



## Yintong talks with...

**Kevin Sui, chief executive of China Hour**



**S**ongyan Sui – known as Kevin – has quite a story to tell. Encouraged by his parents to become a doctor, he ended up being the founder of a Sky TV mini channel ‘China Hour’ based in the UK, via a career path that took in working when an agricultural science student in a North Chinese cornfield, studying economics in Australia, and becoming a BBC broadcaster in London.

In 1990s China, young professionals who could pass stringent English exams were encouraged by the government to study overseas. A correspondent with the prestigious Economic Daily, Kevin accepted the challenge and subsequently went to Australia. While considering whether to continue his studies there with a PhD, he successfully answered a BBC World Service call for Chinese-speaking staff, thus beginning an 11-year association.

### Learning

Kevin recounts his experience at the ‘Beeb’ with fond memories and gratitude. “I was involved with almost every aspect of the broadcasting world and witnessed the world’s

major incidents – the 2004 general election in Taiwan, 9/11, the death of the Pope, the tragedy of the Malcolm Bay Chinese immigrants ... we covered them all.” These experiences and learning from other colleagues provided Kevin with the necessary tools and an awareness of viewing the world objectively to work in the media. Together they formed a solid foundation for his career progression in broadcasting.



His natural curiosity and love of exploration dictated that he was ready to move on. A spell with *China Daily* reinforced his understanding of the strong demand for Chinese programming in the West, with far too few such programmes to satisfy western appetites. Putting his newly-found business realisation into practice along with his comprehensive skills and knowledge, China Hour was born in November 2016.

### Depth

The interest in China within British society is there for all to see – the

British government’s ambition to have 5,000 British pupils speaking fluent Chinese by 2020; and the rise to third of Chinese in the table of most studied languages at A-level, overtaking German. Kevin explains: “The general programmes relating to China were produced mostly with the business and diplomatic audience in mind. These programmes had a great deal of depth but they were not in sufficient quantity and coverage to be informative enough to the general public, so *China Hour* was born.

“It is in English with the core target audience being the British middle-class population. To achieve that, we don’t just buy programmes and put them on our channel. Instead, we repackage them and dub the narratives in English.” As an example he gave a programme called *Tea – the story of a leaf* (below). The



original programme was superb but achieved surprisingly low viewing figures. Kevin learnt from this experience, “The original audience were the Chinese people in China who were already familiar with the Chinese context of tea and tea culture. The British audience has a different built-in understanding and mindset. Our programme would need to connect with their knowledge with a shared empathy.

“So, we invited the Lonely Planet’s China columnist to add an opening talk filmed at familiar locations such as Twinings and Fortnum & Mason before the main body of the programme. This led the audience to the programme at their own pace. The revised version proved to be successful, with one episode of the six parts series achieved 380,000 viewings, compared with BBC News at 10’s 400,000 viewing rating in the same month – a resounding result.

### Success

Audience rating is obviously key to success in broadcasting. Kevin’s

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initial goal was to achieve 300,000 per month in the first year but in the first month it had already reached over 600,000 and gathered a viewing of 9-10 million in 2018, with only four hours of daily broadcasting.

To achieve this result, Kevin and his team cover the whole process, from the selection of a programme, to importing, editing, promotion and sales. With the time difference Kevin stays late at night to ensure all is ready for his Chinese counterpart to proceed first thing in the morning, then he gets up early to catch up with his colleagues in China before they go home. This efficiency has benefited Kevin greatly as he now can enjoy a successful work/life balance, a quality time to look after his daughter and be there for his family.

### Change

Kevin’s parents had high hopes for him to become a respected doctor to save lives and do good. Instead, his career went off on a completely different track. What would they make of it now if they were alive? “I still have a long way to go to change the world for the better but I feel I am on track in contributing to the promotion of the understanding between different cultures and people; the direction hasn’t changed. I know they would be happy to see I am doing something I enjoy. And that, I certainly do.”

[www.chnpec.com/en](http://www.chnpec.com/en)

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INSIDE

Capital music centre  
Page 3



COVER STORY

Behind the scenes  
at MIPIM  
Pages 6-7

