

Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month: James Yao, MD, PhD

James S. T. Yao, MD, PhD, 1934-2022

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James See-Tao Yao was born on October 14, 1934, in Canton, a city in southern China now known as Guangzhou. In the turbulent years during and after World War II, his family moved multiple times, first to Portuguese-controlled Macau, where he spent most of his childhood, and then British-controlled Hong Kong. He attended medical school at National Taiwan University, which at the time was developing a program to attract overseas Chinese students, and earned his MD in 1961.

Early in his career, Yao decided to become a surgeon because, in his words, it offered instant satisfaction as opposed to clinical medicine. With few opportunities for advanced training in China, he left for the United States. He completed an internship and residency in general surgery at Cook County Hospital in Chicago. Years later he reflected that his fellow residents were great mentors to him, teaching him about American life, including how to drive and introducing him to American sports. At the end of his residency in 1967 he married nurse Louise Stewart, whom he had met at the hospital. They would have three children together.

Due to immigration law and Yao's visa status, in 1967 he was required to leave the United States for at least two years. He took advantage of his situation by traveling to London, where he completed a research fellowship in vascular surgery at St. Mary's Hospital. During his time there, he became interested in noninvasive measurement of peripheral vascular disease, including the use of Doppler ultrasound and plethysmography to measure blood pressure. His research, which culminated in a PhD in vascular physiology in 1971, became the basis of the ankle-brachial index, a now-standard test that compares blood pressure in the ankle and the arm to diagnose peripheral arterial disease.

After earning his PhD, Yao returned to the United States and first worked at Detroit Receiving Hospital, a trauma hospital that did not offer him much vascular surgery work. Luckily he was soon recruited to Northwestern University Medical School by Professor John J. Bergan, MD. Together, they established Northwestern as a leading center of vascular surgery. Bergan and Yao created the Division of Vascular Surgery within the Department of Surgery in 1976, established one of the country's first vascular surgery fellowships at the school, and one of the first noninvasive vascular labs at Northwestern Memorial Hospital (NMH). Yao acted as Chief of the Division of Vascular Surgery from 1988 to 1997 and as Chair of the Department of Surgery from 1997 to 2000.



Yao later in life. Via [Society of Vascular Surgery](#).

Yao remained a leader in vascular surgery for the rest of his career. In the 1980s, he innovated at NMH yet again, implementing a hybrid operating room that had an X-ray transmitter installed on the ceiling, allowing surgeons to perform arteriograms in the midst of operations, rather than relying on X-ray technicians to bring equipment to the OR. This setup has become standard in operating rooms.

In the 1990s, Yao's surgical expertise was recognized by his peers in several ways. When Chicagoland doctors were asked to rate the best doctors in the area, Yao was voted in the top 3 in 1992 and in 1999 received the most mentions of any doctor in any field. During these years, the team physician for the Chicago Cubs (one of Yao's colleagues at NMH) began referring players to Yao for surgery. Soon Yao became the go-to surgeon for baseball pitchers who developed artery damage in their shoulders. In addition to his surgical practice, Yao traveled the world as a visiting professor, co-edited 58 books, wrote over 300 articles, and led associations including the Chicago Surgical Society and the Society of Vascular Surgery.

James Yao became Professor Emeritus at the Feinberg School of Medicine in 2005. In commemoration, Mayor Richard M. Daley declared September 21, 2005, James See Tao Yao Day in Chicago. Yao's accolades continued even in retirement: two years later, he received the Society for Vascular Surgery's Lifetime Achievement Award—the organization's highest honor, and in 2015, he was awarded the Rene-Lerliche Prize, the International Society of Surgery's prize for the surgeon who has made the most significant contribution to surgery of the arteries, veins, or heart. Yao died on December 20, 2022, at age 88. Reflecting his commitment to the advancement of vascular science, in 2023, the Society of Vascular Surgery renamed its Resident Research Award in his honor.



Yao (left) in the operating room. From *Annals of Surgery Open* 6, no. 4 (Dec 2025).

Selected References

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