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March 5, 2025

Dear Hong Kong Laureate Forum:

It is my distinct pleasure to write this letter in support of Wai Lam Raphaella (“Raphie”) So’s application to attend the second Hong Kong Laureate Forum in November 2025. Raphie has been a PhD student in my lab at the Tanz Centre for Research in Neurodegenerative Diseases within the University of Toronto since January 2018.

Raphie originally contacted me by email as a prospective graduate student back in December of 2016. I receive many applications from international students but am typically unable to consider them due to the elevated costs associated with hosting an international student. However, I was completely blown away by Raphie’s credentials, which forced me to seriously consider her application. I was particularly impressed by the amount of international research experience she had already amassed, including having worked in labs at the US National Institutes of Health (as a high school student), the University of Chicago (as a summer student), and Columbia University (as a summer student). What also stood out to me was that Raphie had direct experience working on topics related to Alzheimer’s disease, both at Columbia University in Michael Shelanski’s lab and during her final year undergraduate research project at HKUST in Professor Karl Herrup’s lab. These research stints led to co-author papers in Nature Neuroscience and Frontiers in Molecular Neuroscience, which is very impressive for an undergraduate student. The other aspect of her CV that piqued my interest was her very impressive academic credentials. Raphie’s transcript revealed that she mostly received grades of “A+” in her undergraduate courses, with the occasional “A” or “A-” for a cumulative GPA of ~4.2 out of 4.3. Her impressive academic performance led to Raphie receiving scholarships from the D H Chen Foundation and the George K Lee Foundation, and landed her on the Dean’s list throughout her academic career. She also received the HKUST Academic Achievement Medal in her final year. It should be noted that Raphie was one of only three international students (out of a total of 37 applicants) accepted into the Department during her year, which speaks volumes of her academic achievements and her perceived potential.

Based on her amazing credentials, I immediately offered Raphie a position in my lab. I can honestly say that this is one of the best decisions I have ever made. Raphie is an absolute star graduate student, most definitely the best I’ve had in my lab thus far. She is currently in the final year of her PhD program and has amassed an impressive number of achievements during her time in my lab. First, Raphie has received several major awards and scholarships to support her graduate studies. For example, she was awarded a highly prestigious graduate scholarship from the Croucher Foundation in Hong Kong that completely funded the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> years of her graduate degree. These large scholarships (>\$30,000 USD per year over 2 years) are only given to elite students that display a strong potential for research excellence. More recently, Raphie was awarded a highly competitive Ontario Graduate Scholarship. At most, only a single international student in the Department of Biochemistry is awarded this scholarship each year. She also received the Peterborough K.M. Hunter scholarship as well as a doctoral scholarship from Parkinson Canada to support the final

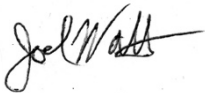
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years of her PhD degree (Raphie's application ranked first in the latter competition). Second, Raphie has published several key papers stemming from her graduate thesis work. She appears as co-first author on our paper on alpha-synuclein strains that was published in Nature Neuroscience. This project was originated by another graduate student but was taken over by Raphie when she joined the lab. Raphie's contributions to this study cannot be overstated—she played an integral role in addressing the comments raised by the reviewers upon initial submission, including repeating previous experiments, developing new techniques, and performing a new set of inoculation experiments in mice. She also wrote a comprehensive review article on alpha-synuclein strains, published in Journal of Molecular Biology, and is the first author on a paper published recently in PLoS Pathogens showing that the cellular prion protein is not involved in the propagation of alpha-synuclein strains in mice. Raphie is currently finalizing a manuscript showing that stochastic misfolding drives the emergence of distinct alpha-synuclein strains, both in vitro and in vivo. This is a tour-de-force study that we hope will be published in a major journal. It suffices to say that Raphie has been incredibly productive during her time in my lab.

Raphie clearly has fantastic “lab hands” and has therefore been able to complete an enormous amount of work in my lab. Raphie's work ethic is admirable, as is her dedication to her project and her attention to detail. She is also very dependable. I relied heavily on Raphie to help out with various laboratory tasks while my technician was on maternity leave, and she selflessly agreed. She is also the first person to volunteer when I need someone to supervise an undergraduate student that wants to shadow in the lab, and she graciously agreed to train a Japanese exchange student for 6 weeks during the summer of 2019. When combined with her volunteer efforts with high school students and Let's Talk Science, it becomes obvious that Raphie is not just an amazing scientist, but also an amazing person. I am incredibly lucky to have her as a member of my lab.

Overall, I can say with 100% certainty that Raphie possesses all the skills necessary to eventually become an independent researcher, if that ends up being the career path she chooses. She has far exceeded all my expectations and has become a standout graduate student within the Department. For these reasons, it is my opinion that Raphie is a highly deserving candidate for attending the Hong Kong Laureate Forum this year.

Sincerely,



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