

# FEEDING LIFE WITH FOOD, PASSION AND COMMUNION

Distinguished  
Alumnus



**PROF. SAMUEL SAI MING SUN**

1968 BSc (Special) Graduate  
1970 MPhil Graduate

## Major Achievements

- Director, State Key Laboratory of Agrobiotechnology, CUHK
- Director, Institute of Plant Molecular Biology and Agricultural Biotechnology, CUHK
- Director/Coordinator of the UGC-AoE Centre for Plant and Agricultural Biotechnology, CUHK
- Master, S H Ho College, CUHK
- Honorary Fellow of CUHK (2010)
- Member of The International Eurasian Academy of Sciences (2008)
- Leader of the Year 2005 (Education/Research), Hong Kong (2005)
- Member of The Chinese Academy of Engineering (2003)
- Great Wall Friendship Award by the People's Government of Beijing Municipality (2000)
- Friendship Medal by the State Government of China (1996)

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To do good science, one must innovate  
and better, out-innovate others!”

“Besides curiosity, serving and for the good of the society, particularly in food supply and nutrition”. It was the year 1942, a time when the sounds of warfare permeated the land and skies. In a small farmhouse in the countryside of Canton Province, a setting reminiscent to that of Jesus in the Bible, a child was born; this child was Professor Samuel Sai Ming SUN. Now widely known as the first scientist who cloned the plant gene, Professor Sun was a pioneer in the fields of agricultural and molecular biotechnology.

Growing up in the perils of war and political turmoil, Professor Sun was not one who could enjoy the luxury of meat and fish. For most of the time his family's diet was limited to vegetables, but each month there was a day when the family's precious stash of salted fish was opened and served to all. Born and raised in these humble conditions, the experience was what paved the way to a career in the life sciences.

When Professor Sun came to Hong Kong in his high school years, he initially wanted to pursue a career in medicine, but then he had to face a major learning hurdle: English. Unfazed by the challenge, Professor Sun

persevered and eventually graduated with a degree in Botany. It was then he found his passion in continuing this line of research, so after a year of working he decided to do a special degree, and then a MPhil degree in The University of Hong Kong (HKU). Under the supervision of Dr S B Yu, he studied the enzymes of glutamic acid metabolism in germinating bean seed.

Professor Sun still recalled vividly his days as a graduate student in the Northcote Science Building of HKU. On the roof of the building, he raised rabbits to collect their antibodies for research,



and the labs where he assumed the role of a demonstrator and assisted in teaching biology to undergraduates. Yet one of his fondest memories, perhaps not surprisingly, was related to food. “Back

then we had these small private family caterers that would bring lunch to us, and we would sit and eat together every day, talking and exchanging ideas,” said Professor Sun. “Since we had several of these caterers, we didn't know what kind of food they would prepare the next day!” Through these lunchtime exchange sessions, Professor Sun grew very close to his fellow graduate students. He also had a good relationship with the faculty in the Department of Botany.

“One of the professors whom I liked very much was Dr Spring Chen in plant physiology,” recalled Professor Sun. “She was just like a mother to us, and she liked to talk all kinds of things. A funny thing I remember was that she sometimes repeated things, and my seniors told me that attending her classes was a suffering, so what I did was I used two cotton plugs to put in my ears!”

The familial relationship that Professor Sun established with his peers in HKU as well as his scientific outlook had all influenced his career. As so succinctly summarized in his motto, “to do good

science, one must innovate, and better, out-innovate others!”, Professor Sun valued innovation as the way to the future in not just science, but also in life. Therefore, when he took up the role as the master of S H Ho College in The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), he innovated his unique ‘Home’ concept that incorporated elements such as communal dining, guaranteed hostel places and weekly tea gatherings to share about life and address queries of students.

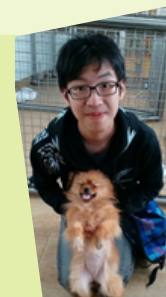
“A home is supposed to be a stable and supportive environment where we find it happy and warm to stay in. I think that the best time in home is during mealtime, when the whole family eats together, sharing good food and good conversation. Besides, while it is inevitable that students will argue during their stay at the College, they will eventually remember that they belong to one big family and no matter the problem, they can talk over it.”



While running the college had taken up a lot of Professor Sun's time, he enjoyed the challenge after a long time in the science field. “It's like part of my own DNA; I always try to find something new that I want to do,” he remarked. But as the college went on a track of its own, he mentioned that he hadn't forgotten his research. After all, his ultimate goal in agrobiotechnology was to “let everybody have enough food to eat”.

## STUDENT REPORTER

“Even from such a short interview, I could already feel Professor Sun's passion towards his profession; his eyes were gleaming as he shared his experience. His hospitality made me feel at ease when talking to him. No wonder the students view him like their grandfather.”



**Luke Ian Cuimin, BSc Student**  
(major in Biochemistry)