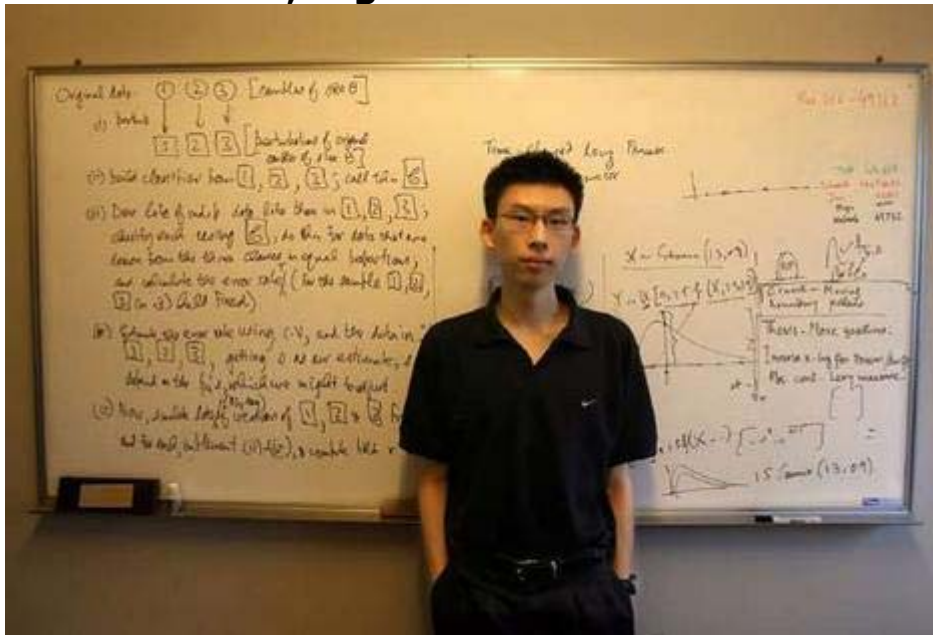


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Meet Dr Chan, high achiever with a PhD at 21



It figures: after completing year 12 subjects at 10, mathematician Yao-ban Chan has now become Melbourne University's youngest-ever PhD graduate.

Photo: *Craig Abraham*

March 8, 2006

WHEN he was 10, while his peers swung from monkey bars and charged around with rugby balls, Yao-ban Chan sat year 12 exams in statistics and calculus. He scored 91 and 90.

It is such a mind-boggling accomplishment that it almost makes his latest achievement seem commonplace.

At 21, today he becomes the youngest-ever PhD graduate at Melbourne University.

"I always liked maths, I always found it fun," Mr Chan said with trademark understatement from his office in the university's mathematics department yesterday. Mr Chan, who was born in Malaysia and raised in New Zealand, was largely home-schooled by his mother Peck-Woon, a microbiologist, and father George, a director with Heinz.

He enrolled in his first university subject while still 10 and completed his bachelor of information science by correspondence in six years.

When he was 16, the Chan family moved to Melbourne. He attended his first university class in his honours year.

He soon started his PhD, examining the maths behind the mechanics of DNA entanglement.

Mr Chan said few of his colleagues found his age unusual. Despite his precociousness he said he had a balanced life, including a diploma in piano performance from a London school.

"I worked maybe 25 to 30 hours a week (on the PhD). I practise piano, I play computer games, I read, I play table tennis," he said.

Mr Chan put much of his rapid advancement down to his mother. His sister Yi-shuen, 23, who was also home-schooled, has degrees in maths and music and is studying for her masters in the pipe organ.

"I guess my mother has good ideas in maths education and how to learn quickly," he said.

Mr Chan's PhD supervisor, Professor Tony Guttman, said his student had produced important results on the time it takes for DNA knots to unravel. "Mathematics is evolutionary and, as history shows, what seems theoretical now could enter the mainstream in decades to come," he said.

Mr Chan is now working as a postdoctoral fellow on a statistical method to identify protein anomalies in the brain with a view to diagnosing schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

ADAM MORTON

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