations.
6. Be a good steward of the State’s resources and conscious that all citizens are your employer. If we serve our stakeholders well, our personal successes are inevitable.
7. Be accountable and take responsibility. We must accept personal responsibility for the outcomes we promise. We must be accountable for what we don’t deliver.
8. Exercise mindfulness towards yourself and towards others.

Being the current California State Treasurer, Fiona believes that money is essential and is fond of managing lots of dollars. “Last year we processed \$3.2 trillion in banking transactions. We managed a short-time portfolio of \$200 billion and oversaw \$85 billion in outstanding general obligation and lease revenue bonds. I also chair fifteen boards, commissions, and authorities that help to finance and fund affordable housing, hospitals, schools, transportation, environmental protection, infrastructure projects, and more. I am the Chairman of three savings programs that help Californians save for higher education, retirement, and people with a disability achieve a better quality of life. Because of all the financial resources at our fingertips, we worked quickly to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, offering initiatives to small businesses, expanding access to health care facilities, and creating a new program to help our K-12 schools stay open. We grew and revamped our state’s affordable housing and homeless housing programs, embarked on our first student housing project on the Santa Rosa Community College site, and funded clean energy projects to create new jobs,” she narrates.



*"We stand on the shoulders of those that came before us.
Let us commit to becoming the shoulders of the future generations."*



Over the years of being a public servant, Fiona has learned that you cannot please everyone and there's always going to be people who are not happy with one of the votes, a public position she has committed to, or a candidate(s) she has supported. "I'm hoping that the public looks at the totality of my portfolio and what I've championed today and in the past. I believe in the term *trust but verify* and do my own independent research and analysis. I like to meet with both sides of an issue, broker a compromise if I can, and try to focus on *people over politics*," she states.

Despite all her achievements and success, Fiona has encountered some obstacles in her career, yet has chosen to overcome them. "There's a double standard for women in politics. We are scrutinized more and asked questions that are not asked of men. The questions pertain to whether I can do the job, what my qualifications are, how much money I can raise, and the list goes on and on. Women need to work harder, smarter, be more strategic, and find more allies to align with. Even if there are gender biases in my line of work, there is nothing I would rather do than be in public service. When times are tough, I go back to asking myself as to why I do what I do and try to surround myself with positive, supportive, and happy people," she voices out.

Fiona believes that women empowerment denotes encouraging other women to step outside their comfort zone and dream big. "It means mentoring others who want to be future leaders, helping them get appointed to boards and commissions, endorsing women candidates, helping them get elected, and being available to them for advice and guidance," she indicates.

As the first Asian American woman to serve as California Assembly Speaker Pro Tempore, Fiona broke the stereotype beliefs and discovered her voice to stand out from the rest. "When I initially ran for my first office, I had to read my speech from a piece of paper. This has been difficult for me today, yet it has taken years for me to be a comfortable storyteller and be the center of attention. In my generation, women didn't speak up and debate freely. People didn't seek out our opinion. Instead, we were told to work hard, go to a good college, find a nice husband, and have a family. As Asian Americans, we are not encouraged to boast about ourselves and take credit for things we've done, but we must do this to compete and get ahead of the game. I believe social media is a great leveler where we can post what we are doing, what we feel, and shape the narrative about who we are versus waiting for someone else to prop us up or try to tear us down. I grew up playing sports and really enjoyed team sports better. Working in teams is harder than doing it alone, but much more satisfying for me to be able to share the glory and defeats with a group of people," she describes.

With her role as an Asian American woman, Fiona reaches out to inspire, encourage, and influence women through public speaking which projects her candidness and sincerity. "I try to break free from clichés and stigmas and talk openly about domestic violence, Hepatitis B and liver cancer, eating disorders, depression, and menopause because there is power in sharing, exchanging information, and knowing we are not alone," she declares.



Fiona was raised with good values, to be family-oriented, and take care of her elders. As the eldest child with no children of her own, Fiona has been looking after her parents for the past twelve years in their co-owned home in San Francisco. “My mother passed away three years ago and one of the highlights of the pandemic is that my dad and I enjoy watching many Chinese and Korean dramas together with our three furry babies.” She smiles. Fiona believes in honesty, loyalty, and treating others the same way she wants to be treated. “I aim to help people solve the problems they are facing; help them navigate through government bureaucracies and to be a resource for people seeking assistance and information; to be a connector; and to make cool things happen,” she expresses.

Although her prominent career is a huge part of her life and one of the greatest blessings, Fiona keeps a work/life balance by exploring California, going to the movies, singing karaoke, and eating Japanese food with her husband. “Public service is about putting the public first and forgoing some/most of one’s private life. It’s important to find a spouse/partner who understands what you do and supports you because you need to share your time and try to please as many people to get elected and re-elected. I’m fortunate to be married to a full-time firefighter in Ventura County and an elected member of the Port of Hueneme, so he too, is a public servant and elected official.” She winks.

While she has reached the pinnacle of her career, this unstoppable woman is on the ballot for re-election this June and November for another four-year term—2026, the Year of the Horse. “My last name is *Ma* which means Horse in Chinese. I was born in the Year of the Horse and I’ve won two elections during a Horse year. Ultimately I’d like to be the next governor of this great state but will have to see whether California is ready to elect its first female governor. Time will tell,” she concludes.

From the outset, Fiona integrated her goals to improve people’s lives and make a difference in this world. Parallel to her outlook, her tunnel vision has enabled her to value fundamental elements that provide direction, positive changes, and an impact on the people in her community. Fiona Ma lives a life of purpose which represents the significance of service at its very best.