

# Business and Philanthropy

## An Interview with Yue-Sai Kan

**EDITORS' NOTE** Chinese-American Yue-Sai Kan ([yuesaikan.com](http://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

### Will you provide an overview of your philanthropic work and your main areas of focus?

I've been involved in charities all my life. Living in the United States, giving is a way of life. Through the years, I've been involved with many different kinds of charities in both China and the U.S., mainly focusing on children, education and women empowerment.

I set up many scholarship programs in both countries. For example, the Jin Yu Xi Scholarship at Peking University to reward the female champion of the national college entrance examination from different provinces and regions in China; the Yuxi Scholarship at Beijing Film Academy and Shanghai Theater Academy; and scholarships at Hunter College and the Fashion Institute of Technology, among others.

As the first ever Chinese-American Ambassador of UNESCO's Say YES for Children campaign, I helped launch a global commitment to children with many world class celebrities, calling for healthy, peaceful and beautiful living environments for children.

In 2011, I set up my own foundation, the Yue-Sai Kan China Beauty Charity Fund, because I realized that we can harness the power of beauty to accomplish so many good things. As the first order of business, the Foundation hosted the China Fashion Gala in New York, a platform to recognize remarkable talents and emerging Chinese designers who would carry Chinese aesthetics and inspirations to the world. The talents and designers may be known or

unknown to the West, but are definitely worth our efforts to highlight them. So far, we have showcased the works of couturier Guo Pei, designer Grace Chen, and photographer Chen Man, just to name a few. On April 29th, our China Fashion Gala 2020 will introduce designer Xiong Ying. Her Dun Huang-inspired collection is breathtakingly beautiful and will blow your mind.



China Fashion Gala 2019

The China Fashion Gala is also a fundraiser. Last year, we were able to raise nearly \$850,000 to benefit the China Beauty Charity Fund Scholarship at the Fashion Institute of Technology, an executive education program in sustainable fashion, as well as China Institute's Fashion Design Competition Award.

I have been the National Director of Miss Universe China since 2011. Starting in 2013, we combined the Miss Universe China final with a charity gala dinner. Over the years, we raised millions of dollars by selling tables and holding raffles and auctions. These funds were all donated to the Operation Smile and Smiling Train projects. The donations were used to fund repair surgeries and comprehensive treatments for children suffering from cleft lip and palate. They give these unfortunate children the chance to change their fates and give them a reason to smile.

I've also served as co-chair of China Institute together with Chinese-American architect Chien Chung Pei since 2018. Founded in 1926 by Chinese reformers Hu Shi, K.P. Wen, and American scholars John Dewey and Paul Monroe, China Institute is the oldest bicultural, nonprofit organization in America to focus exclusively on China. It's New York City's



Jin Yu Xi Scholarship recipients at Peking University

preeminent center for insight and access to China through education, art, business and culture. My goal is to bring in more trustees and secure funds for a historic capital campaign to build out China Institute so it has a much bigger and modern space in line with its mission. It will be the only such home for Chinese culture in the United States.

**What are the keys to being effective in philanthropy?**

I'm a strong believer that charity is not about how much money you give away, but how effective your donation can be. Choose wisely whom or what organization to support. Do your research. In China, I work with the Soong Qing Ling Foundation because I know they have a strong infrastructure and tons of experience in helping women and children. When I do hands-on charity work, I really try to understand what the problem is and listen to the professionals and insiders, and then figure out how I can leverage my resources and my capabilities to help the best way I can.

**Do the same skills that are needed to be successful in business translate to being successful in philanthropy?**

Absolutely. Communication skills, networking skills, organization skills, and leadership skills are some of the most important and transferable skills that you need in order to succeed in both business and philanthropy.

Effective communication can make so much difference. I always like to invite donors and supporters to my house so that I can have a face-to-face conversation with them. I share my mission, vision, and values with them and also learn the stories behind them so that people will feel valued and inspired to support the causes.

Having an extensive network of friends is of utmost importance when it comes to developing business and doing charity in both China and the United States. Cold calling is really hard. Your network will help you succeed.

A strong leader can build a strong team and motivate and guide them to success. To be successful in philanthropy is actually more challenging

poverty. Just drive around downtown Los Angeles. The homeless tents extend for miles. The more you know about how China took more than 800 million people out of poverty, the more you will appreciate how extensive the program is. By the end of 2020, the goal is to have no more poverty in China. The alleviation program is truly grassroots. To give you two

examples, last year I was with the publicity chief of Lijiang, Yunnan Province. He said he was going to take a week off to go to work with the poor family he was assigned to help to bring the members out of poverty. I was really surprised. A leader is given the specific responsibility to help. Another German friend who is in charge of government relations of his company told me he was really busy because he has to find a poor village to help fight poverty.

**Do you take moments to reflect and appreciate the impact that your philanthropic work has had on so many lives?**

I hardly have the time to do so, but every now and then, in a really sweet and heartwarming way, I'm reminded how my small contribution can completely change a person's life. A couple years ago when I had surgery in the Hospital for Special Surgery, a nurse came to my room and told me that when she heard that I was in her hospital, she decided that she must see me and say thank you in person. She was one of my scholarship recipients in the English Language Program of Hunter College. The scholarship was set up to help new Chinese immigrants. She said my scholarship was a game changer for her and that mastering the English language opened so many doors for her in America. She was able to choose a career she's passionate about and support her family all because of me. ●



China Institute's Blue Cloud Gala 2019

because you are oftentimes equipped with minimal staff and volunteers. You need to bring out the best in every single team member. That's what a great leader is about.

**Is there a major focus and commitment to philanthropy in China?**

Poverty alleviation has always been a focus in China and will remain so. My friend Robert Kuhn did a brilliant documentary on this subject. *Voices from the Frontline: China's War on Poverty* documents some real-life cases of poor people being lifted out of poverty via micro-business, education and relocation. The grassroots campaign is mounted in the poorest counties, townships and villages in China. It is truly amazing.

The United States is the richest country in the world, but it does not do much about



2016 Miss Universe China Smile Train Charity Gala



Yue-Sai with 2017 scholarship winners at the Fashion Institute of Technology