



Where I work Jean-Pierre Bourguignon

Photographed for *Nature* by
Mashid Mohadjerin

The only painting in my office is a copy of a piece of Chinese calligraphy made by the late Shiing-Shen Chern, one of the most important mathematicians of the twentieth century, which I received from colleagues in 2007 as a birthday gift. It says “Mathematics is fun.”

When I became president of the European Research Council (ERC) in 2014, I thought this piece would inspire me in my role, so I displayed it in my office above a book featuring Chern’s portrait. As president, I maintain regular contact with the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, which is made up of ministers from the various member states. But for me, it is extremely important to spend at least half my time talking to scientists to understand their needs. I also chair the ERC Scientific Council, which defines the ERC’s funding strategy and promotes scientific creativity and innovation.

Chern approached science as a collaborative, creative endeavour. I met him many times, and his interest in my early mathematical research helped me gain

confidence in my work to understand the role of curvature in geometry. In my career, I have benefited so much from interactions with people from many different countries, so I feel like I have to continue this chain of creating opportunities in the EU for foreign researchers to collaborate. While I have been president, the ERC has signed ten cooperation agreements with countries outside Europe – including China, Japan, Singapore and India – to fund their researchers who come to the EU.

In my office, I have a few plants, a table for holding small meetings, an EU flag and a map of the world. Above the map is a depiction of one of the mottoes of the ERC: “Open to the world.” At the moment, it is unclear how relations with the United Kingdom will proceed post-Brexit. Still, with scientists from more than 80 nations holding ERC grants, we aim to continue making that motto a reality.

Jean-Pierre Bourguignon is president of the European Research Council in Brussels.
Interview by Virginia Gewin.