

Philanthropy in China



Training at the Safety for Mother and Baby program

An Interview with Yue-Sai Kan



Yue-Sai Kan (second from right) visiting Tara, a research vessel

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 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.

What makes philanthropy so important to you?

It started when I was young. There are many ways of participating in philanthropy. In my father and mother's generation, philanthropy was never organized.

Philanthropy is a huge business in America, but with the old Chinese, the most important thing about philanthropy is that the family takes care of itself. This is their definition of philanthropy.

Under Communism, the government is supposed to take care of everything. They give people tickets to buy their meat, rice, and oil, and a home to stay in. That is what the state is supposed to do. So the government used to be embarrassed to see people raise money for disaster relief or other causes. Some people were admonished for doing that. Then things began to change. The Open Door Policy initiated in the late 1970s brought about tremendous changes economically and socially. Chinese people began to accumulate wealth and started to support philanthropic causes. The new wealth allows the Chinese to now think of other people. In the old days, they would only think about leaving money for their children. It's no longer like this. The government's attitude also changed. Today, for example, the Chinese government gives an award to outstanding philanthropists.

In my particular case, I remember the first philanthropic endeavor I had in China was in 1985 in partnership with the Chinese Women's Federation because I had a cosmetics company at that time, and they asked me for support.

I donated \$1.5 million to the United Nations' first women's conference in Beijing.

To give that kind of money away was very new – in the U.S. sense, it is probably not a lot, but in those days in China, it was a lot of money. I was very proud to support an international gathering of leaders to discuss women related issues. It was also the first world class event China hosted successfully, then the Beijing Olympics followed, and then the World Expo.

Subsequently, I started doing philanthropy in rural areas in China where the mortality rate of children was so high. Mothers had no access to modern facilities to give birth. We called it the Safety for Mother and Baby program. We decided to do the first charity event to raise

money to buy ambulances and build small clinics where doctors could be there to help with deliveries of babies. Eventually, through a foundation, we built thousands of those clinics around the country.

I remember we set the price of a ticket at \$2,500. At that time, it was difficult to sell a dinner for \$100 a seat. People thought it was a joke. But through our efforts, they quickly got used to the notion. At the last fundraising event I did in Shanghai, I was selling tickets for \$5,000 a seat. That is the difference between 10 years ago and today.

We also chose to make the final competition of the Miss Universe China Pageant a charity event. Besides choosing Miss China, we also raised money for charity. The first year we did it, we made about \$1.5 million and donated it to a charity called Smile Train. We have helped a lot of children around China get operations for cleft palate for free.

I also sponsor and support the *Tara*, the big boat that goes around the world measuring changes in the ocean. It will go to China and measure the ocean, and the earth under the ocean, to ascertain their condition. When the boat returns, we will mobilize 5,000 students to go to understand the environmental impact.

Philanthropy in China has grown and people are receptive to philanthropy and actively doing it.

Do you put metrics around your philanthropic work as you do with your business activities?

It's much harder to do this with philanthropy, but I do try to concentrate my efforts. Instead of sitting on one of the bigger boards, I decided that since I'm Chinese and the China Institute had been around for 92 years, I should put my efforts into this organization to help it survive. I could do some good for other organizations, but I can have the most impact for China Institute. It's a wonderful organization that advances a deeper understanding of China through programs in education, culture, art and business.

We recently moved from a small townhouse on the Upper East Side to Downtown Manhattan so we have a much bigger space for our programs. We are in the middle of a capital campaign to raise enough money to build out the two floors we have – very exciting and challenging.

I want to do this to help China Institute grow and then I will think about other things. ●