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 the same thing, 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.

“Students view him like their grandfather.”

Luke Ian Cuimin, BSc Student

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“His hospitality was gleaming as he shared his experience. His hospitality was so important to his passion towards his profession; his eyes were glowing 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)