

Honorary Fellow A Citation

Professor Wong Nai-ching Henry

Professor Robert B. Woodward, a renowned American organic chemist and Nobel Laureate in Chemistry, once said, 'The structure known, but not yet accessible by synthesis, is to the chemist what the unclimbed mountain, the uncharted sea, the untilled field, the unreached planet, are to other men.' The wonders of synthetic chemistry, wonders that never cease, are those of a venture to the end of the earth. Wondrous, indeed, has been the life of Professor Wong Nai-ching Henry as a student, researcher, and teacher in the field. One word for wonder in Chinese is 'qi', which the ancient Chinese dictionary *Shuowen Jiezi* defines as 'strange'. Notice the character for it, '奇', has at its top the glyph '大', which stands for the word *da*, meaning 'great'. With proper care and serious work, strangeness does breed greatness.

Professor Wong is a native of Hong Kong with roots in Taishan, Guangdong. In 1969, he was admitted to the Department of Chemistry of United College, CUHK and graduated in 1973 with a BSc degree with first-class honours. He went on to University College London (UCL) for postgraduate study with a Shell Scholarship. Under the supervision of Professor Franz Sondheimer, he investigated the synthesis of high-strained planar fully conjugated eight-membered ring compounds and was awarded a PhD degree in 1976. With a reference from Professor Sondheimer, he went across the pond to Harvard and pursued postdoctoral research for the next two years under none other than Professor Robert B. Woodward. He returned to UCL afterwards, working as a Ramsay Memorial Fellow there before moving on to be an Associate Research Fellow at the Shanghai Institute of Organic Chemistry of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and a Lecturer at the Hong Kong Polytechnic. In 1983, he was back at CUHK and joined the

Department of Chemistry, where he rose through the ranks as Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Reader and then to become Professor of Chemistry. Alongside his academic work, he was Chairman of the Department, Head of New Asia College, Pro-Vice-Chancellor of the University, and Dean of the Faculty of Science. When he retired in 2018, he was made an Emeritus Professor of Chemistry and continued to serve the Department as a Research Professor. He is now the X.Q. Deng Presidential Chair Professor at CUHK (SZ) and holds visiting and honorary professorships at various higher education institutions on the Chinese Mainland.

Strange—or rather, extraordinary—were the days when Professor Wong was a schoolboy. The 1950s and 60s, when Professor Wong received his primary and secondary education, were hard times. The deprivations, however, meant he was free of the distractions of the material world and set his mind merely to learning. His difficult childhood echoes the words of the great Sui Confucian Wang Tong, who has this to say about Professor Wong's name, Nai-ching, 'being proper': 'It is proper for a person to stumble. Strange is the life that runs smooth.' Seeing in the bleakest of times the seeds of success, the boy was on track to greatness.

Strange—or rather, miraculous—was his life as a budding chemist. He had the fortune of having not one, or two, but three prodigiously talented chemists as his mentors: Dr Edmund P. Woo of United College, whose work in organic synthesis sparked his interest in the field, Professor Sondheimer, and Professor Woodward. In another stroke of serendipity, he found himself to be part of a single, singular line of excellence in the discipline: Dr Woo had been a postdoctoral associate of Professor Sondheimer, and Professor Sondheimer a

protégé of Professor Woodward. Widely regarded as the father of modern organic synthesis and a giant in chemistry, Professor Woodward was serious about his work yet delightfully unorthodox as a person, renowned for his addiction to cigarettes, alcohol and blue colour. That was another bit of strangeness Professor Wong picked up and incorporated into his way of life.

Strange—or rather, magical—is the world of synthetic chemistry, the world Professor Wong has been so drawn to. The chemist was frank that he became a researcher out of sheer curiosity. Out of nothing, synthetic chemistry makes something. It is the most creative of sciences, an art by every measure. In his postdoctoral years, Professor Wong explored the total synthesis of natural molecules with a focus on synthesizing erythromycins. As he pressed on with his work in organic synthesis, he pushed back the frontiers of synthetic methodology, non-natural molecule synthesis, and the total synthesis of naturally occurring molecules. He verified Hückel's rule by experiment, broadened the enquiry into iron-catalysed carbon-carbon cross-coupling reactions, and managed to synthesize a cyclophane with orthogonal benzene rings that had eluded chemists for some time. Curiosity, an affinity for what is strange, lies at the heart of all research; it was precisely what led Professor Wong to all these remarkable discoveries. It in turn brought him numerous honours, including the Second Prize of China's State Natural Science Award and the Croucher Senior Research Fellowship, and elevated him to such prestigious positions as member of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Fellow of The World Academy of Sciences for the

advancement of science in developing countries, and a founding member of the Hong Kong Academy of Sciences.

Strange—or rather, exceptional—has been Professor Wong's career. In the 1970s, when he was a researcher at Harvard, he joined a group of young scholars in a visit to China. This was a turning point in his career. Called to serve his country, he joined the Shanghai Institute of Organic Chemistry of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, where he became the first scholar in the mainland to publish a chemistry paper in an international journal after the Cultural Revolution. He made history again at CUHK, where he was appointed Head of New Asia College twice. He held this Headship position for a total of 15 years, a tenure second only to that of Professor Ch'ien Mu, the College's Founding President.

Strange is New Asia's Pavilion of Harmony, a pavilion without a roof, without bounds, stretching as far as the 'high, bright sky' the College Anthem sings of (*'tian gao ming'*). The freedom of the mind that the Pavilion would nicely symbolize was what made Professor Wong's wonderfully strange life in academia possible. In his ventures in the world of chemistry, Mr Chairman, we see Professor Wong's love of truth. And in his diligence and modesty, we see a desire for greatness and his promise to live up to his name. For his work at this University and beyond, Mr Chairman, it is my great pleasure to present to you Professor Wong Nai-ching Henry for the Honorary Fellowship.