

BREAKING THE BARRIERS

The sky is the limit for Tom Tam Lok-ming, who has triumphed over profound deafness to ace his degree and win a PhD fellowship to study in America, writes **Heidi Chik Wiseman**



First-class honours science graduate Tom Tam Lok-ming has a severe hearing impairment. Photo: SCMP Pictures

An unassuming young man in a blue Abercrombie T-shirt and shorts steps through the door of the Charles Kuen Kao Building at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). He is Tom Tam Lok-ming, a first-class honours science graduate and recipient of this year's Edward Youde overseas fellowship for disabled students. In September, Tam began studying for a PhD in environmental toxicology at the University of California, Riverside, near Los Angeles.

Apart from a tiny hearing aid which looks like an earphone, he does not show any sign of being physically disabled. But Tam was diagnosed with profound hearing impairment at age two. His left ear can only hear sounds of 91 decibels and upwards and his right one, of 113 decibels and above, which is equivalent to the volume of sandblasting or the front row at a rock concert.

Despite this serious impediment, Tam excels academically. When it was time for him to go to secondary school, his parents knocked on the doors of CCC Ming Kei College, an English-medium, aided school at the forefront of inclusive education for children with special needs. Ming Kei was one of the first schools to join a pilot scheme on integrating children with special needs into mainstream education before the government's inclusive education policy was implemented across the board.

"Back then, we all voted on whether or not to join the scheme," recalls Fung Ming-leung, then chairman of the school's integrated education planning committee. "Most teachers were supportive - 70 per cent voted 'yes', only two voted 'no', and the rest were neutral."

The school has since admitted one to two students with special educational needs (SEN) a year, whose disabilities range from visual impairment to autism. Teachers often have to sacrifice their

lunchtimes, stay behind after school and produce different versions of test papers to cater to their needs. This year, the school admitted a blind student for the first time and it has bought special learning aids for them such as a 'speaking calculator', while teachers will learn how to use a Braille printer.

Ming Kei's principal Dr Annie Chan Kit-ching says: "It's not easy for the staff, as it adds to their workload but, with a whole-school approach towards integrated education, everyone is involved in caring for [the students with SEN]." Students naturally show kindness to the new blind student, while others act as designated "integrated-education ambassadors", she says, adding that family members of SEN students are invited to join social activities organised by the school.

"Over the past fourteen years, even though we've had two principals, their support for integrated education has not wavered," says Fung. He adds students are admitted to the school based on their grades, regardless of disability, but staff would first find out what kind of additional support the child needs and whether the school is able to provide it.

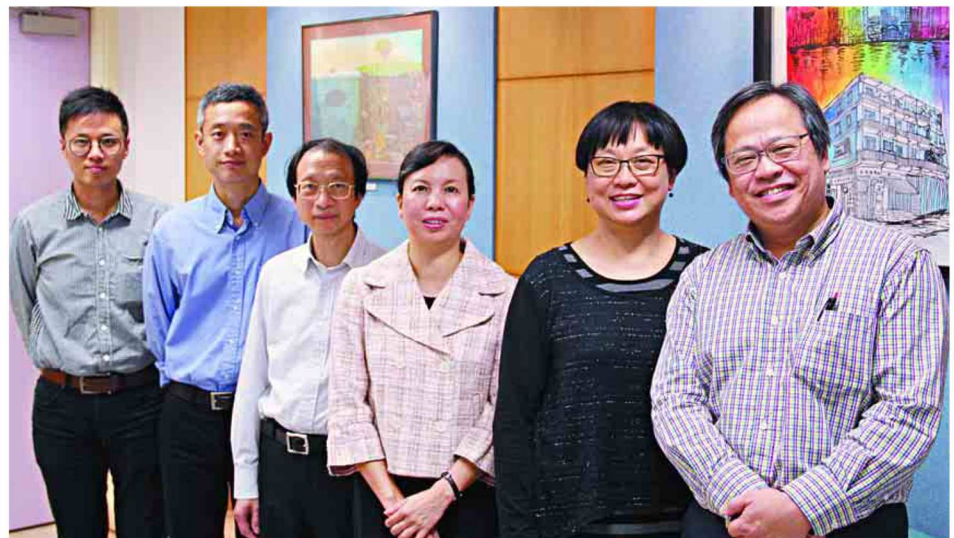
Simon Wong, who was Tam's class teacher in Form One and his chemistry teacher from Form Three to Form Five, describes him as an "extremely industrious, dedicated, meticulous and persistent" student who "always asked many questions after class." In his chemistry classes, Tam always enjoyed tackling advanced drilling exercises. "At first I was worried about Tam, as he could not speak very well," says Wong. "But his communication skills improved significantly when I taught him again in Form Three."

Tam eventually gained 5As in the now-defunct Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination and 3Bs at A-level. Apart from completing school assignments, Tam's main after-school activity was speech training. But he attributes his success to his early start in language learning as well as reading widely and copiously. "Nearly every day, until I was in Form Three, I would go



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TOM TAM LOK-MING



Dr Annie Chan (third from right) with teachers at CCC Ming Kei College. Photo: SCMP Pictures

for an hour to an hour and a half of speech training," says Tam. "When I learnt more words, I started to read many books, such as 10,000 Whys (a popular children's science encyclopaedia series). I was particularly inspired by Helen Keller, who contributed so much to the world even though she was deaf and blind."

Despite his positive attitude and formidable achievements, Tam admits that studying has never been easy. "There was a moment before my A-levels, when I became quite emotional because the hardship was just too much to bear. Yet when I thought of all the people who have helped me in my life, I felt a sense of duty to them and I told myself to hang in there."

Fung says: "I was worried that Tam's social circle might be quite small when he went to university because he devoted so much time to studying. But he came back and told me that he had met some very nice people at CUHK."

In 2010, Tam got into the university's research-oriented cell and molecular biology degree programme, which had been launched the previous year. But the adjustment from the cosy environment of secondary school to

his active participation in many volunteer and community activities.

Tam's one-year exchange at University of California, Davis in Year Three of his degree programme was a breakthrough for him in many ways. That year, his GPA shot up to four out of four. "With the help of the real-time note-taking service the American university provided, I suddenly felt that life became less difficult and more balanced. My self-confidence also improved. It was then I decided to pursue a PhD,"

a large university campus was another hurdle.

"The lecture theatres are far bigger than the classrooms at school, and some professors like to walk to and fro when they talk," he says. "Also, a single subject could be taught by many different lecturers, who specialise in their particular field, so it was hard for me to adjust to their styles in a short time."

Over the three years, however, Tam consistently scored a grade point average (GPA) of 3.5 out of a maximum of four each term at CUHK, and won many awards and scholarships.

Besides his academic work, Professor Leung Kwok-nam, associate dean (education) in CUHK's science faculty, has praised

says Tam. CUHK now also provides this assistance for students with hearing impairments.

Tam hopes that he will be able to give something back to society through his research. "I'm especially interested in finding out how toxins in the environment affect human beings, especially mothers during the first six months of pregnancy," he says. "If so, we can reduce the negative effects or prevent it from happening."

Tam also hopes that his story will encourage other young people with special educational needs. "Uncertainty about your future can be a good thing," he says. "It has made me assess my abilities and passions honestly. Follow your heart and never copy other people."