

# Conferment of the Degree of Doctor of Social Science, *honoris causa* A Citation



## Ms Lee Lai Shan, MBE

Early one morning in August 1996 many Hong Kong residents were still awake and watching their TV sets. At around 5 am came the picture they were all waiting to see: Lee Lai Shan sailing past the final marker at the Atlanta Olympic Games to win Hong Kong's first Olympic gold medal. Many people who had hardly heard of windsurfing nonetheless felt a wave of communal pride and joy pass through the territory. Great athletes can come to focus the aspirations of a whole community. As many people pointed out, in 1996 Shan Shan's famous victory was the kind of good omen Hong Kong seemed to need.

Lee Lai Shan's early life gives little hint of the fame she was to achieve. She grew up on Cheung Chau, number eight in a family of ten. Her father died when she was eight years old. As in many large families, she was brought up as much by her older sisters and brother as by her parents. The times were tough. Her brother qualified for entrance to university but had to find a job instead. Apart from her siblings, a major influence on her was her uncle, for whom she occasionally did odd jobs. He was a hard man to please and believed firmly that the only way to learn anything is by making mistakes. One day he gave her the task of filling a hole in his garage floor with concrete, which she did carelessly. The next day he showed her how water gathered in the concreted spot and made her do it all again.

It was Ms Lee's uncle who first put her on a windsurf board at the age of 12. Although she was a good athlete at school, a champion swimmer, her balance was not good. After an hour, she could still stay on the board for only a minute. It took her a month of learning from her mistakes before she could control the board and go where she wanted to. She soon fell in love with the sport and love drove her on.

Seeing windsurfers gracefully leaning out and skimming the waves gives little idea of how arduous the sport is. To succeed at the highest level demands many qualities. It requires, first of all, the judgment and knowledge of a skilled yachtsman. Shan Shan tells how the champion needs to be able to read the wind right across the course, to discern subtle shifts of wind-speed and direction that might give an advantage. This means being able to read the sea, to notice the patches of darker water that may mean stronger wind. And then, in a split second, the champion needs the courage to make what may be a crucial decision, either to "shadow" the rest of the fleet or to take a risk and go right out on her own to the other side of the course. In the final race at Atlanta, Shan Shan's main rival steered wide, looking for advantage, whereas she herself stayed close to the buoys marking the course and found the wind to take her to victory. Such instant judgements are informed by weeks of research and observation before the races begin. The prevailing winds on the course at every time of day have to be studied, along with all the currents. Shan Shan arrived in Atlanta a month before the race, especially to study the strong tidal currents at the mouth of the Savannah River where the regatta was held. Behind her feat of athleticism lay meticulous planning and preparation, of a characteristic Hong Kong kind.

As well as seamanship and preparation, the champion windsurfer needs the strength and



endurance of an Olympic rower. After 1992, when it became legal to pump the sail for extra speed, windsurfing became a gruelling contest of physical fitness and power. To succeed, Shan Shan needs to train five to six hours a day, six days a week, throughout the whole year — two and a half days in the gymnasium, rowing, swimming and cycling, and three days on the water.

To sustain such a punishing schedule, year in year out, and to race at peak performance, requires what Shan Shan sees as the essential quality of a champion, and that is self-motivation. Winning at the highest level demands the capacity to push herself, sometimes beyond her limits. Races are won in the mind, she says, by dedication, mental toughness, resilience, the ability to bounce back after defeat. Like most modern champions, she uses the services of a sports psychologist, who teaches her to relax, to switch off, to put all thought of loss out of her mind. Meeting the bright and happy victorious athlete provides little clue to the mental discipline it takes to get her there. Nor much clue to the teamwork needed behind the scenes – coach, psychologists, sports scientists, and above all her husband, himself a distinguished windsurfer, ever at her side.

Drawing all these together, Lee Lai-Shan has become the most successful woman windsurfer in the world. Apart from winning Olympic gold in 1996, she has been World Champion three times, gold medallist twice at the Asian Games and twice at the European Championships, seven times Hong Kong champion, three times Singapore champion, as well as winner of the World Sailor of the Year Award. Right at this moment she is preparing for the next World Championships in Pattaya in Thailand, ahead of a campaign for a second Olympic gold medal at the Games in Athens.

Success in her sport has taught Shan Shan many things. She is the first to admit that she was not a dedicated student at school, putting in what she describes as only 70% effort. After winning the World Championship in 1993, she realized that she could achieve nothing by putting in only 70% effort. This altogether changed her attitude to study. When she was awarded a scholarship by the Hong Kong Sports Institute she undertook study at the University of Canberra in Australia, where she graduated as Bachelor of Applied Science in Sports Administration in 1999.

Her degree gives a clue to Shan Shan's future. Feted and celebrated in Hong Kong after her famous victory, she has gained rich rewards from her sport. She now feels a strong obligation to give something back to the Hong Kong community – a process that has already started with her active public role in promoting participation in sport in the local community. She aims to become involved in coaching or sports administration and to use her high visibility to promote more active and healthier lifestyles in Hong Kong.

This important work of Ms Lee is very much in harmony with this University's research and teaching focus on sports science, sports medicine and physical education, as well as its campaign for community and personal health. It gives me great pleasure Mr Chairman to present to you Hong Kong's most distinguished athlete, Ms Lee Lai Shan, for the award of the degree of Doctor of Social Science, *honoris causa*.

*This citation is written by Professor David Parker*