Pauline Yu became president of the ACLS in July 2003, having served as dean of humanities in the College of Letters and Science at UCLA and professor of East Asian languages and cultures from 1994-2003. Prior to that appointment, she was founding chair of the Department of East Asian Languages and Literature at UC-Irvine (1989-1994) and on the faculty of Columbia University (1985-89) and the University of Minnesota (1976-85).

She is the author or editor of five books and dozens of articles on classical Chinese poetry, literary theory, comparative poetics, and issues in the humanities, and has received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the ACLS, and the NEH. She was awarded the William Riley Parker prize for best PMLA article of 2007. She is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and an elected member of the American Philosophical Society and Committee of 100.