

The World of Yue-Sai Kan

An Interview with Yue-Sai Kan



Yue-Sai Kan

EDITORS' NOTE Chinese American Yue-Sai Kan (www.yuesaikan.com) is an Emmy-winning television producer, best-selling author, entrepreneur, and humanitarian. In 1986, the television series *One World*, produced and hosted by Yue-Sai, aired on China's national television network CCTV, giving millions of Chinese the first glimpse of the outside world. In 1992, she successfully transformed herself from a TV personality to an entrepreneur by creating the Yue-Sai cosmetics brand, which is recognized by over 90 percent of the Chinese population today. She also created a lifestyle product line called *House of Yue-Sai*, which focuses on interior design and home furnishing. Yue-Sai has written seven best-selling books, spreading the knowledge of beauty, etiquette, health, and success among Chinese readers. Yue-Sai's humanitarian efforts have primarily been focused on education and children. She has built schools in her hometown of Guangxi and libraries in poor regions in Northern China. As a board member of the Shanghai Soong Ching Ling Foundation, she helped raise millions of dollars for the well-being of women and children. Two years ago, Yue-Sai signed on to be the National Director of the Miss Universe China Pageant, which seeks to encourage young people in particular to be charitable, educate them about exemplary values, and create a positive image and celebrate women by empowering them to use beauty for positive social change. Yue-Sai Kan is the first and only living American featured on a Chinese postage stamp.

With all you are involved in, how do you define yourself?

It is difficult to use one word to define me. I have had the opportunity to become involved in many different areas that interest me. Americans cannot describe someone who is in a different country without comparing her to someone they know in the U.S. When I first

started in television, they would compare me to Barbara Walters or Oprah Winfrey; when I started writing about etiquette and manners, they compared me to Emily Post; and when I started in cosmetics, they compared me to Estée Lauder. I admire all of them immensely, but I am a combination of all of them.

Did you possess that entrepreneurial spirit early on?

Yes, even in my 20s, I was entrepreneurial. I was too young to know what the word "entrepreneurial" meant then, but I knew I didn't like to work for other people. Entrepreneurs are a special breed; they have a great desire to create their own businesses. It is a drive that pushes them every day to build successful companies. It's like a musician who says he cannot breathe unless he plays the piano or an actress who cannot survive without acting. It's the same with entrepreneurs; it's as if they have no choice. The entrepreneurial spirit cannot be stopped. It has everything to do with my success.

Were there times during your career when you were uncertain that it would all work out?

All the time. And the younger you are, the more unsure you are. But I thought I had some good ideas so I would try them anyway.

I also had confidence that I could be successful if I worked hard enough. They say, "You have to kiss many frogs to find a prince." I tried some businesses and some may have "failed", but I don't see it that way because I learned what I did not like to do or what I was not good at. For me, giving up on being an entrepreneur was never an option.

How have you been so successful in the cosmetics arena and what makes that part of the business unique?

Chinese women know they look distinctly different from Caucasian or black people. They know they have a different eye shape and skin tone, and all Chinese have black hair and black eyes. They may have a shade lighter or darker skin, but they all have yellow-based skin.

It's wrong to think that the same coloration that a blue-eyed blonde-haired woman uses will look good on me. It's difficult to persuade me that my flat nose can use the same makeup techniques as someone who has a big nose. It doesn't make sense.

So we created products geared towards our own facial features and coloration. We also

believe in traditional Chinese medicine so we added Chinese herbs that have been effective for thousands of years into all of our products – even my first lipstick had a Jasmine scent. Ours is the only brand that designs, tests, and manufactures for Chinese skin and hair.

In order for a brand to be successful, the DNA has to be very strong. Even though I sold my company to L'Oreal, I'm still the Chairman. It has been going strong for 20 years. In the Western world, a 20-year-old brand is considered very young but, in China, there are no more than three brands that have lasted 20 years in this new world. So to have this brand last this long and grow bigger every year is amazing.

How will e-commerce affect your market?

E-commerce is already popular in China and it seems that the amazing rate of growth will continue. We are about to launch an e-commerce site that will start selling fashion jewelry and will grow to offer many different lifestyle products.

How did your work in television come about?

In the early '80s, the Chinese government wanted to have a more educated citizenry. It had been closed for so many years and everything was old. When I started, there was only one national network – CCTV – and that one government station had only six hours of programming a day for a billion people. The programs were not well produced and the hosts and hostesses were dressed in an obligatory simple style, and they would read the news with scripts written for them.

In those days, a lot of TVs were black and white and it was a luxury to have television, so it was like the early days of American television – all of your neighbors came over to watch a show.

As the sole national government network, CCTV was extremely powerful. I was asked to create and produce a show there, which I hosted. They specifically asked me to do it the way I did it in America: wearing colorful clothing and makeup and visiting different places in the world. I produced shows for them in 18 countries showcasing each country's history and interesting people like artists, businessmen, prime ministers, kings, and queens. They had never seen the world this way before.

I happened to be the right person at the right time. I literally had carte blanche in producing

that series, which is amazing. In some ways, producing a television show today in China is more governed than when I was doing the first television series. My permission was granted all the way from the top.

Are you more involved in production or on-camera work?

When I started out, I had to do all of it. I was poor and had no money. I found sponsors, hired the entire crew, wrote and hosted the shows on camera, and was directly involved in editing. Then I found the TV stations that would air my shows. When I was working on *One World* for China, I would take two television crews with me all over the world. The technology was very different then – cameras and equipment were big and heavy and when you're shooting on location, it is hard work. I hosted the China TV series in both English and Chinese. My shows taught the Chinese how to speak English. Subsequently, my diary of the production and also the script became a textbook for students; both became highly influential not only for the public but also for generations of TV producers and hosts.

Did that work naturally lead to writing books and your other entertainment activities?

While working on my shows and later as an entrepreneur, I realized there was a great need for information in China. At least two of the books I wrote, I was asked to write by the government: the first was called *One World*, which the Ministry of Film, TV and Broadcast asked me to write to teach the Chinese how to do TV shows; and the other was *Etiquette for the Modern Chinese*, requested by the Minister of Culture. We recently reissued two books – *The Complete Chinese Woman* and *The Chinese Gentleman*.

My latest book, the eighth one, is related to Miss Universe in China. Beauty pageants are a very new thing for China and I wanted to show the Chinese how to conduct beauty pageants in a professional way because, in a real sense, you can show off internationally what the new Chinese women are really like. Pageant is a new concept in China. In the U.S., South America, and elsewhere in the world, there is a pageant culture. When a child turns 15 or even younger, if she is physically beautiful, the parents will help to train the girls to enter some kind of competition; there are all kinds of coaches. But since China doesn't have a pageant culture, there are many forms of beauty pageants in China today that are not professionally run.

I went into Miss Universe China to build another brand. Each year, we hold regional competitions around the country. We select and train the most beautiful girls from the huge "ocean of people", so to speak. At the end, there will be a final competition with contestants from

all over the country. The woman who wins is crowned Miss China and goes to the international competition to represent China in the Miss Universe pageant.

My latest book is called *Life is a Competition*. We all compete from early on, even in kindergarten, and the book addresses how young people can prepare themselves for this lifelong battle, so you can be selected from the ocean of people and be the one to excel above everybody else.

With the Miss Universe China pageant, are you seeking someone to be an example for the world as a spotlight on China?



Yes. In China today, there is a lot of talk in the government about promoting its soft image. I can't think of a better way to showcase the beauty of China than through its beautiful women. The final Miss Universe pageant is seen by a billion people every year. When our contestant in 2011 became one of the five finalists, the whole world was looking at her. It had an important impact around the globe.

I have been in the beauty business for so long that it is natural for me to do this. But my aim is not just beauty; we also focus on promoting charity. When I sign the contract this year with the contestants, they will be required to involve themselves in charity work. We also promote education for exemplary values in life. We acknowledge that beauty is powerful and we can use beauty to affect positive social changes.

Where are the opportunities today for women in China?

There are lots of opportunities for women in China. When I started working on my business in 1990 and launched it in 1992, there were hardly any entrepreneurs, let alone women entrepreneurs. But today, women entrepreneurs are present in all kinds of businesses. I have girlfriends who are involved in making tires, quarrying marble, and building huge hotels and office buildings. Surely, my success has inspired a whole generation of business women. They probably said to themselves, if Yue-Sai can do it, I can too.

Today, I'm proud to say there are many women entrepreneurs that are very successful. They drive their own Bentleys and Mercedes, which their husbands did not buy them; they bought them.

The reason for all this is that in China, unlike in a lot of third-world countries, women are more emancipated and have equal rights.

Being so well known, is it difficult not to be tempted by all the opportunities presented to you? How do you remain focused?

Literally every day, somebody comes to me with a business proposition. Many would be tempting to do, particularly today when people are flocking to China.

When I started my business in China, nobody was interested in the country. It was complicated wading through all of the barbwires that existed here and some of which still do. The language is tough to learn. A long and culturally rich history has shaped the country and its people in a unique way. Thus, nobody ventured into China. If you did, you had to go through a lot, like rat-infested hotel rooms; we went through a period when hotel rooms weren't even lockable. But this is the same country in which I built 24 companies in 24 provinces and operated in 800 individual department stores before I sold to L'Oreal. There were no chain stores in China. Also, China is enormous and not all of the cities are like Shanghai and Beijing. Every city and location has its own business practices. It is as if you are doing business in many different countries within China.

Yue-Sai Kan crowns Ms. Zilin Luo, Miss Universe China for 2011 (above); with Prince Charles (next page top); and with American actress Halle Berry (next page bottom)



I know I offer a lot of expertise in doing business in China, but I also have little time to spare beyond my own interests. So I try hard to focus.

At what stage should China no longer be considered an emerging market?

China can no longer be termed an emerging market. From a manufacturing point of view, China is no longer a manufacturer of cheap products like shoes and clothing. Today, they manufacture planes, trains, boats, and satellites. It is the second largest economy in the world. What is extraordinary is that it has only taken them 30 years to see such success. A lot of Chinese businessmen have conquered their own country and they are now looking to conquer the world. With the encouragement of the Chinese government, they are now going after core investments like mines and energy. There are tremendous investments made in places like Africa and Australia. Money that they have made has made them very wealthy and this money gives them tremendous confidence.

In fact, the Chinese investment abroad today is growing in leaps and bounds. So even though there is still poverty in China, it can no longer be termed an emerging market. In America, the government is poor while Americans themselves are wealthy. While there are rich people in China today, the general public is not rich, but the government is extremely wealthy. So the government sets up investment funds and they go after various strategic industries all over the world. They like to make movies now so they have an investment fund in movies. They hire good people who have been successful doing business for successful Western companies and use them to start their own funds. You will see more of this in the future.

While tremendous wealth has been built in China, there are also many challenges in provinces outside the major cities. You have focused your charitable work on education and young people. How important is that work to you?

The Chinese have always cared a lot about their families; they leave money to their families. The idea of American philanthropy where a family leaves their money to charities is unheard of in China.

Also in the past, based on the principles of communism, the government is supposed to take care of the citizens from cradle to grave. But that has been changing. So over the past few years, charity has been promoted. Like all new concepts, there have been some problems, like a lack of transparency and misuse of funds in some Chinese charities. The government is now making an effort to get the situation under control.

For my charity, the China Beauty Charity Fund (CBCF), Ernst & Young has volunteered to do all of the auditing. The CBCF is part of a well-respected Chinese government charity named after

Soong Ching-ling, the First Lady of China, who was the wife of Sun Yat-sen. She started schools and hospitals, and places to train young kids to excel in their talents, and she did a lot of cultural exchanges around the world. So it is in her spirit that this charity is run.

I have put together the most outstanding group of women in China for my charity board and every year we have a major charity fundraiser. This year, my charity will also be part of the Shanghai International Film Festival.

Do you ever take the time to appreciate what you've accomplished or are you always looking ahead?

I don't think a lot about what I have done. I enjoy work, so I am always on the next project. When I see something that can be done, I do it. It's not so much for money. I feel that if you give your customers things they need or want and they can enhance their lives, the money will come; it's never the other way around. To me, it is fun to try to prove that my hunch about something was right.

If I was talking to those who have worked with you over the years and I asked them about your leadership style, what would they say?

Some would probably say it is easy to work with me because I am so transparent and overly generous. My management style is American, which means I am very direct. Being direct has more meaning than you think in China because people here don't normally tell you everything – they are opaque. Their parents and the society teach them not to be direct. Often, it takes them awhile to get to the point.

If I like something, my staff knows it; if I don't like something, they also know it. To me, time is precious and there is a short amount of time to get what I want to get done. Whenever I

see something that needs to be changed or corrected, I say it right away; otherwise, I forget it. It's also a waste of time for people to have to guess what I want, especially if I am the leader.

What advice would you give young people coming out of school today?

While young, work and study hard because it is easy to do these when you are young. Find out what you love the most and determine if it is a talent you can make a living with – and do it as early as possible so you can focus. Learn to be generous and give back to society; it has benefits for the future. Determine whether you want to be an entrepreneur. There are some who want to be entrepreneurs and they're often already entrepreneurs in college. There are some who think all they want is to have a steady job that will feed their families. Also, be honest. There is so much dishonesty in business. When I first came to China 25 years ago, no one in this society had money. Everybody made the same small amount of money, dressed in the same style, and had the same hair style. But in a short span of time, there are many billionaires today. How did this happen? The Chinese are hardworking and focused, but not everyone did it honestly. What I admire most are those who live their lives with honesty and integrity, and those who succeed without hurting anyone while they're on the way up – that is my definition of success.

Could you ever imagine a day when you will slow down?

I admit that my life is a bit unbalanced: I work too much. But I love what I am doing and I am still having fun. For now, I can't imagine slowing down. ●

