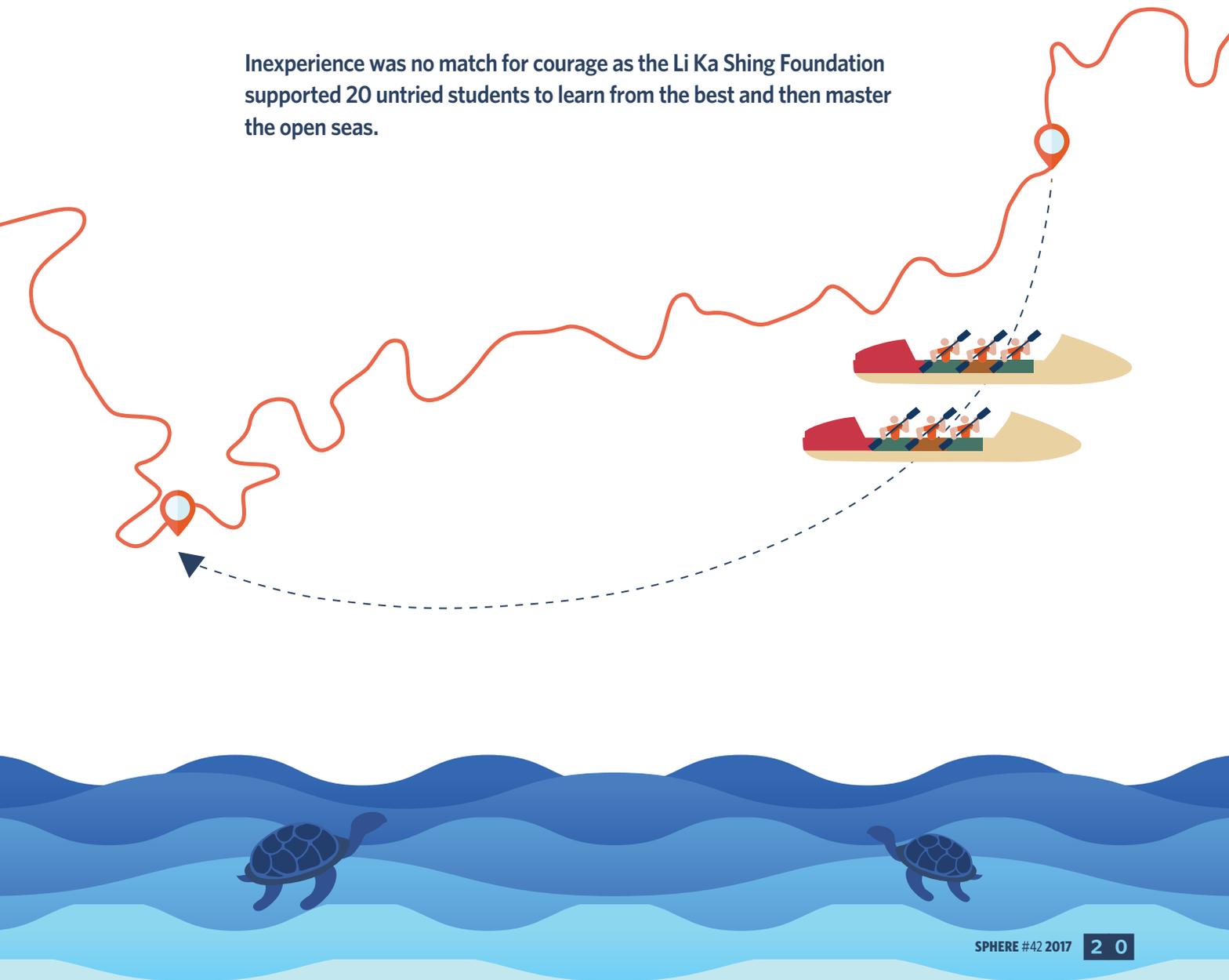


ACCOMPLISHMENT

PADDLING, PERSEVERANCE, AND COURAGE

Inexperience was no match for courage as the Li Ka Shing Foundation supported 20 untried students to learn from the best and then master the open seas.





Strong hearts – and dedicated training — are needed to face big waves on the high seas.

A

Aspiration. Knowledge. Perseverance. And finally, Achievement.

A small group of adventure neophytes took up their oars in early 2015 to tackle a huge task – rowing along the South China coast from Shantou to Hong Kong. Braving the open seas’ rough waters and massive commercial ships that dwarfed their rowing vessels, 20 undergraduate students from Shantou University (STU) set out on 11 February 2017 and persevered to arrive in triumph at the pier in Hung Hom, Hong Kong, on 19 February. They were exhausted, but glowing with the pride of accomplishment as the people of Hong Kong came out to welcome them.

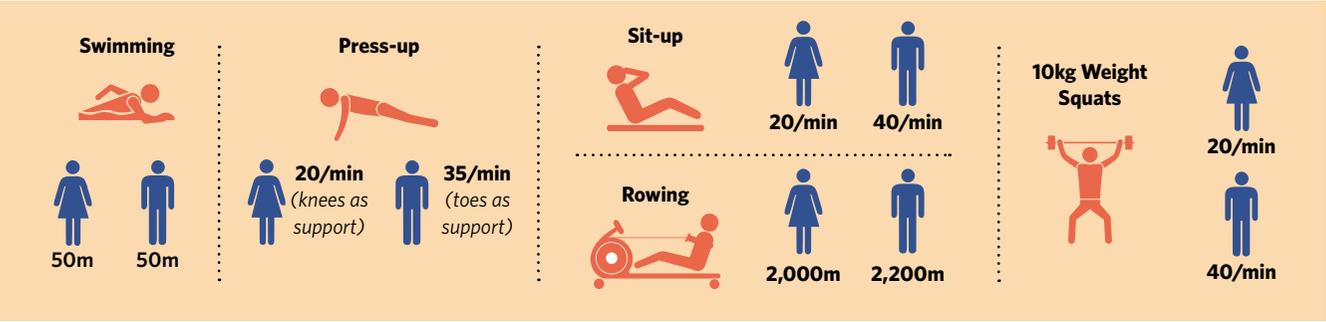
START IGNORANT AND BRAVE, FINISH SMART AND STRONG

To be clear: the 20 students who took on this huge task had no experience in rowing, ocean navigation or survival skills. Over 260 applicants took up the call to apply, but only 20 were chosen. Attitude and physical fitness were the main qualifiers as the plan was to begin training from level zero. They did not know how to row, steer or complete even the simplest of tasks known to a beginner rower. But they had heart and took on the training with gusto.

In 2015, a phone rang in the Burnham-on-Crouch (England) office of Rannoch Adventure. The founder, Charlie Pitcher, took the call that would see him cross the world a number of times over the

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MAKING THE GRADE





Row row row! Physical training is a must (left) as are survival skills (right), including navigation.

SURVIVAL SKILLS ON BOARD

 Swimming	 Rowing
 Navigation	 Seamanship
 First aid	 Weather planning

next two years to select, train and guide the chosen 20.

In contrast to the students, he knew what he was doing. He is the world record holder for rowing solo across the Atlantic (35 days and 33 minutes) and his company is the world leader in ocean-rowing expeditions. When he accepted the project, he also brought an accomplished student to work with the Chinese students – Molly Brown, the youngest girl ever to row across the Atlantic, at the age of 20, during the summer of 2016. As a fellow young person, she could connect to the students and provide inspiration they could relate to.

The students went on a physical and mental crash course including all the skills they would need to survive on the open water. Swimming, rowing, navigation, seamanship, first aid, weather planning and forecasting were the obvious skills that would be needed. However, it also included less obvious open-ocean life skills, like cooking on board without setting fire the boat. Changing clothes on board without getting soaked, leading to life-threatening hypothermia in the winter conditions. Eliminating personal waste without making an unholy and unhygienic mess.

Working with Chinese students was a first for Mr Pitcher – and he loved it. “Working with Chinese students has been unique and absolutely delightful.” Starting from level zero meant extra work, but it was made easier by the unquestioning work ethic, often rare in the West. “They were new to rowing and had to be taught. It was great to see them growing from Zero to Hero.”

LIFE ON BOARD

There were, in fact, two boats: a men’s boat and a women’s boat. This enabled more students to participate and preserved some sense of modesty in the close quarters required. They were shadowed by a command boat that was in VHF contact and “never more than a couple of miles away” – a long way, it seems, if disaster struck. The rowers had to be ready for a man overboard or rogue wave at all times. They were trained on identifying and staying away from commercial shipping lanes where a huge container ship would never see their two tiny blips on an open and unforgiving ocean.

The two boats had their own names, of course. *Hannah* was the men’s boat and had a name that hearkened to the university’s links to the Technion – Israel

Institute of Technology. The Hebrew name means favour and grace – two things very welcome on the open ocean. The women rowed in *Jasmine* – a Chinese flower suggesting purity, abundance, dignity and persistence – the latter a must-have on the long journey, and part of the university's motto.

The R45 boats were custom-designed and built by Rannoch Adventure for this expedition and will stay at the university. The students were on them for eight days in total. Rowers would eat and sleep on the boat, alternating between two resting and two rowing in four-hour shifts.

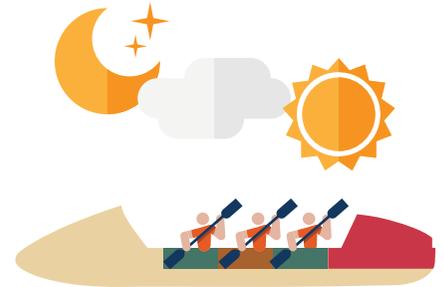
Seasickness was a real companion on the trip. The students would “puke and row” – it was all part of the training! Sometimes students would be completely wiped out by the conditions and others would have to pick up where they could. Student Yoyo Wang remembers, “I rowed for eight hours consecutively against rough waters when my teammates were down. But I made it through because I knew my team was behind me. I believe this experience will lead us to go further and beyond the horizon.”

Times were tough on the open seas – but not without quiet moments of reward. James Xu Yuxuan, a member of *Hannah* for the second half of the journey, recalls, “It was tough rowing in the daytime when the scorching sun was above us. But the stars at night-time were just breathtaking. I have never seen so many stars in my life.”

AN INSPIRATION FROM CHINA TO HONG KONG

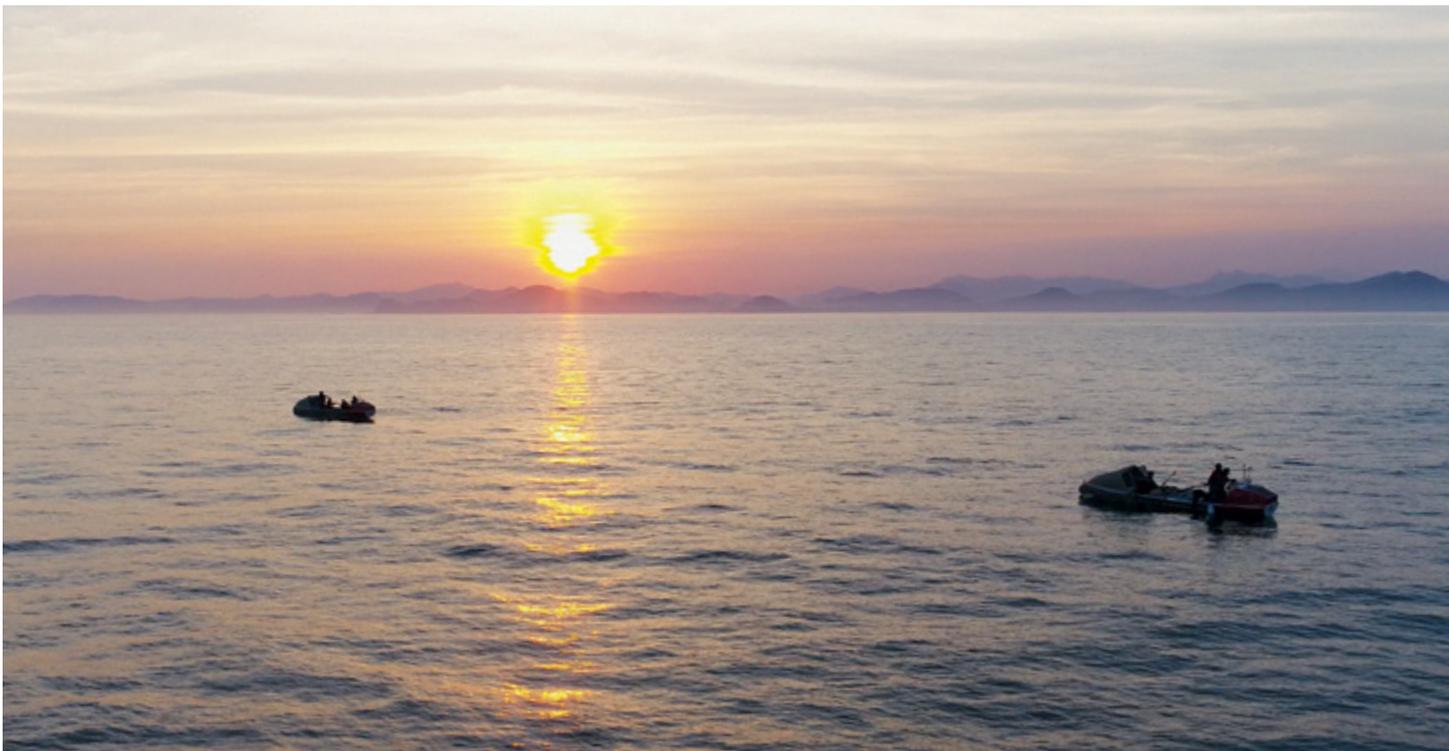
The Li Ka Shing Foundation (LKSF) supported the venture and Mr Li followed the journey by satellite. Indeed, many Hong Kongers were interested and took inspiration. Many came from families that made a similar journey, if less well trained, to establish themselves in Hong Kong in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. Mr Li himself remembers his family travelling the more than 1,000km from Chaozhou (next to Shantou) to Hong Kong when he was only 11 years old.

While many of those people made the journey out of necessity, this expedition saw young people take on a completely novel challenge and push themselves to their limits. Mr Li supported this venture, and continues to support the university, as part of a longer-term goal of changing



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James Xu Yuxuan, *Hannah* rower



It isn't all blood, sweat and tears. There are rare moments of beauty.



Mr Li is on the high seas in spirit, keenly interested in the progress of the teams.

the world. He says, "In this changing world, I am committed to inspire societal improvement through long-term education initiatives and it is my hope that Shantou University and Guangdong Technion - Israel Institute of Technology, through their pursuit of education and excellence will foster our younger generations to become mission-driven thrivers, creative, caring, intellectual engaged industrious leaders of the society."

Young people in Hong Kong were equally excited. The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) Rowing Team came out to welcome the arriving heroes. They had participated in a friendly head-to-head rowing match with the aspiring rowers earlier this year and been impressed with the beginners' grit and commitment. Shantou did not have a rowing team and these trainees were competing for the first time. Chiu Tak-wing from the CUHK team joined fellow members and alumni to share their own open-ocean experience (on a Hong Kong-Macau return venture) and looked forward to seeing the Shantou team arrive safely in Hong Kong.

It was an incredible experience, but Mr Pitcher felt "... sad that this has to come to an end." This journey has ended perhaps - but for at least four students the adventure continues. LKSF will support these four young women through a new round of training with Rannoch Adventure and Molly Brown to follow in her footsteps - or rather, her oar strokes. They will tackle a crossing of the North Atlantic - 5,000km in 50 days. For Amber Li, Cloris Chen, Tina Liang and Sarah Meng, they are on to the next challenge in life - again on the open seas! □



Mr Li cannot resist welcoming the students on arrival in Hong Kong.

"The pursuit of education and excellence will foster our younger generations to become mission-driven thrivers, creative, caring, intellectual engaged industrious leaders of the society."

Mr Li Ka-shing