

WYP2005 Launch Conference Snapshots

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The Launch Conference of the International Year of Physics was held at UNESCO headquarters in Paris from Jan 13 – 15. As one of the six representatives of Hong Kong, I'm pleased to share with you the excitements of this event:



Delegates from all over the world are gathering at the conference hall of UNESCO. Over 1200 people took part in the conference, about half of which are students. 25% of them are young women. Including the students coming on an individual basis, the overall number of countries represented by students is 70.

The inauguration session consists of ten key figures from the organizing committee each giving a talk lasting for five minutes. The topics basically centered on the excitement of physics, the role of physicist to promote physics to general public and so on. Einstein was quoted many times – in fact the assignment of 2005 as world year of physics is in memory of the 100th anniversary of his ground breaking papers in 1905.



During the tea breaks, the stimulating experiments conducted by a group of Danish physicists named EuroPhysicsFun (<http://www.phys.au.dk/~epf/>) brought lots of vigor to the conference – you can perform amazing experiments only using everyday instruments! Look, one of our group members is watching the demonstration with great interest.



The French biophysicist Denis Le Bihan made a very inspiring talk. He introduced the concept of diffusion MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) which he developed, refined and introduced into research and clinical practice. It's a new and powerful approach to study normal and diseased brain anatomy and function as well as brain wiring from the measurement of molecular motion (especially water) in biological tissues. He also explained functional MRI, which has changed forever our way of studying human brain by accessing neural networks underlying complex cognitive functions from language to consciousness.

The talk that triggered most laughter was "2010, A NanoSpace Odyssey" by Harold Kroto (Nobel Prize in Chemistry, 1996). As one of the discoverers of fullerenes, he centered his talk on the family tree of C_{60} , which originates from the discovery of carbon chains in space, and simultaneously with which carbon nanotubes were born (hence the name NanoSpace). His words were full of British humor, with portraits on his students and experiences of educating young people. His website <http://www.vega.org.uk> contains many video and audio talks by famous scientists.



The Dutch physicist Gerard t'Hooft (Nobel Prize in Physics, 1999) brought us a fresh kind of beauty from the world of elementary particles and forces. After a brief account of the underlying concepts, he explained the elementary ideas of renormalization groups to cope with the irregularities encountered in small-distance structures. Then he introduced the standard model based on spontaneous "Hidden" symmetry breaking, with a glimpse into superstring theory towards the end. The most impressive words from his talk were, "How does God play dice?"



It's a pity that students in mainland universities are unable to attend the conference due to visa problem. However, we did meet Prof. Chen Jia-er representing the Chinese Physical Society and National Science Foundation of China in the Round Table on the third day. His talk titled "Physics as Part of Culture" reminded the audience of the immortal contribution that Chinese people have done in contributing to the development of science as well as moral philosophy. Students from various countries showed great interest in the lecture material.

The conference came to a successful ending with the short closing session consisting of words of thanks to appropriate individuals and societies.

Tour Eiffel is conveniently reachable from the conference venue and delegates from everywhere enjoyed Paris as well as physics...



And of course, French dinner... Each participant in the conference was invited by the President of the Launch Conference and the Organization Committee to have the banquet held in the Salons Boffrand of the Presidency of the Senate on the night of Jan 14, which ended with a "drunk" speech on Einstein's anecdotes...

I'd like to express my keenest thanks to UNESCO for hosting the Launch Conference of World Year of Physics 2005, and Physics Department of HKUST, Physical Society of Hong Kong as well as European Physical Society for financial support.