



A meetings couple

For over half a century, Kim and Jean Tran Thanh Van have been organizing meetings which enable scientific exchange beyond the scope of ordinary conferences.

Kim and Jean Tran, married to science

Portrait This retired scientist couple is setting up in Vietnam, their country of birth, a scientific conference center.

In August, the scientist couple Kim and Jean Tran Thanh Van will be adding yet another line to an already well filled curriculum vitae. Although they retired from the CNRS (Centre National de Recherche Scientifique – National research center) more than ten years ago, they will be inaugurating in Vietnam, their country of origin, an international conference center. Justly proud, the couple unveils its programme and the harmonious plan for this center, destined to *“make Vietnam into concourse for the development of science and technology in the region”*, explains Jean. Nine Nobel Prize winners in physics will be present, as well as the spokes-persons for the major experiments which have made headlines over the past year: the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN), with the hunt for the Higgs Boson using the CMS and Atlas instruments, and Planck with pictures of a universe just 380000 years after the Big Bang.

Just a few days earlier, specialists in gravity, cosmology and the nano-sciences will have been the first to try out the auditorium (300 seats) and the conference room (100 seats), built on 20 hectares of bordering on the sea front and inland rice paddies in the province of Quy Nhon, in central Vietnam.

Faced with this panoply of scientists, one cannot but realize that behind their modest smiles, the two kingpins are exceptional organizers with a fabulous address book. When you ask them their secret, *“You don’t need much to achieve almost anything. We believe in what we are doing!”* they reply. *“Our*

fearlessness is our quality. We believe in the higher things of life, and always seek to go farther.” The strength of their conviction persuaded the province to grant the land; the architect, Jean-François Milou has defrayed his contribution to the project. Even the builders have granted them particularly favourable conditions. *“The rest will sort itself out in due course”* explains Jean, showing us the plans for living quarters, a hotel, sports grounds, a planetarium.

“We plough, we sow, and the harvest never fails”, summarizes Kim. Their tried and tested methods have been proven to work for almost fifty years. They are in fact well known for having established, in 1966, a new kind of conference, the Rencontres de Moriond; to-day, these meetings, which take place in March in les Arcs (the Savoy region of France), attract annually almost 400 scientists. This year, CMS and ATLAS presented their latest results on the Higgs boson, discovered in 2012.

“In 1965, we were looking for somewhere in the mountains to spend our holidays. At that time, the price for a fortnight or for a month was the same, and we decided to reserve a full month for the following year. And in order to stimulate our physicist friends, we had the idea of mixing pleasure and work, as well as encouraging exchanges between theorists and experimenters”, recalls Jean, himself an elementary particle physicist at Orsay. *“The other feature is the place given to young researchers - they are the ones who actually present the work”*, explains Jean. *“This was before 1968, and the idea was quite revolutionary!”* added Kim, wryly. This biologist adapted the same idea to her speciality, with the creation of the Rencontres de Meribel (Savoy region of France).

“The scientific exchanges during the afternoon break, on the ski pistes, and in the hotel, are no joke” explains Jean-Marie Frère, a physicist at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, who became a co-organizer of the Rencontres. *“It’s much easier to get to know people in this kind of relaxed atmosphere. Young researchers have often given their first presentations here in the presence of senior scientists.”*

Michel Spiro, ex-president of the CERN council, was one of them. *“It was quite fantastic – I gave my talk after having been lowered from a stuck chairlift”*, he recalled. *“But seriously, we owe to the organizers the creation of a “Moriond spirit”. They look after the slightest detail, from the housing to the meals, and not forgetting the invitations. And they do all this while insisting that they do nothing”*. *“They are visionaries and indefatigable workers and it can be hard to work with them at first, since they are always a step ahead”*, recalls Nicole Ribet, a CNRS research engineer, now retired, who was responsible for the secretariat in the early years of the Rencontres de Moriond. *“I am not a leader. I am just an ordinary soldier”*, rebuts Jean.

The Trans’ aspirations did not stop there. In 1989 they launched the Rencontres de Blois, in the Chateau of the town, in order to bring scientific culture to a wider public, with a broader range of subjects, and always with prestigious participants. This year the Rencontres, whose subject is cosmology and particle physics, ended on the 31st of May.

Soon after starting the Rencontres de Blois, they created the Rencontres du Vietnam, with the same “Moriond spirit”; their purpose was to encourage scientific and educational exchange between Vietnam and the rest of the world. They have also initiated 1500 Vietnamese teachers in the experiment based “hands on” pedagogical methods. In fact, the Ministry of Education has even decided to include certain parts in its future school programme.

Their desire to help their country, which they left at the age of 17 (in 1953, in the case of Jean) and 18 (in 1954 in the case of Kim), does not date from yesterday. In fact, they met in Paris in 1958, in a franco-vietnamese humanitarian association, selling, in particular, post-cards, as a means to finance the association. In May 1970 they created the “Aide à l’Enfance du Vietnam” (“Aid to Vietnamese children”), an association which built villages for orphans in Vietnam.

“They are not only brilliant organizers and helpers. They were also brilliant scientists” recalls Jean-Marie Frère. Jean devised a model for the structure of the neutron at a time when every-one thought it was an elementary particle. Kim, a biologist specializing in flowering, was honoured by the press in 1974 (including the March 27th issue of *Le Monde*) for her work on orchids. *“Kim has had a hundred times more publications than me”* concluded wryly Jean. *“We are now more busy than ever before. We probably realize that time is running short”*.



Phippe Mazzone, for *Le Monde*

Translated from a text by David Larousserie