

## Mei Xu: A Chinese American Entrepreneur

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What does it take to turn candles made from Campbell soup cans into a multi-million-dollar company? Mei Xu, the founder of Chesapeake Bay Candles, made a significant commitment to step away from a stable office job to pursue her passion as an entrepreneur.

Born in Hangzhou, China, in 1967, Mei grew up during the transition to a more open-market China, giving her access to more opportunities than those who came before her. At age 12, Mei was one of 80 children selected to attend the Hangzhou Foreign Language School boarding school to train diplomats for Foreign Service. There, she learned subjects in English such as the English language, but also literature, world history, and art. This language immersion education equipped Mei with a global mindset that would eventually pave a road for her success, but not in the way she originally intended.

After graduation, Mei continued her education at the Beijing Foreign Studies University and interned at the World Bank, where she further exposed herself to global education and the business world. Unfortunately, Mei's dreams of becoming a diplomat did not materialize, so she moved to the United States to begin graduate school at the University of Maryland College Park. Upon completing her master's degree, Xu moved to New York to work for a high-tech medical company that shipped minerals to China. She would frequently visit a Bloomingdale's near her

residence and look around at the merchandise. Here, she became inspired to improve the home goods industry and update it to the fashion standard. Unhappy with her position and the mundane work at her current job, Mei turned to entrepreneurship.

Mei began gathering products from China to test out in a trade show, and the one product that stood out was the candle. Xu started to experiment with manufacturing candles using empty Campbell soup cans as molds and launched Pacific Trade International, a candle and home decor company with her husband at the time.

"Risk in Chinese is written as danger and opportunity. It's two letters, one is danger, and the other one is opportunity. So, the risk is taking opportunities when there's danger, when there's uncertainty. You also need to understand what is your bottom line that you can lose and what is the point where you have to abandon the plan so that you are not going to lose everything."

Mei expanded her business in the early days at a smaller scale with trade shows that catered towards mom-and-pop retailers. It was just what the market needed, and Chesapeake Bay Candles quickly reached shelves across the nation and began selling to department stores like Bed Bath & Beyond, Kohl's, and Target. Xu quickly expanded and grew the contemporary, clean brand into a multi-million-dollar candle empire known as Chesapeake Bay Candles.

"When I brought the factory to Maryland in 2010. I was the first factory to request a permit in two decades in Maryland. And they told me, 'I don't understand why you're moving in a factory back when everyone's moving them out, and you're making candles. It's not a high-tech company, and the labor cost is much higher. So, how can you make it work?' So, I have not done many easy things. But I do feel if a risk is worth taking, you should go for it."

In 2016, Mei developed breast cancer and had to receive surgery in the coming year. Not knowing the outcome, Mei sold the company for \$75 million to Newell Brands. Luckily, she made a full recovery and continued as the CEO in the coming years to assist the company's transition.

Near the end of 2018, Mei stepped down as the CEO of Chesapeake Bay Candles and was looking for something new. At the time, she got a book offer and began writing her book titled "Burn." Mei attended many events for women and women CEOs, where she was often told how fortunate she was to grow and scale her business to this size, especially for a woman entrepreneur.

"I started to realize that I am indeed the exception, not the rule in the Women's Business arena. And there are a lot of women brands that can use expertise to find new vendors, find new sources

of funding, and find new logistic partners. So, I was always trying to find ways to support them in the back end, and then the pandemic hit."

Mei decided to take action and launched Yes She May, an online platform to promote women entrepreneurs and businesses. Since its launch, the website has curated more than 80 vendors from five different continents and more than 30 different countries, helping more entrepreneurs like her follow and fulfill their dreams.

"Even with this new business, people look at me and say, but there's no reason why people should only buy from women, or why would anybody want to shop on such a website? Nobody knows these women. And that's precisely the reason I'm fighting for them. They have not been featured by Amazon or other shopping sites because they don't have the resources to put their names there. So we do need to give them a push, and you will find that they're worth pushing for."

Not only is she fighting for the equal representation of women business owners, but Mei is also making waves in the social fight for Asian American equality, as she firmly believes in the benefits of a culturally diverse workforce.

"Well, racism has always been here. The challenge is that we never seem to be the group of minorities to speak up on our experiences. So, I feel like raising the profile and raising the issues when they come is one of the first ways to expose the weaknesses and the problems. I know, culturally speaking, it's not very easy because Asians are trained to be not so confrontational, and not to bring attention to themselves. All these so-called Asian virtues really are against the principles of speaking up and acting up on behalf of your community. So, I feel we must adopt a newer philosophy, which is that we can only have a voice if we speak, right? Who's going to give us a voice if we don't even want to speak? It starts with you and me, if we want to see the change, we have to be the change we want to see."

Mei's story is truly inspiring and sets an example for the next generation of Chinese Americans, teaching us the importance of global entrepreneurship, risk-taking, and what it's like to break through the bamboo ceiling.