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Shan Woo Liu was born in Jackson, Michigan. She moved to California and attended Los Altos High school. She graduated with a Bachelor of Science and a Bachelor of Arts with honors from Stanford University in 1995. From there, she spent a year as a Fulbright Scholar conducting health policy research on AIDS education policy in Honduras. She graduated from Harvard Medical School in 2000 and entered the Harvard Affiliated Emergency Medicine Residency where she began conducting health services research with an emphasis on outcomes for patients who board in the emergency department. After graduating from residency in 2004, she assumed a position as a faculty member in the Emergency Department at Massachusetts General Hospital and enrolled in the Harvard School of Public Health. She became board-certified in emergency medicine in 2005. She completed her Masters in Public Health in 2005 and then began her doctoral studies in the department of Health, Policy and Management at the Harvard School of Public Health. In 2008, she completed a diploma in tropical medicine and hygiene at the London School of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene. She completed her doctorate in 2010 with a dissertation entitled "An assessment of quality of care provided to patients boarding in the emergency department."

She currently works as an emergency physician at the Massachusetts General Hospital while doing health services research. Her current interests are quality of care in the emergency department and geriatric trauma. She has worked in Honduras, China, Gabon, Niger, Ghana, and Haiti on various public health or clinical projects.