



The scalpel and the brush: an interview with Professor Philip Wai-yan Chiu

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Since his graduation from the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) in 1994, Prof Philip Wai-yan Chiu has established an illustrious career as an academic surgeon. Currently, he is Professor in the Department of Surgery at the CUHK, Assistant Dean of the CUHK Faculty of Medicine (External Affairs), Director of the CUHK Jockey Club Minimally Invasive Surgical Skills Centre, and Director of the Chow Yuk Ho Technology Centre for Innovative Medicine.

Surgical career

An expert in endoscopic and minimally invasive surgery (MIS), Prof Chiu has been instrumental in the development of his field both locally and internationally. He fondly recalls how MIS stratospherically emerged from laparoscopic cholecystectomy—the only MIS in his early career—to its current ubiquity over the last two decades. What he is most impressed by is the number of patients who have benefited from the less-traumatic surgical experience.

To study the advanced endoscopic techniques of upper gastrointestinal cancer management, Prof Chiu pursued studies in Japan in the early 2000s, and was the first to bring endoscopic submucosal dissection (ESD) machinery out of Japan. He strives to apply cutting-edge technology to benefit local patients, and he performed the first ESD and the first per-oral endoscopic myotomy in Hong Kong in 2004 and 2010, respectively. In the Asia Pacific Digestive Week 2016, he received the 'Emerging Leader Lectureship' award from the Journal of Gastroenterology and Hepatology Foundation.

Broadening one's reach via education and innovation

Outside the surgical field, Prof Chiu further contributes to the community by focusing on education and staff development. "While performing surgery can help patients," he explained, "teaching and furthering medical science allows more patients to benefit."

Apart from the education of medical students at the CUHK, Prof Chiu strives to share medical knowledge with his engineer colleagues and engineering students, as he sees the potential of interdisciplinary collaboration between engineers and doctors, whereby doctors' clinical experience paired with engineers' mechanical expertise can enable the development of novel surgical instruments. To further promote revolutionary biomedical engineering research, Prof Chiu was involved in establishing the Chow Yuk Ho Technology Centre for Innovative Medicine in the CUHK, where he currently serves as its inaugural director. Continuous innovation, he stresses, is the key to improved patient care.

Prof Chiu currently chairs the Asian Novel Bio-imaging and Intervention Group, an academic interest group that aims to train endoscopists and promote early gastrointestinal cancer management. Since its inception in 2014, the group has organised over 50 training courses and trained over 1200 doctors.

Serving with paintbrushes

When asked about why he chose surgery as his career,

Prof Chiu was quick to attribute it to his interest in traditional Chinese painting. A pupil under the Lingnan School of Chinese Painting since his teenage days, he believes that the Chinese art has trained him in discipline, planning, and manual dexterity; all of which are crucial virtues of a successful surgeon.

Throughout his hectic surgical career, Prof Chiu has maintained his passion for art and has shared exhibitions with professional painters—his traditional depictions of sometimes medical themes, for example the view in an operating theatre, have been said to bring new elements to the school.

Art is at the same time another means to serve his school. During the celebrations of the 35th Anniversary of the CUHK Faculty of Medicine, Prof Chiu drew a traditional Chinese painting that was then auctioned, with the proceeds used to promote further development of his alma mater.

Recently, Prof Chiu combined his impressive surgical and artistic talents by using the da Vinci Surgical System to paint a praying mantis. While this innovative endeavour enabled him to explore his interest in both art and science, it also showcased the fine movements and dexterity of the System, further supporting the potential of robotic surgery.

“We need to be accountable to our patients”

On a personal level, Prof Chiu cherishes his work, as his research satisfies his inquisitiveness and yields clinical benefits in patients. While he admitted that the cutting-edge technology is fascinating in itself, he reiterated that healing, similar to traditional Chinese painting, is an art. “As doctors, we have to be accountable to our patients and must strive for the best patient care at all times,”—and he himself has certainly been doing exactly that.



Prof Chiu (middle) in the operating theatre



Prof Philip Chiu (rightmost) has been actively pursuing innovative patient care solutions, including collaborations with engineers and engineering students



The painting drawn by Prof Philip Chiu (left) with inscription by Prof Joseph Sung (right) is a collaborative work put up for auction in 2016



The praying mantis drawn by Prof Philip Chiu using the da Vinci Surgical System