Interview: Xue-jun Song – Director, Southern University of Science and Technology (SUSTech) Center for Pain Medicine; Professor of Neuroscience, Anesthesiology and Pain Medicine, China



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As Professor of Neuroscience and Pain Medicine and director of the center for pain medicine at Southern University of Science and Technology (SUSTech) since 2016, Dr. Xue-jun Song explains the reasons he came back to China and decided to settle in Shenzhen. In this exclusive interview, he shares the advantages the SUSTech offers, as



well *as the reasons for building a Center for Pain Medicine in Shenzhen.*

What made you decide to come back to China after 20 years working in the US?

After spending more than 20 years as a biomedical scientist and professor at various universities in the United States, I decided to come back to China for a number of reasons. First, my two children have grown up: my daughter is an MD student at University of Pennsylvania and my son is a college student at Duke University. As they are now very independent, I have become ‘free’. My

wife and my children were very supportive. They told me, “dad, you can now focus more on your research interests and your unrealized dreams.”

Secondly, as I grew up and completed all my education up to PhD level in China, I have always felt in my heart that I need to work for my motherland for another 20 years. Thirdly, by that point, I had stayed in the US for a long time – moving from New Haven, Connecticut to Houston and finally Dallas since 1995. A few of my colleagues would sometimes crack a joke by telling me, “doctor, you need to move and see the whole US and the world …”

In the meantime, I had been maintaining strong connections with old friends and respected scientists in China, particularly Dr. Jisheng Han at Peking University and Dr. Xiongli Yang at Fudan University, well-known scientists in the fields of neuroscience and pain medicine. They kept encouraging me to come back here. Therefore, once my children went to college, I decided it was the right time for me to come back to China. Drs. Han and Yang both have provided me the greatest support as possible in establishing the two pain medicine centers at Peking University and SUSTech, respectively.

Additionally, I wanted to have the opportunity to apply my research to clinical trials and do more clinical research in pain medical field, particularly cancer pain research and treatment. This is why I completely closed my lab in US after three years transition at Peking University Health Science Center.

As a university professor and translational medicine researcher in US with strong connections between US and China, it was not hard for me to move back to China. Actually, I was quickly recognized by my Chinese and American colleagues in this field. As an example, I have recently received the 2018 American Academy of Pain Medicine’s Robert G. Addison, MD Award, which recognizes outstanding contributions of scientists and physicians to the development of pain medicine and international cooperation and collaborations.

Why did you then move from Beijing to Shenzhen?

I left the US to first settle in Beijing for five years. One of the few most important things I accomplished in Beijing at Peking University Health Science Center was leading the establishment of the Center for Pain Medicine. After a couple years however, I experienced and realized many difficulties like the lack of laboratory space, research staff, and financial support, etc. Then in early 2016, encouraged and invited by the President of SUSTech Dr. Shiyi Chen, who was the Vice President of the Peking University, I decided to take the opportunity to join SUSTech in Shenzhen. As we all know, while forty years ago, Shenzhen represented almost nothing in any field, today, it is

now a well-recognized metropolis in many fields in the world – I wanted to be part of it.

As to the higher education system in Shenzhen, it still lags behind, even compared to the domestic Chinese system. But the Chinese Central Government has high expectations for Shenzhen, having set high standards to establish a new world-class university in Shenzhen to test the adoption of a 'Western' higher education system in China, just as forty years ago, Shenzhen had been selected as one of the cities through which China could be opened to the world.

The newly established SUSTech in Shenzhen, only six years old, is already shining not only in China but also in the world. This new hope is very attractive to many scientists worldwide, particularly to Chinese scholars in every corner of the world. I was one of them and I am now one of the SUSTech faculty members. So far, SUSTech has been very successful in recruiting high-quality faculty and students in the progress of science and technology.

[Featured_in]

In the pain research field, your specialty, how would you describe the academic landscape in China, compared to the US and more broadly, internationally?

In general, we may say that China has been leading pain research and pain treatment throughout history and also more recently. Currently, Chinese government has a historical record of financial support in science and technology including biomedical research and translational research, while such support in US and Europe is declining – this may be the first reason we are now in a strongly competitive position against the Western world in innovative research. In addition to the large amount of outstanding Chinese professors and scientists who have studied abroad returning to China, Shenzhen has also been successful in attracting foreign scientists from Europe and the US. In the near future, I am confident that Shenzhen will become an important biomedical innovative center.

What about the new center of pain medicine that you established last year?

Before and immediately after I joined SUSTech, I was appointed as the member of the SUSTech medical school planning committee and member of medical school planning working office, while still committed to the responsibilities as a professor. As mentioned, I have a special interest in developing pain medicine in China – because till then, China and more broadly, the world, did not offer a good system for any independent system for pain medicine, the reason being that many people did not even recognize chronic pain itself as a severe problem, but rather, as a consequence. People assumed that if one get rid of the problems, the pain would go away, that one

would not die out of pain. But now people realize that pain can actually kill you. For example, depression may cause people to commit suicide. In fact, chronic pain is the number one reason for inducing depression; cancer pain also leads to many severe problems including suicide.

In addition to leading the establishment of the pain medicine center at Peking University, I also led the establishment of the second comprehensive pain medicine center at SUSTech in 2017 and have organized the pain medicine class at Peking University and SUSTech to make it available to all undergraduate students in both biomedical and non-biomedical fields, which is a first in the country!

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How much do you collaborate with the industry?

My lab in US did have several long-term collaborations with industry when I was in US. So far, since my return to China, I have been focusing on translational research and also the application of my research to clinical trials. I are now very open to connections, aiming at collaborations on new drug research and development, in addition to developing pain medicine education, basic and translational research, and clinical research and treatment. This is our ultimate aim for this pain medicine center. We therefore look for more collaboration opportunities with biopharmaceutical companies.

Since our goal is to change the global image of Shenzhen – from your "outsider" perspective, how do you think the global perception of Shenzhen has evolved over the past two years?

I think a lot more people know about Shenzhen now, and are becoming aware that the city is now an innovation hotspot. In the US especially, the majority of my non-Chinese friends know about this city. Shenzhen is also kind of the Silicon Valley of China. However, even though Shenzhen is a very wealthy city, it is still not the most advanced one. In my view, a modern city has to have first-class high education and medical systems. Shenzhen, at this point, is far behind Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and many other cities in China. The local government is realizing this, and hence put a lot of effort supporting universities, SUSTech is a great example, to develop Shenzhen in that regard. For this reason, I believe that Shenzhen will be great in all the aspects in the near future.

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