

A Journey into Traditional Chinese Medicine

— Natalie Su Peixuan 苏佩萱

Meet Natalie,
a young TCM physician currently
practicing at Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital.
Read on as she shares her journey into
TCM and experiences as an early-
career practitioner.

How It All Started

I actually chose TCM not because of a strong personal interest or prior experience with it, but simply because I enjoyed both Biology and Chinese as subjects.

Like many Biology students considering a future in healthcare, I was exploring related courses offered in local universities, such as Nursing and Biological Sciences. While browsing through the programmes under the School of Biological Sciences, the Biomedical Sciences and Chinese Medicine double degree caught my attention. It felt unique and interesting.

Had I ever thought of becoming a TCM physician before that? No. Did I know I would eventually have to sit for a licensing exam? Also no.

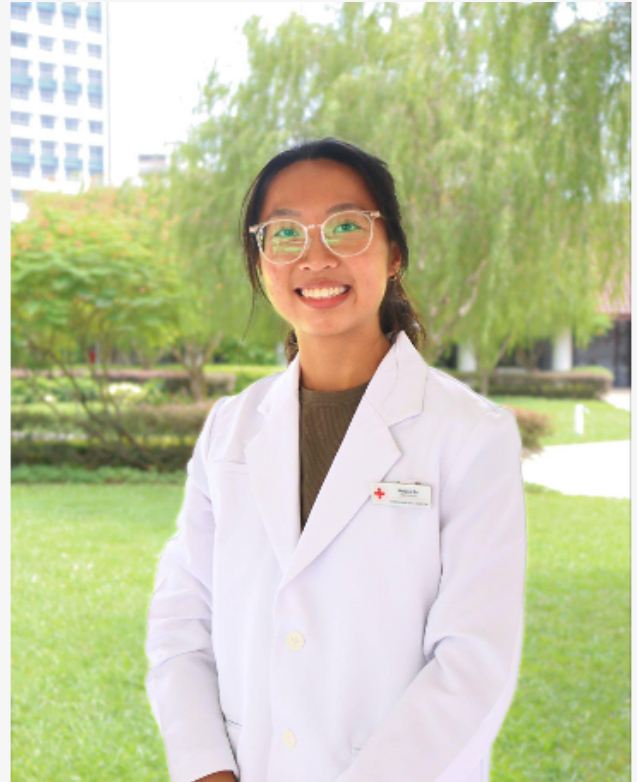
I think the younger version of me simply decided to go for it and see how things unfolded along the way. Funnily enough, many of my classmates also did not fully know what we had signed ourselves up for — half-semester modules, finals during recess week, packed schedules from 8.30am to 5.30pm almost every day, and eventually licensing exams.

Fast forward five years later, after a hectic academic journey and many moments of hesitation whenever studies became overwhelming, here I am today — licensed and practising.

Challenges During Training

The biggest challenge during school was honestly the studies themselves.

With back-to-back lessons from morning till evening, coupled with extracurricular commitments after class, it was difficult to consistently keep up with the pace of the programme.



My batch was also one of the few significantly affected by COVID-19. From Year 2 onwards, most of our lessons shifted online, which made learning even more challenging.

Thankfully, we were still given the opportunity to go to China for our final-year internship, which turned out to be one of the most eye-opening experiences of our education.

We were immersed in a TCM hospital setting, learning under teachers and mentors equipped with both TCM and Western medicine knowledge. We observed scans, medical checks, and surgeries being performed alongside the prescription of herbal medicine and external TCM treatments such as acupuncture, fire cupping, and bloodletting.

This was a unique experience that we do not often get in Singapore, where there is still a relatively large gap in the understanding between Western and Chinese medicine.



Life at Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital

Interestingly, I found out about Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital's TCM clinic after coming across its booth during a career fair.

At the KWSH TCM Centre, our work functions similarly to a regular TCM outpatient clinic. A typical day may involve consultation sessions, prescribing herbal medication, and administering treatments such as acupuncture, cupping, or gua sha.

Like many TCM clinics, we frequently see patients for pain management, though cases can range from common coughs and colds to post-stroke rehabilitation and chronic condition management. One unique aspect of practising at KWSH is the opportunity to conduct ward sessions. On certain days, we head over to the nursing home wards to provide acupuncture for residents who have opted for treatment. This was something that attracted me when I first enquired about working here, as it was not something we were exposed to during our internships in NTU.

It is also meaningful to work alongside nurses and doctors in caring for ward residents. In the nursing home setting, residents often require more patience and attention during acupuncture sessions, especially those with cognitive impairment or behavioural challenges. Thankfully, we are supported by acupuncture assistants during these sessions. KWSH also encourages physicians to continuously upgrade ourselves, whether through overseas training opportunities or support for further studies in areas we wish to deepen our expertise in.

Growth as a Young Physician

“Ah girl, you look very young.”

“How long have you been learning this?”

“Just graduated?”

These are comments I believe many young physicians are familiar with.

Similar to many healthcare professions, patients often prefer older physicians due to their perceived years of experience. Ageism is something many of us will likely encounter, so over time, I have learned not to let it affect me too much.

Some perceptions are difficult to change, so I prefer focusing on what I can control instead.

As many seniors have shared, patients do not fall sick according to textbook patterns. Everything we memorised for examinations is merely the foundation.

When I first started seeing patients independently, I struggled with syndrome differentiation and identifying the most suitable treatment approaches for individual cases. To make things even more challenging, patients often present with multiple overlapping concerns.





Thankfully, as part of the KWSH two-year residency programme, we are given opportunities to shadow different physicians and gradually familiarise ourselves with clinic operations and available medications.

This allowed me to learn from senior physicians not only in patient communication, but also in clinical reasoning, syndrome differentiation, and practical treatment planning.

In many ways, I feel that I have learned even more in practice, as real-life cases constantly push me to revisit the basics and think deeper about the many “whys” and “hows”.

Advice to Aspiring TCM Physicians

A quote that resonates deeply with me is:

“不以一病之不治而质疑，不以众病之皆治而惬意。”

Do not doubt yourself because one illness was not successfully treated, and do not become complacent because many were.

I think this is an especially meaningful reminder for young physicians – to remain grounded in both failure and success.

This is a long journey, and the learning never truly stops. I am also still slowly figuring things out along the way, both in knowledge and in understanding myself.

