Extract From an Article in New Yorker by Alec Wilkinson

The original article was published in New Yorker at Feb 2,2015 by Alec Wilkinson about Dr. Zhang Yitang. The following is an extraction of all relevant materials about Dr Zhang'life at Purdue.

Zhang had received a Ph.D. in algebraic geometry from Purdue in 1991. His adviser, T. T. Moh, with whom he parted unhappily, recently wrote a description on his Web site of Zhang as a graduate student: "When I looked into his eyes, I found a disturbing soul, a burning bush, an explorer who wanted to reach the North Pole." Zhang left Purdue without Moh's support, and, having published no papers, was unable to find an academic job.

During the summer of 1984, T. T. Moh visited Peking University from Purdue and invited Zhang and several other students, recommended to him by Chinese professors, to do graduate work in his department. One of Moh's specialties is the Jacobian conjecture, and Zhang was eager to work on it. The Jacobian conjecture, a problem in algebraic geometry that was introduced in 1939 and is still unsolved, stipulates certain simple conditions that, if satisfied, enable someone to solve a series of complicated equations. It is acknowledged as being beyond the capacities of a graduate student and approachable by only the most accomplished algebraic geometrists. A mathematician described it to me as a "disaster problem," for the trouble it has caused. For his thesis, Zhang submitted a weak form of the conjecture, meaning that he attempted to prove something implied by the conjecture, rather than to prove the conjecture itself.

After Zhang received his doctorate, he told Moh that he was returning to number theory. "I was not the happiest," Moh wrote me. "However, I was for the student's right to change fields, so I kept my smile and said bye to him. For the past 22 years, I knew nothing about him."