

Finding beauty in adversity

COCO ZHANG, Vice President of Mary Kay China, tells how her life story drives her career. Brunswick's **DR LU JIANZHONG** and **BAIJIA LIU** report

BUSINESS LEADERS RARELY TALK CANDIDLY about their personal lives. But Coco Zhang Jing, Mary Kay China's Vice President of External Affairs, doesn't hesitate to begin a speech to a room full of young professionals with a story of personal heartbreak.

At 25, on the path to marriage, she almost quit her job as a secretary to focus on supporting her future husband and his career. Instead, she was blindsided by his decision to break up with her. Deeply wounded, Coco realized she couldn't afford to sell herself short. She had a choice: idealize someone else's success or take control of her own. In a recent TED Talk, Zhang said, "Your attitude in these specific moments determines who you will eventually be." She chose self-determination and it became the foundation for her growth and success as a business leader.

Born near the end of the Cultural Revolution – a decade from 1966 to '76, when government-led policies kept much of the society in a state of upheaval – Zhang came of age during the unprecedented socio-economic recovery of the subsequent era. Retaining a strong loyalty to Chinese culture, hers was one of the first generation of Chinese executives with international vision and experience.

Zhang joined Mary Kay's logistics department, moving away from her hometown for the first time. On her first day on the job, she wrote down everything her manager told her and carried that piece of paper with her for a year, referring to it regularly until she had it memorized. Today, she is a crucial member of the company's leadership and, among her other responsibilities, is the architect of its award-winning corporate social responsibility programs.

The members of Zhang's generation share an outlook marked by equal measures of tenacity, empathy and a drive to succeed. The Chinese expression *chi ku* ("吃苦") – "eat bitterness" – defines their attitude: they are survivors, set to persevere through adversity. In our interview, Zhang says that if you are willing to "eat enough bitterness," you will be able to overcome challenges.

While working toward her individual success, Coco also learned to take pride in her role as part of a collective. Success, she says, must be shared. Every day, walking the halls of the Shanghai headquarters, Coco says, she is reminded of the hundreds of thousands of women across China whom Mary Kay employs and provides with opportunities. Her goal now, Coco says, is to "be a role model and a mentor," showing women how they can be influential within and beyond the organization.

How did your upbringing affect your success in business?

Growing up, I heard a lot of stories about how the life of my parents' generation was turned upside down by the Cultural Revolution. My father was a businessman and had to endure criticism and prejudice. My mother was a good student but could not continue her studies. Both became laborers, but they kept a sense of responsibility and dignity.

COCO ZHANG

Coco Zhang Jing is Mary Kay China's Vice President of External Affairs and oversees government affairs, corporate communication, social responsibility and customer services. As a member of the leadership team, she established the company's corporate social responsibility system that supports women's rights and environmental protection. It has spent more than RMB160 million (\$23 million) and provided nearly 400,000 hours of volunteer services.



And they tried their best to give me a carefree childhood. I didn't even realize that my family's financial condition wasn't good until I graduated from college. My childhood taught me that all of us are a product of our time. You cannot choose the time you are born in, but you can control how you experience it.

Over your 20 years with Mary Kay in a variety of different roles, what has changed?

One thing that never changes is our mission – to enrich women's lives. We want each of our sellers to have the opportunity to achieve financial independence. But for that we have to make sure our business is relevant and successful.

As a result, change is constant. When I joined, sellers had to pick up their orders from our branch offices. We introduced online ordering just as the internet arrived. I personally visited many small cities to show our sales representatives how to order with the computer. Within a year, online orders made up 70 percent of all orders. We visit startups each year to get inspired by their creativity and to make ourselves bolder in our work.

How do you initiate such change at a business the size of Mary Kay China?

My motto is, "I cannot lead people to a place where I have never been." We are now leading the team into an unfamiliar area as Mary Kay China enters the nutritional food business and moves from a beauty company to a beauty/well-being company. As leaders, we decided the change should begin with ourselves, leading healthy lifestyles. I had never been a fan of fitness. But I made up my mind, bought my first pair of running shoes since college and started working out every day. Now I've lost 6 kilograms and am more fit. And I am now truly an expert on well-being and nutrition.

When you face a tough decision, what do you do?

I rely on my team. As chief commander, I may not be the best soldier. My job is to see that my team obtains their objectives. I must stay humble and listen. They are experts in their fields and more capable than I am.

Mary Kay also encourages women to start their own businesses. How do you support them?

They need the skills and capabilities for long-term success. In Yunnan province, we help a group of women who make embroidered products. It is a traditional craft that was vanishing. Each year,



we bring in experts, such as our Vice President of Marketing and a Professor from the China Art Academy, to talk to these women on topics ranging from brand building to fashion design.

I have been visiting them each year and it is incredible to witness their transformation. When I first met them, the women did not look me in the eye and we could not communicate. Now, they proudly display and sell their products to tourists and they speak to me confidently in Mandarin.

Top management in China is still dominated by men. Has this affected your career?

Mary Kay was founded by a woman, which definitely makes it easier. As a career woman, it is important to define priorities, as we can't do it all. I don't think we should try to act like men though. We need to embrace our skills and use them to our advantage. We are good listeners and team players and approach situations with more empathy.

Beyond Mary Kay, do you see more women being promoted to top positions in China?

A recent report by Grant Thornton found that globally, 25 percent of senior roles are held by women, up slightly from last year. China is above that with 31 percent. As a woman-friendly employer, Mary Kay outperforms the average – 64 percent of our leadership roles in China are held by women; I'm proud to be one of them.

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A retired Dallas saleswoman founded a global beauty company to empower women

In 1963, with \$5,000 in savings from previous door-to-door sales work, Mary Kay Ash (1918–2001) set out to write a book on the best way to earn money in direct sales, aimed at helping women become financially independent. But in examining the lessons of her experience, she decided on a different plan: to launch her own business, based on fair, rigorous policies regarding sales and commissions to her "beauty consultants" and a clear priority to make each customer feel important. In its first year, the Dallas-based Mary Kay Cosmetics sales were nearly \$200,000 and it employed 318 consultants. In 1969, the company began awarding pink Cadillacs to top sellers, giving away 6,500 cars by 1993. Today the company is global. Mary Kay Ash won numerous recognitions, including Baylor University's posthumous designation as the "Greatest Female Entrepreneur in American History."

