

# GATEWAY TO OPPORTUNITY

*In just 20 years, Shantou University has grown from a seed of an idea into a tree of learning where talent blossoms.*

*By Isabella Ng*



Graduation day was all chill and thrill for Ma Enxi. “I was so excited but also anxious,” Ma recalls. “On one hand I couldn’t wait to see the world in front of me, but on the other I wasn’t sure if I could handle it. I felt very proud in my academic gown, clutching my certificate, but it was also a sorrowful farewell to Shantou University.”

For the now-CEO of three companies (two in the Mainland and one in Hong Kong) those early doubts have been put to rest. Ma is a textbook case of success through hard work, a good education and a bit of luck. Since graduating 12 years ago, he has become a captain of industry and he believes his alma mater played a pivotal role in laying the foundations of his success.

“Shantou prepared us very well in theory as well as in application,” explains

Ma, “I have been able to apply most of my knowledge to my work. I feel quite lucky in that respect.”

Dr Zheng Minghao enrolled at Shantou Medical College in 1978. By the time he graduated, the institution had transformed into a full-fledged university, thanks to the financial backing of Hong Kong businessman Li Ka-shing. The education Zheng received helped him thrive in the medical field.

“In those days, the facilities were not as advanced as they are today,” he recalls, “but the lecturers were outstanding – they really put their hearts into teaching and communicating with the students. They taught us to be positive. It equipped me to survive when I went abroad.”

After graduating, Zheng went to Australia to study further, then to Harvard in 1991. He is now head of research at the University of Western

Australia’s department of Orthopaedic Surgery.

The list of distinguished graduates is long. Another past student of Shantou Medical School, Dr Cai Zhiming, is now head of the Peking University Shenzhen Hospital. He graduated in 1984.

Liu Qingsong earned a degree in law in 1987. He is now a Judge in the Guangdong High Court, and deputy head of the Civil Court.

These are just a few of Shantou University’s success stories. In the past 20 years, nearly 30,000 high-calibre graduates from its eight schools and colleges – Medicine, Liberal Arts, Engineering, Law, Business, Art, Adult Education and Science – have gone into the world equipped with a solid education and the confidence to make a difference.

June 27, 2002 was another proud day for many at Shantou University (also



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known as Shanda). On its sixteenth graduation day, it awarded its first doctorate in medicine, its 246th master's, and its 13,552nd bachelor's degree.

Perhaps the most delighted of all was Li Ka-shing who has been a driving force behind the institution. Speaking at the ceremony, Mr Li recalled "the distinctive scent of the fields on which our university now stands. It is so remarkable that today we gather here to witness the conferment of our first doctoral degrees. It fills me with an emotion that words cannot express."

A native of scenic Chaoshan district in eastern Guangdong, Mr Li is among the region's most famous sons.

In 1940, the Li family fled from Chaozhou to Hong Kong as Japanese troops invaded China. Shortly after their arrival, Mr Li began his career as an apprentice at the age of 12. After his father died, 15-year-old Li had to shoulder the responsibility of supporting his family. He took his first job in a watch strap company and set out on the long road to success.

Armed only with a basic education and the resolve to prevail, he rose to become one of the world's pre-eminent businessmen at the helm of a business empire that now spans 41 countries. Through all the excitement and setbacks and triumphs of his distinguished career, he never forgot his roots.

He wanted to give something back to his homeland and success in business

gave Mr Li the financial clout to really make a difference. Twenty years ago, there was no university serving Chaoshan's 10 million inhabitants. So Mr Li set out to establish an institution whose graduates could contribute to the region's economic progress and improve the quality of life for its people.

But few people in those days shared Li Ka-shing's belief and commitment. At

***"A teacher  
affects eternity;  
he can never  
tell where his  
influence stops."***

***— Henry Brooks Adams***

times it seemed he was operating alone. To many observers his mission to build a top-rate university from zero seemed an impossible dream. But Mr Li remained focused and searched long and hard for a suitable site on which to build his educational vision.

Finally, with the approval of the State Council, he made a substantial donation to develop a site on the outskirts of

Shantou, a picturesque seaport on Guangdong's East Coast, 43km from his hometown of Chaozhou.

Mr Li's dream had begun to take shape at last.

For a man who has spent half a century building a global business empire establishing a lone school in his home province could be perceived as a minor point of focus. But Mr Li believes that providing educational opportunities at home is just as important as creating wealth abroad. To date, he has donated more than HK\$2 billion (about US\$256 million) to the University through the Li Ka Shing Foundation.

Shantou University was officially founded in 1981 and admissions began in September 1983 with 103 students enrolling in the first four-year undergraduate class.

Since then, Mr Li has continued to take a personal interest. As Honorary Chairman, he never fails to attend the twice-yearly University Council meetings. He describes the institution as "a commitment that transcends my life."

Today, Shantou University overlooks the booming special economic zone. The 1.2-sq-km campus is festooned with palm trees and exudes a quiet, elegant atmosphere. Its distinctive architecture has earned it the reputation of being one of the country's best-appointed campuses.

In just two decades, Shanda has been transformed into a comprehensive seat



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of learning with more than 10,000 students and over 1,300 academic staff. In 1997, it was successfully accredited as a candidate university for the “211 State Educational Project” and embarked on an internationalisation programme to enhance its competitiveness. One year later, it was granted approval to conduct doctoral programmes and award doctoral degrees.

The university has already made a big impact on the society it serves, not only by providing opportunities for its brightest minds but also by extending its resources and expertise into the wider community. It has launched various medical projects, including the establishment of the first and second affiliated hospitals, the Eastern Guangdong Oncology Research Center and the Mental Health Centre. It has also built a hospice and provides medical aid for the poor. Recently, Shanda collabo-



## VISIONARY PROJECT

**T**HE RETINAL VEIN CATHETERISATION Operation is based on the most modern scientific practices, but for recipients of the procedure the results seem miraculous. They have literally been given a chance to take a fresh view of the world.

The surgical procedure adopts the concept of “cardiac catheterisation”. By inserting a very fine catheter into the central vein of the retina, and administering tissue plasminogen activator (TPA) to revive the blood flow, the operation helps the patient regain normal eyesight.

The first such operation in China was successfully performed at the Joint Shantou International Eye Center, which was officially opened on June 28.

It is the fifth affiliated hospital under the Shantou University Medical College – after the First and Second Affiliated Hospitals, the Affiliated Tumor Hospital and the Mental Health Center.

The 9,500-sq-m institute has 100 beds and is equipped with state-of-the-art medical facilities, providing comprehensive treatment for patients with various eye diseases and visual impairment.

As a specialist eye hospital, it integrates teaching and research and was built through a 70 million-yuan (about US\$8.5 million) donation from Li Ka-shing.






rated with the Chinese University of Hong Kong to open an eye centre (*see story below*).

“Our world is sustained by the individuals in it,” Mr Li told graduates, “the acts we perform, the decisions we take, will make a difference in this world that we share.”

This vision is perhaps best exemplified by Mr Li himself. Shantou University has taken great strides in two decades – one man’s “lonely passion”, as it was called, has become a gateway to opportunity for thousands.

“When we see our alma mater, we see Li Ka-shing, a fellow from our village, who is giving something back to his ancestral home,” says Ma Enxi, who met Mr Li in 1994. “To us, this exemplifies the old Chinese saying: “We should never forget our past.”

That may be so, but Mr Li’s eyes also seem firmly fixed on the future. 

Mr Li started making donations in 1991 to help people suffering from eye diseases, including a contribution of 100 million yuan to the China Disabled Persons’ Federation, which has helped more than a million cataract patients.

He first proposed building a specialist eye centre in Chaozho-Shantou in 1998 to provide a “role model” for the treatment and care of eye diseases in the South China region.

While Retinal Vein Catheterisation Operations will be the key services developed by the Eye Center, other tasks include the prevention and treatment of various eye diseases, training of medical students and eye specialists, conducting ophthalmology research, and the establishment of an eye bank to promote cornea donations and transplants.

At present there are about nine million cases of visual impairment in China, and four million people suffer from cataracts.

At the opening ceremony of the Eye Centre, Mr Li encouraged people in the



area to overcome traditional reluctance and donate their corneas.

“The eye is a window to the soul,” he said. “I think blindness is the most terrible of all disabilities. To be able to help those patients waiting in darkness to see light again and thus lead a new life is really the most meaningful thing to do in the world.”