

BUSINESS

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Trần Triều Quân in his Quebec City office. His philosophy is to be happy by making other people happy.

FRANCIS VACHON THE GAZETTE

PROFITING FROM THE MARTIAL SPIRIT

WORKING WITH FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITIES,
Trần Triều Quân has used the discipline of tae kwon do
to prosper in business and do good in the social realm

MARK CARDWELL
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

QUEBEC - Chinese philosopher Confucius said that the superior man is modest in speech but excessive in actions. It's hard, then, not to admire Trần Triều Quân, a soft-spoken Quebec City businessman, survivor of Vietnam's prison system and a world-class tae kwon do expert.

"(Tae kwon do) philosophy is for people to be champions of justice and freedom (to help) build a better and peaceful world," said Trần, the senior partner in Norbati, a consulting firm that provides professional advice and technical expertise for public, industrial and commercial construction projects.

An eighth-dan black belt in tae kwon do, he is the president of the 450,000-member International Taekwondo Federation.

"What motivates me," said Trần, a Canadian citizen who immigrated from Vietnam in 1971 to study engineering at Université Laval, "is to be happy by making other people happy."

That outlook, together with his Buddhist beliefs, and the discipline and values he has learned from a lifetime of martial arts training, help guide him in his personal and business dealings. They also help him to cope with adversity. In particular, he said, they helped him get through an international incident that made him famous locally a decade ago.

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TRÂN Time in Vietnamese jail taught appreciation for human rights

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At the time, Trân owned a private consulting firm that did business almost solely in Vietnam. He represented more than a dozen large Western companies – including the U.S. engineering and construction behemoth **Morrison, Knudsen** – in the communist country and, as a sideline, acted as a middleman in deals involving consumer goods.

In early 1994, a million-dollar deal he brokered between the Vietnamese government and a Toronto-based subsidiary of a U.S. cotton company went awry.

"We had done nothing wrong, so I went (to Hanoi) to straighten things out," Trân recalled.

He was arrested upon his arrival at the airport.

"It was only when I got there that I learned the money had disappeared and that several Vietnamese had already been put in jail."

Despite official diplomatic protests, and a personal appeal from Prime Minister Jean Chrétien during a trade mission to Southeast Asia in the fall of 1994, Trân spent 2½ years in a Hanoi jail without being charged or brought to trial. He was also unable to communicate with his wife and three young children in Quebec City.

He was eventually released in May 1997 because, he said, the Vietnamese government "grew tired" of the diplomatic fallout from his case, which remained in the news in Canada thanks to the efforts of a coalition of friends and the support of several business organizations, including the Canadian Chamber of Commerce.



FRANCIS VACHON THE GAZETTE

Trân in his tae kwon do outfit. He's an eighth-dan black belt.

Trân "has made many friends here over the years," said Janel Gauthier, a Quebec City psychologist, Université Laval professor and tae kwon do expert who helped to organize efforts aimed at freeing his diminutive master.

"He is someone with tremendous leadership abilities and loads of charisma."

For his part, Trân said, surviving in a Vietnamese jail was a humbling experience that helped him to grow as a person.

"You learn a lot through bad times," he said. "For example, I am now very sensitive and committed to human rights and justice."

In 1998, Trân was asked by the United Nations to be an ambassador in the From Witness to Advocate program, which requires participants to talk to Canadians about victims of human rights abuses. Since then, he has been involved in dozens of human rights-related events at schools and other institutions across Quebec and frequently gets involved in letter-writing campaigns to free political prisoners.

The same year, Trân started to rebuild his professional life from scratch.

Reluctant to keep doing business in Vietnam, where he learned that jealous competitors had worked to keep him behind bars in order to steal his clients, Trân decided to close his old company and start Norbati.

Norbati is one of only a few firms in eastern Canada that combines services in building construction, public safety and fire protection. One of its specialties is designing equipment that controls smoke and helps people escape fires in high-rise buildings.

Trân was a fire-safety expert who spent 15 years with Quebec's labour ministry before retiring to start his ill-fated company in Vietnam.

The company is also involved in building projects in southeast Asia as a partner of Canadian engineering-construction giant **SNC-Lavalin**. It is working with Lavalin on a residential housing complex for the elderly in Laos.

The company is not planning, however, to do any work in Vietnam, Trân said. "I'm not bitter," he said. "I just don't want to take any unnecessary chances."

Norbati has also been involved in two construction projects on the Innu reserve of Betsiamites, a half-hour's drive west of Baie Comeau.

Those projects – the building of a public school and a community centre – are notable because Trân was instrumental in opening a tae kwon do school on the reserve five years ago.

The school – or dojang – is one of two Trân has founded on aboriginal reserves on Quebec's

"You learn a lot through bad times."

TRÂN TRIÊU QUÂN

rugged North Shore (the other is in Sept Îles). It is also one of more than 60 he has started across the province since opening his first – also Quebec's first – on the Université Laval campus in 1972.

Since then, Trân has trained several Canadian tae kwon do champions, some of whom work part-time in his office, "to make some money and be able to train with me," he said.

Notably, Trân beat out Quebec Nordiques head coach Michel (le Tigre) Bergeron to earn the province's Coach of the Year Award in 1984.

According to Trân, Canada's aboriginals are particularly receptive to the Korean martial art, which teaches fitness, self-defence and a Confucian-based value system that emphasizes personal improvement, respect for others and social harmony.

"One of the biggest problems Raphaël Picard said. "We have a lot of problems in our community and our youth are confronted with many big challenges. Tae kwon do is an instrument of personal affirmation and offers a way to integrate society."

Picard also praised Norbati's role as the manager in the reserve's major infrastructure projects, including the multimillion-dollar development of an industrial park that is now entering its first phase.

"Trân and his people are excellent in the planning and development of a project, and they have good business vision," he said. "And when we talk to them, they are sensitive to our particular situation and needs. That's very important for us."

Elected to replace International Taekwondo Federation founder General Choi Hong Hi, who died in 2002, Trân, who is now referred to at dojangs around the world simply as "Master," has visited about 60 countries in the past three years.

"Running an international martial-arts organization is a very big responsibility," he said, adding that he has worked more than 70 hours a week since his election in Warsaw in 2003.

"I've got two full-time jobs. Fortunately, when you believe deeply in something, time and priority management is not a problem."

He's happy that his four-year presidency will end in June, when Quebec City plays host to its annual congress and tournament – attracting more than 1,000 delegates and athletes from around the world.

Trân said he has tried to make the international body more democratic and business-like.

"In the dojang, the master is like a king, and the international organization reflects that in that it is very conservative," he said. "I've tried to change that by allowing (national members) more participation in the decision-making process."

Trân added that he has also tried to bring "business thinking" to the federation. One of his most important messages, he said, is about a basic tenet of tae kwon do: leadership.

"Respect is earned," Trân said. "When you're a leader, you need to look in the mirror so you can set the best example."

He added that, as Confucius said, the best reflections come to those who know themselves and learn to live in harmony with their families and neighbours.