

Living the Impossible Dream ---

王凱峰 Hoi-fung Roger Wong

Text: Charity Oi-ming Fok

Doctor of Philosophy, Comparative Biochemistry; Research Scientist Department of Nutritional Science and Toxicology, University of California Admitted to SGSS in 1996; Dragon House; Committee member of Photography Club



Roger at a TV talk show

Not long ago, in a discussion about the new generation of Hong Kong, someone made this comment: It's a horrible thing when having a dream is something to be laughed at. It really got me to think... Since when has Hong Kong become a place where dreams die? Since when did we start looking for immediate gratification, with something we don't really care, rather than aiming at and persisting for something we really want? And you even got some very positive feedbacks of "being realistic", "being efficient" and "being goal-oriented" for that.

One day in March this year, I got this forwarded message through Facebook with an attached news clip about a Chinese scientist discovering a gene named DNA-PK that works to transform carbohydrates into fat. This discovery is a breakthrough in biochemistry and a big step toward the cure and prevention of cancer, diabetes and obesity. And that Chinese scientist was my classmate back in SGSS during Form 2 and 3, Roger! I was like...wow... this big guy who used to pick fights around school? You hardly ever saw him bury his head in the books like everyone did during the exam period, though he certainly was one smart kid back then.

This summer, Roger was invited to give presentations on his findings at several universities here in Hong Kong, so I called him up for an afternoon tea during his stay. It had been nine years since our F.5 graduation. Roger left SGSS since then. After a year of matriculation studies in Lingnan Hang Yee Memorial Secondary School, he moved to the US with his family and started his college life.

Having no idea what biochemistry was about, only knowing that he got a chance to apply what he was going to study in his work as a pharmacist, Roger chose to go into this field simply because he

both loved biology and chemistry – of course, it turns out that this is not exactly just the combination of the two high school subjects, but something that fascinates him even more, something that changes his life. In the second year of Roger's undergraduate studies, a professor offered him a part-time job as his research assistant. That was when he first tasted the satisfaction and the excitement of being the first person to see unique sets of data resulting from countless possible manipulation of different variables. When I saw his face as he tried to explain this joy to me, I knew THIS is how one should look when he really loves what he is doing.

Here came another junction point in life as the college life was ending: To work comfortably at some biotechnology companies, researching on something that he did not have much say over, or to continue with his studies for a total of easily four to seven years, and pursue what he really cared? Finally, upon the encouragement of his teachers, Roger chose to take a bet, live his dream and applied for the doctoral degree programs in over ten universities around America. He honestly doubted whether he was going to get any offer at first since they seldom take students from state universities, but with good achievements in his past research work, a good GPA, good letter recommendations and the enthusiasm he showed to the admission committee, he finally got into one of the most prestigious universities in the world, UC Berkeley.

He chose to find answers in basic science instead of applied science because, while the latter brings convenience to people's everyday life, the former leads to more important breakthroughs in science and in human history. Sounds grand, huh? There is a price to pay. The first half year of this supposedly bright and hopeful career path was filled with exhaustion, frustration and confusion. There is one thing about research in basic science that makes you love it and hate it at the same time – you keep asking questions that people have been asking throughout human history, you keep working out the small details and contributing to the knowledge pool which is supposed to lead people to the answers...but it is possible that you can never get THE ANSWER before you die.

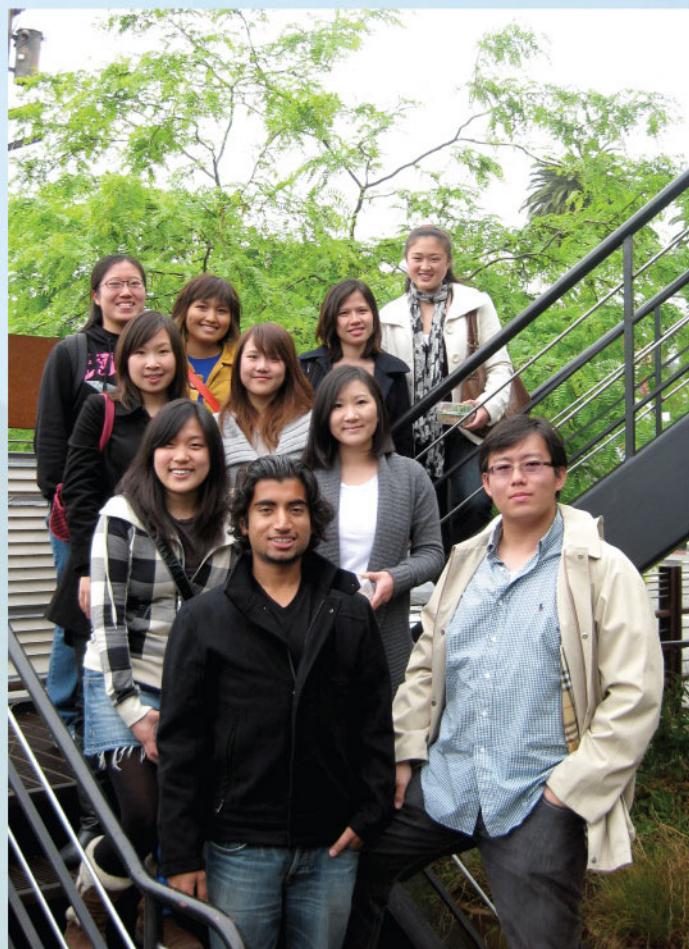
Roger still remembers the mixed feeling of excitement and fear when he and his team first realized their findings were going to shock the whole academia. He kept dreaming about the possible errors in his sleep. The thought of somebody else who happened to be doing the same thing published their findings before he did also worried him because, if that happened, years of hard work was going to be efforts in vain. Well, after all, in this world where resource is scarce and the demand is unlimited, competition is unavoidable. Scientists are not immune to the need of human resource management skills. One simple rule outside the lab: Never mention the details of what

you are doing inside!

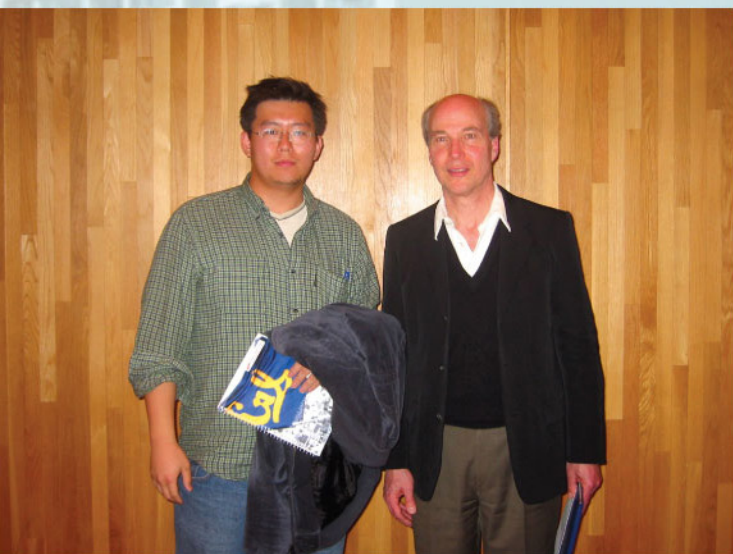
An FAQ after the findings were published: Once this discovery leads to the invention of drugs, any chance this is going to be misused or even abused especially in a society where people are crazy about slimming up? This is the overseas press calls “guilt-free appeal”: People might just eat as much as they like and take the drug to cancel it off. They don’t feel guilty because no visible damage can be done to their bodies. Well, an official response: “We don’t encourage unhealthy lifestyle. Balanced diet and exercise are still the best way to health.” However, we all know how lazy people can get. Honestly, it really depends on the self-discipline of users, the legal regulation on drug prescriptions and the good intention of the professionals.

This brought about an interesting question about the ethical boundaries that balance a scientist’s satisfaction in the pursuit of knowledge and the possible threats to human well-being. Roger pondered for a while and revealed that he would not choose to start something that would end up as a disaster to the world, and that’s why he keeps virus and other dangerous stuff outside his lab. So no worries, SGSS is not going to produce a biochemical weapon maker.

Having left his home town, where paths of everyone seem to be mostly set, for a foreign country where even impossible dreams seem possible, Roger, surprisingly, gradually realizes his identity as a Chinese. It was hard to believe that this actually came from a young man who hardly even opened his Chinese history textbook back in high school. These years, he started to read and learn more about his home country. When he sees his modest, hard-working Chinese colleagues being stereotyped as materialistic gold-miners instead of sincere knowledge-seekers, he secretly pledges to himself that he has to do something to change their mind. In times of frustration, being a small particle of the whole big Chinese nation and culture turned out to be even more motivating than being a prominent individual with promising future.



Roger and his students



Roger with 2007 Chemistry Nobel Prize winner Roger Kornberg

EDUCATION

- 2001 Fall – 2004 Spring B.A. Chemistry with biochemistry concentration, California State University, Sacramento.
- 2004 Fall – present Ph.D. student comparative biochemistry, University of California, Berkeley.
- 2006 Fall – advanced to Ph.D. candidate

AWARD AND HONORABLE AFFILIATION

- Grant National Science Foundation Graduate Fellowship Honorable Mention, April, 2006.
- ACS 2003 Undergraduate Award, Division of Analytical Chemistry, May, 2003.
- Phi Kappa Phi Honor Society, California State University, Sacramento, inducted in 2002.
- Golden Key Honor Society, California State University, Sacramento, inducted in 2003.
- Summa Cum Laude, graduation honors, California State University, Sacramento, May, 2004.
- Commencement speaker, gave commencement keynote speech with President Alexander Gonzalez, California State University, Sacramento, May, 2004.
- Dean list and honor roll recipient (6/6 semesters).