

Scholar's honour.

289 words

1 September 2002

Straits Times

English

(c) 2002 Singapore Press Holdings Limited

MENTION of the name Lam Lay Yong will not draw shouts of delight and disapproval, in the manner of the China-born Singaporean table tennis stars after their Commonwealth Games triumphs. But Dr Lam, a retired professor, is as much a celebrity in her own cloistered community. She is no less deserving of public recognition, more so in a country which reveres learning. She comes from the arcane world of **mathematics**, which recently awarded her the Kenneth O. May Medal given out every four years for outstanding contributions to the history of **mathematics**. As a benchmark of intellectual peaks, this prize shares company with the Fields Medal and the Nevanlinna Prize respectively the highest award for achievement in **mathematics** and theoretical computer science. The two latter awards are presented by the International Mathematical Union (IMU), a body whose intended obscurity is sometimes disturbed by the fame of such numbers-magicians as Stephen Hawking and John (A Beautiful Mind) Nash.

It was at the IMU's quadrennial International Congress of Mathematicians held in Beijing the past fortnight where Dr Lam presented her research to, yes, the delight and disapproval of her peers. Those of our readers who have at school either excelled at **mathematics** or dreaded the brute can appreciate the romance of her work. She posits that the ancient Chinese invented the numeral system in use today, not the Arabs and Indians of antiquity, as prevailing thinking holds. She asserts that the Chinese were using bamboo rods to keep count by the 5th century BC, a millennium before anybody else did. She retired in 1996 from the **National University of Singapore** after a lifetime of teaching. Hers has been a beautiful sojourn in a rarefied field.

Document stimes0020020902dy9100017

© 2005 Dow Jones Reuters Business Interactive LLC (trading as Factiva). All rights reserved.