



SUPER FRAUEN

Podcast Transcript

Mai Thi Nguyen-Kim

the woman who
makes science fun.

GOETHE
INSTITUT

Sprache. Kultur. Deutschland.



Podcast Transcript

- [00:25]** Mai Thi Nguyen-Kim — the woman who makes science fun!
- [00:30]** It's always those explosions! Mai Thi Nguyen-Kim's long hair sticks out wildly in every direction, her face blackened by soot. She wears a white lab coat and holds two test tubes filled with luminous pink and blue fluid. She tries to untangle her safety glasses from her bedraggled hair. "I wear too much makeup," the young woman smiles. "If the explosion was strong enough, you wouldn't have noticed anyway."
- [01:00]** So how did we end up here? After all, this moment looks like a scene from a movie about a mad scientist. Normally you would expect to see an old man with wild white hair, whose madcap experiments lead to a brilliant discovery, not a young woman like Mai Thi. In this video she looks more like an influencer who tests beauty or lifestyle products for her viewers: young and pretty, wearing lots of makeup and, as well, very funny. That is to say, everything in this video defies expectations.
- [01:45]** **Do you know people who defy the clichés associated with their job?**
- [01:55]** Welcome to the world of Mai Thi: the 33-year-old defies clichés. Professionally she is a clever scientist, with a PhD. But she doesn't look like it. For Mai Thi, she finds the stereotype that scientists are mostly male nerds with no hobbies or social life absolutely terrible, which is why she filmed a video on this exact topic. She wishes that more cool people and women would be interested in her profession — and thanks to her YouTube channel MaiLab, that wish is coming true. Her videos that mostly focus on science — especially chemistry — are being clicked on more and more by people who would normally avoid anything that has to do with formulas or numbers.
- [02:50]** Almost no one in Germany can explain these formulas as amusingly or interestingly as Mai Thi. Above all, she makes it clear how her videos relate to everyday life: she answers questions like: "What happens to the body when you don't sleep enough?" or "Do male and female brains function differently?" "Why can't we not stop eating chips and sweets?"
- [03:20]** **If someone could explain it to you in a simple way, what topic would you like to understand more about?**
- [03:29]** Sometimes Mai Thi plays the ukulele in her videos or drinks tea. Her videos are always entertaining, often serious, and sometimes both. And because Mai Thi manages to enjoyably explain quite complex ideas in a straightforward manner, she has already received several media prizes, along with the highest order that there is in Germany: The Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany, an honour that is given each year to individuals who work to improve society.



- [04:04]** Just like her father and brother, Mai Thi is a chemist. “The whole family is infected with the chemistry-virus,” she says. After emigrating to Germany from Vietnam, her parents started their family. As a kid, Mai Thi already had a great love of learning. For nights on end she would keep her nose in her schoolbooks, soaking up everything she read like a sponge. Chasing good grades was her sport. Admittedly she did so in secret. The word for students who enjoyed learning was “nerd” — meaning that you weren’t one of the cool kids. Whenever Mai Thi would receive the best test result in the class, she would blush, smile in embarrassment and apologise to her classmates: “Oops, I don’t know how I did it!” Outside of school, she was not only interested in getting good grades, but also having fun. She was therefore always popular with her friends. The cliché of the “nerd?” Just like every other stereotype she would come across later in life, it bounced straight off her.
- [05:25]** So why choose chemistry? Thanks to the combinations of letters and numbers that very few can remember, chemistry remains a mystery for many people. Mai Thi explains her love of chemistry as this: “You can always compare it to a wonderful person who is absolutely fascinating — but very, very bad at small talk. After briefly getting to know them, you don’t have much interest in meeting them again.” Thankfully, Mai Thi has a talent for small talk, allowing her to fulfill her mission
- [06:07]** After studying in Germany and the USA, she could have started working in the laboratory of a large chemical company. But she didn’t because each night when Mai Thi watched the news, she would be slightly afraid. More and more people and politicians did not want to believe what scientists were saying. Today, people believe more often in feelings than facts and that can be very dangerous. Can someone make good decisions when they’re angry or afraid? What happens when a country is governed based on fear instead of facts? Facts helps you to see all sides of an issue. And feelings? Sometimes they make us blind to many of these sides.
- [07:02]** “What has happened to the world?” Mai Thi asked herself. “People once believed in what scientists had to say. Not anymore.” She knew that she wanted to make change in the world. And that would not be done in a chemistry lab. She had to find an audience that listened; and she could convince them that science is brilliant and that it can explain the most complex things in our world.



[07:30] Mai Thi found her audience on YouTube. Nowadays, her most successful videos have been viewed more than six million times. And chemistry is not the only focus of her videos — she is starting to speak more often about societal problems, such as racism, climate change and COVID-19. During the nations lockdown in the first wave of the pandemic her popularity in Germany started to rise. In a friendly, but nonetheless comprehensive video, Mai Thi prepared Germans for the reality that COVID-19 would not disappear in a few weeks, but would instead remain with them even in the coming years. You could say that her love of chemistry helped Mai Thi to analyse the entire world. As a chemist she never settles for the simplest answer and is instead constantly looking for new information or ideas.

[08:30] Whenever Mai Thi puts on her white lab coat and has two test tubes filled with bright fluid in her hands, she has a message that is about more than just chemistry. Like in her videos where she plays the mad scientist, she lets things explode and aims to inspire people to take up scientific careers. “We can only do this if as a scientist I am someone young people can look up to,” she says. In other words, someone who is interested in life — and does not act like they are more intelligent than everyone else. Mai Thi receives emails from girls and young women thanking her for inspiring them. They are girls and young women, who like Mai Thi are confident enough to go into a male-dominated field.

[09:50] Mai Thi recently gave birth to a girl — we are curious to know, if the little one is also infected with the chemistry-virus. The chances are pretty high: the child’s father, Mai Thi’s husband, is — of course! — also a chemist.

Mai Thi Nguyen-Kim can explain complicated things in a simple and humorous way. The popular chemist and science journalist received the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany for this in October 2020. Which person would you award a medal for special social engagement?

PODCAST EPISODE

“Mai Thi Nguyen-Kim — the woman who makes science fun.”

AUTHOR

Tina Röhlich



For more Superfrauen Podcasts und materials:
www.goethe.de/superfrauen Podcasts are also available on Apple Podcast, Spotify und Google Podcast.

© All rights reserved. Changes and errors excepted. The work and all its parts are protected by copyright. Any use in cases other than those permitted by law requires the prior consent of the Goethe-Institut Australia.

www.goethe.de/superfrauen



**SUPER
FRAUEN**

Goethe-Institut in Melbourne

Level 1, 448 St Kilda Road
Melbourne VIC 3004
Australia

Phone: 03 9864 8999
Email: info-melbourne@goethe.de

Goethe-Institut in Sydney

90 Ocean Street
Woolahra NSW 2025
Australia

Phone: 02 8356 8333
Email: info-sydney@goethe.de



**GOETHE
INSTITUT**