

# Changing People's Lives

## An Interview with Yue-Sai Kan

**EDITORS' NOTE** *Chinese-American Yue-Sai Kan (yuesaikan.com) is an Emmy-winning television producer, best-selling author, entrepreneur and humanitarian. Her Looking East television series was the first nationally syndicated program to introduce Asian cultures to American audiences. Following her success in the United States, China's national network, China Central Television, invited her to produce and host One World, giving millions of Chinese their first look 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 has written nine best-selling books, spreading the knowledge of beauty, etiquette, health and success among Chinese readers. Her humanitarian efforts have primarily been focused on education and children. She has built schools and libraries in her hometown of Guangxi and in other underprivileged regions throughout China. She awarded scholarships to students in a number of colleges in China as well as Hunter College and the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York. Since 2018, she has served as the Co-Chair of China Institute in America. She also sits on the boards of the Ellis Island Honors Society, Committee of 100, and Prince Albert of Monaco's Philanthropy Roundtable. Yue-Sai Kan is the first and only living American featured on a Chinese postage stamp.*



Yue-Sai Kan

involved things no one had done before. I see all my focus areas as interrelated because they change people's lives and make them better. I'm passionate about anything that has to do with making the world better. I do all these things because they're meaningful and help others.

**You spend a great deal of your time in New York and support many causes in the New York community. What has made New York so special for you?**

New York has always been special for me. Throughout my young student life in Hawaii, I had wanted to go to New York. I always thought a young person should spend a few years in New York because it is the world's most important city. I moved to New York in 1970 and started my TV career – a show called *Looking East*. It was the first TV series in America dedicated to introducing Asia to the American audience which at that time had very little interest in Asia. Forty years have passed and I have since been involved in all kinds of different projects and supported many causes related to New York. For instance, Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney and I once hosted "The Pandas Are Coming to New York" gala to raise funds for the panda project. How can New York not have a pair of giant pandas, right? It never came to

pass but even that experience taught me how things are done in the city. It is a complicated city and you can learn a lot very fast by being exposed to it.

I must say New York made me who I am and I have its multi-racial and multi-cultural DNA to thank for it.

**Are you concerned about New York's future coming out of the pandemic and what are the keys to New York's recovery and rebuilding?**

COVID-19 put Asian American communities in a uniquely complicated position. Cities like New York are faced with so many daunting challenges such as post-pandemic recession, economic disparity, racial tension and especially the latest dramatic rise in anti-Asian hate. This has made me realize that Asian Americans need to have more representation in the government who can speak on our behalf and protect us in a way no others can. Therefore, I supported almost all Asian candidates in the last election such as former presidential candidate who ran for Mayor of New York City Andrew Yang. We must have more diversity in politics and with that, a move toward true equality.

**You devote a great deal of your time and resources to philanthropic work. What makes this so important for you and how do you decide where to focus your efforts?**

One day in 1995, my neighbor, the wife of the Secretary-General of the United Nations Mrs. Leah Boutros-Ghali, told me that they were going to host the first United Nations' Women's Conference in China. I was determined to play a role in this event and donated \$1.5 million which was the total revenue of my cosmetics company in the first year. Yue Sai Cosmetics was the first Chinese company to donate to a United Nations' charity event at that time. Charity was a new concept in China as giving away money was a "joke." The Communist system of government is supposed to take care of its citizens from cradle to grave. Of course, today, like everything else, the Chinese have learned to use civil society to help to fill the gap of what the government cannot provide. Today philanthropy is alive and well in China. There are a lot of amazing home-grown philanthropists in China.

**You are an Emmy-winning television host and producer, successful entrepreneur, fashion icon, best-selling author and humanitarian. How do you do it all and do you see these focus areas as interrelated?**

I'm a Chinese American. It so happened that my entire career coincided with the unprecedented and unimaginable changes that happened in China since it opened its doors to the West in 1978. I was a pioneer in all I did in China, including television, cosmetics, fashion, etiquette, philanthropy, etc. I took what I know in America to China and on most occasions, I had to start from scratch. Nothing I have done in my life came easy because most of it



Miss Universe China at a Smile Train event

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Since 2011, I have been running the Miss Universe China Pageant and using the final pageant as Shanghai’s most glamorous charity ball. The pageant raised millions to support orphanages, cleft lip and palate correction surgeries and scholarships for students in China’s best music, TV and film schools.

Later as the first order of business of my own foundation, Yue-Sai Kan China Beauty Charity Fund, we started to host the China Fashion Gala in New York, a platform to recognize remarkable talents and emerging Chinese designers who would carry forward Chinese aesthetics and inspirations to the world and continue to make a difference to the community with the power of beauty. Last year, due to the pandemic, we held the Gala virtually and reached a much wider audience of several million people globally. It turned out to be a big success.

**You serve as co-chair of the China Institute. Will you discuss the history of the China Institute and your priorities for the Institute?**

China Institute is a 95-year-old cultural organization founded by a group of visionary Chinese and American scholars including Hu Shih, Kuo Ping-Wen, John Dewey

and Paul Monroe. Its mission is to promote Chinese culture through Chinese language, arts, music, dance, technology and business dialogues. As a non-political organization, China Institute’s impactful programs deepen connections and build knowledge between citizens of two of the world’s most important nations. Over the years, China Institute has served as the only major bridge between Chinese and American cultures, bringing Chinese scholars and artists to the United States for cultural exchange.

As the Co-Chair of China Institute, it’s my strong belief that this venerable organization should have a bigger reach in order for more people to gain insight and participate in our mission. For this reason, I launched a bold initiative called the “China Institute Goodwill Ambassador Program” in 2019. A group of outstanding international elites joined us, such as the world-renowned musician Tan Dun, designer Christian Louboutin, best-selling author Amy Chua, haute couture designer Guo Pei, and artist Zhang Huan, just to name a few.

Each year China Institute hosts hundreds of programs. I always encourage my family and friends to participate. For example, this

summer I have a number of friends learning Chinese there and my 9-year-old grand-nephew is taking Chinese language camp every day and is loving it. This year we even offer kids’ classes starting when they are only 22 months old.

Another major effort China Institute is undertaking is the ground floor buildout. China Institute moved to a new space in Downtown Manhattan seven years ago. With over five times the space of its previous location, the new center covering two floors is bursting with possibilities. This 6,000 square-foot ground floor includes a culinary center to teach Chinese cooking lessons and a great hall that will be able to host all kinds of exciting exhibitions of art, tourism and fashion. It will be a dazzling place to introduce Chinese culture to thousands of visitors every year. I invite everyone to come visit us at 100 Washington Street.

**As someone who has a deep understanding of China and the United States, what is your outlook for U.S.-China relations and how critical is it for there to be a positive, mutually beneficial relationship between the two countries?**

I think in today’s unstable economic and political environment there is an urgent need to mitigate the animosity between the two countries. What I wish for more than anything is respect and understanding on both sides. Cross-cultural understanding is vital for world peace. We should try to learn from each other and learn to live with each other. Xi Jinping told Donald Trump at their first face-to-face meeting in 2017, “We have a thousand reasons to get the China-U.S. relationship right, and not one reason to spoil it.” I thought he was right. No matter if it’s COVID-19 or the climate change problem, one thing for sure is that so many of the enormous problems we face are better solved if we are going to solve them together and I really hope that day will come soon.

**You are a role model for many young women. What advice do you offer young women who are starting their careers during this challenging and unprecedented time?**

One piece of advice I would give is to not be afraid to fail. If you are willing to try and work hard, you will be surprised by what you can achieve. But if you fail, many lessons can be learned. It’s win-win. So don’t be afraid. ●



*China Institute's Blue Cloud Gala 2019*