

Economic Opportunities

for Women in East Asia and the Pacific

CHINA:

A Voice for Women

A Voice for Women

Yang Lan has been called China's answer to American television personalities Oprah Winfrey and Barbara Walters. Her web portal, *Her Village*, is China's largest online community for professional women. Their number one issue? Inequality in the workforce.

Yang Lan and her husband Bruno Wu founded Sun Media Investment Holdings in 1999. Their business has quickly become a leading multimedia company in a largely government-dominated industry. Yang serves as its chairwoman and also stars in several programs, including *Yang Lan One on One*. Forbes magazine has described her as "one of China's 50 most successful entrepreneurs." *Madame Figaro China* magazine chose her as the "Most Admirable Chinese Woman" of 2005, and the World Human Resource Lab named her one of the "100 Most Powerful Women in China."

Over the past decade, Sun Media Investment Holdings Limited has become a leader in the movement on media convergence. The company invests in television, publishing, sports marketing, and new media. It has direct interests in 11

media companies, through which it holds shares in more than 30 media operations, and controls at least 60 media brands.

Yang has used her platform to reach out to female audiences. This has allowed her to explore the changing roles of women in Chinese society as well as proving a profitable business niche. In the surveys Yang's company regularly conducts, she says workforce inequality has emerged as the single most significant preoccupation for Chinese women. The lower mandatory retirement age puts women at a particular disadvantage. Women feel they are unable to reach their full potential in terms of career advancement and ensuring adequate retirement pay. And employers cannot fully benefit from this increasingly educated and experienced segment of the workforce.

Starting Out

Yang grew up with positive role models. Her mother was an engineer who encouraged her to strive for success. Yang began her career as a TV announcer on China's national station in



COMPANY PROFILE

Business Name: Sun Media Investment Holdings

Business Type: Media investment company

Employee Number: 1,000

Business Reach: The Americas, United Kingdom, Ireland, Japan, and over 20 other countries and regions





the 1990s, beating over one thousand candidates for the role. With some years of experience to her credit, she left to enroll at Columbia University, and after completing a masters degree returned home in 1996 to work for the Phoenix Chinese Channel. Her programs were very successful, but she wanted more independence and creative control. In 1999 she left the channel to establish a media business with her husband Bruno Wu.

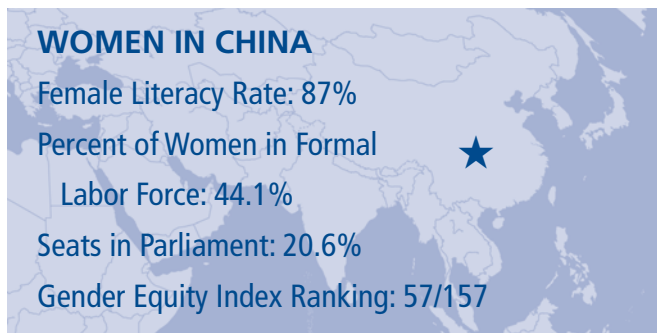
Bruno and Yang began their joint venture by pursuing their shared interest in documentary movies. “At that time, a documentary channel was non-existent in the greater China area,” says Yang. “So we thought - why don’t we combine our personal passion and career aspirations with the prospect of developing digital or satellite paid TV channels in China?”

Yet their initial pay-per-view model did not work. The decision to let go of the business was emotional. “It was a really painful experience for me, because it was the first time in my career I had to swallow some kind of failure,” says Yang. “It was the first time that I realized efforts and dreams alone cannot help to realize everything. You need a solid business model, [and a] very solid team to carry out whatever is in your mind.”

Going for Growth: Obstacles and Opportunities

The couple revamped their business to focus more closely on the needs and interests of Chinese consumers. “The major breakthrough took place when we decided to build a cross-media community for Chinese women professionals,” says Yang. “Chinese women are eager to pursue careers and there is a major social and family transformation underway.” To better understand and serve its consumers, the company conducts periodic on-line surveys on issues relating to women, with topics ranging from marriage to workplace issues.

Yang also recognized that Chinese women are powerful consumers. A 2008 Synovate survey on



spending habits of women in the region found that 75 percent of Chinese women pay their own bills for purchases rather than being financially dependent on their husbands or partners.¹ Moreover, women are “making the decisions for family expenditures, including housing and cars. They are the ones who decide on the education for children, where to travel for holidays,” says Yang.

Yang’s media empire is capitalizing upon this. *Her Village* encompasses a network of TV talk shows focused on the interests of women. The topics covered also appear online in multimedia form through Yang’s magazine, called LAN, which has print articles and embeds video from her television interviews. She has her own channels on China’s internet portal, Sina.com, and distributes programming and information over China’s mobile platforms. Her shows help promote positive female role models through programs such as awarding prizes for top businesswomen. Yang’s weekly TV show reaches 8 million viewers per week, her e-magazine receives 3 million downloads per week, and *Her Village* receives 600,000 downloads daily.² Within a short time, *Her Village* has turned into a powerful brand, becoming China’s largest on-line community for professional women.

Being in touch with consumer trends and the needs of Chinese working women presents new business opportunities. A survey by the Guangdong Development Bank found that 65 percent of women earning more than 2,500 yuan (US\$308) a month were interested in applying for credit cards. A number of banks across China have recognized the potential of women as consumers and tapped into this market by creating customized products for women.³ Yang has launched a women’s credit card in cooperation with one of China’s leading commercial banks to facilitate purchases by the



upwardly mobile women that are part of the *Her Village* network. Yang’s program has over 30,000 members and is growing steadily. “With that credit card women can pay on the website. We also organize different seminars and special discounts for our members,” Yang explains.

Through her programs and her company’s surveys of female consumers Yang became aware of how strongly Chinese women felt about certain inequalities facing them in the workforce. China ranks at number 111 in the Employing Workers category of the Doing Business report. The indicator measures labor legislation on the flexibility of working hours, and the cost of hiring and firing (using the case study of a male employee who has been with the company 20 years when he is laid off.) While the Doing Business indicator does not include retirement age, Yang’s surveys have consistently highlighted the concerns Chinese women have about the earlier mandatory retirement age for women.





Worldwide, women live on average four years longer than men but are often forced to retire earlier. The retirement age gap is largest in Eastern Europe and Central Asia (see figure below). This may seem to benefit women on the face of it, but it can hurt them by reducing their career options and eventual pension pay.⁴ Raising and equalizing the retirement age would facilitate more comfortable retirements for women, but would also allow employers to keep workers longer and thereby help address China’s skilled labor shortage.⁵



Source: World Bank. 2007. *Doing Business in 2008*. World Bank, Washington, DC.

There are anti-discrimination provisions in China’s laws, including the Constitution, the Labor Law, and the Law Protecting Women’s Rights and Interests. Yet lower mandatory retirement ages for women are still widespread and socially acceptable.⁶ The mandatory retirement age in China is 60 for men and 55 or 50 for women, although employees in certain sectors may be required by their employers to retire even earlier.⁷ Employers routinely set very low retirement ages for women in sectors where there has been a preference for young female employees, such as in the airline industry.⁸

Yang hopes to change both laws and attitudes, as well as improve women’s career options. “We want the public and private sectors to be aware of their attitudes toward women and the result of these,” she says. “[We want] to convince them that providing for better working conditions and providing career sustainability for women is actually good for business and efficiency.”

Since women retire earlier, they are also less likely to get the maximum pension at the required retirement age even though they have longer life expectancy. The All-China Women’s Federation notes that the average length of service for female civil servants is 31.6 years, compared to 39.3 years for males.⁹ Generally, only those with 35 years of service are entitled to the maximum pension.

In neighboring Vietnam, a recent World Bank study estimates the earlier retirement age contributes to women earning an average 12 percent less in rural areas and 13 percent less than men in urban areas, as well as having fewer training opportunities. With the issue high on government’s agenda, Vietnam is now considering amending the law to close the gender gap.¹⁰

Yang points out, “Earlier retirement age for women may have made sense when most of the jobs relied on physical labor, but it doesn’t apply to the current situation anymore. At the age of 55 many women, just like their male counterparts, are at the prime of their experiences and management skills.”

In addition to her business and advocacy on behalf of working women, Yang is also a philanthropist. In 2005, she founded the Sun Culture Foundation to raise awareness about poverty and encourage communication among cultures, donating an estimated US\$72 million.¹¹ She is the Goodwill Ambassador of the China Charity Federation and a trustee of the Soong Ching Ling Foundation, which contributes to children’s causes. Yang also served as an image ambassador for Beijing in its successful bid for the 2008 Summer Olympics.

Next Steps

Looking ahead, Yang is focused on building on the success of *Her Village*. She is equally determined to use her high profile to advocate for policy change and ensure women’s equality in the workforce. Her message to women is one about learning from mistakes: “I have never stopped learning. Women look up to me as a symbol of being brave enough to probe into the unknown, to realize your own potential. I always encourage women, especially young women, to have the courage to fail.”

BUSINESS ISSUE: DIFFERENTIAL RETIREMENT AGE

OPPORTUNITIES TO LEARN AND REFORM

- Equalize mandatory retirement ages, to ensure that both women and men can fulfill their economic potential.

Footnotes

1. Synovate. 2008. “Synovate reveals the financial and retail clout of Hong Kong women.” Press Release, August 10.
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4. World Bank. *Doing Business in 2008*. World Bank, Washington, DC.
5. China Economic Review. 2006. “China considering retirement age increase.” November 29.
6. Bulger, Christine M. 2000. “Fighting Gender Discrimination in the Chinese Workplace.” *Boston College Third World Law Journal*. Vol. 20, no. 2, p. 345. Available at http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/law/lwswch/journals/bctwj/20_2/03_FMS.htm
7. Ni, Ching-Ching. 2007. “Pretty faces fill Chinese air space.” *The Seattle Times*. November 24. http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/nationworld/2004032257_chinawomen23.html
8. Ibid.
9. China Daily. 2003. “Women Question Early Retirement.” September 10. Available online: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/en/doc/2003-10/09/content_270188.htm
10. Pham, Hoa Thi Mong. 2008. “The Facts about Women’s Retirement Age in Vietnam.” *World Bank Group Gender Action Plan Newsletter*. Fall edition. Available online: <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTGENDER/Images/336002-1205956505684/gnewsletterp8.pdf>
11. Linebaugh, Kate and Jane Spencer. 2007. “The Revolution of Chairman Li.” *The Wall Street Journal*, November 2. Available online: http://online.wsj.com/public/article_print/SB119394575671179451.html

Sources for the Boxes

Population: *World Development Indicators 2008*
Gross National Income per Capita: *World Development Indicators 2008*
Female Literacy Rate: *World Development Indicators 2008*
Percent of Women in Formal Labor Force: *World Development Indicators 2008*
Seats in Parliament (% held by women): *World Development Indicators 2008*
Gender Equity Index: *Social Watch Gender Equity Index 2008*

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Australian Government
AusAID



THE WORLD BANK



International
Finance Corporation
World Bank Group



World Bank Group Gender Action Plan

