The Fie

by Ling San

Have you ever noticed that the celebrated Nobel Prize does not have mathematics as one of its categories? It is given for outstanding contributions in physics, chemistry, medicine, economics, etc., but just not mathematics. Well, legend has it that the reason for this most noticeable omission is that Mr Nobel, after whom the prestigious award is named, hated mathematicians because his wife liked one a little too much.

In 1932, at the International Congress of Mathematicians (ICM) held in Zürich, an earlier proposal by the late Canadian mathematician John Fields was re-considered - to institute an award for brilliant mathematicians. The first Fields Medals were then given out at the ICM in 1936, to two mathematicians Lars Ahlfors and Jesse Douglas from the USA. Initially no age limit was imposed, but gradually the tradition that the recipient be at most forty years of age took shape to be consistent with Fields' wish that the award be an encouragement to further work by the recipients. The award is given out once every four years at the ICM, usually to between two and four mathematicians.

In August 1994, ICM took place once again in Zürich. During the opening ceremony, four Fields Medals were awarded. The recipients were: Jean Bourgain (Belgian, 40), who is a permanent professor at the Institut des Hautes Etudes Scientifiques (France) and also affiliated to the Institute for Advanced Study (Princeton, USA) and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (USA),

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The Fields Medallists at ICM '94 (from left to right): Jean Bougain, Jean-Christophe Yoccoz, Pierre-Louis Lions and Efim Zelmanov

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for his work in harmonic analysis; Pierre-Louis Lions (French, 37), of the Université de Paris-Dauphine, for his contributions to several areas of partial differential equations; Jean-Christophe Yoccoz (French, 37), professor at the Université de Paris-Sud (Orsay), who researches in dynamical systems; and Efim Zelmanov (Russian, 38), who was once a researcher at the USSR Academy of Sciences and professor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison (USA) but now works at the University of Chicago (USA), for his work in group theory, and in particular the Restricted Burnside Problem.

For those who missed the chance this time, and who are not older than thirty-six years old, they will have to work harder for the next four years, and hope that they will join the rank of the Fields Medallists at the ICM '98 in Berlin.

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Dr Ling San graduated in 1985 as a Wrangler in Mathematics from Trinity College, Cambridge, UK, and obtained his PhD in Mathematics in 1990 from the University of California, Berkeley, USA. He joined the Department of Mathematics, NUS, in April 1992 after completing his National Service. His research interest includes number theory, algebra and combinatorial designs.