

# TWAS Tianjin Meeting in Eyes of Participants

By SONG Jianlan (Staff Reporter)

The 12<sup>th</sup> General Conference and the 23<sup>rd</sup> General Meeting of TWAS (later referred to as “Tianjin Meeting”) had over 400 participants from about 60 countries sitting together to exchange their scientific experiences and discuss science issues of their own area and beyond. What did they find and get from the event? How do they view the Meeting? Follow *BCAS* and listen to their voices.

## Good Science Possible in Developing World

“It is possible to do science, good science in the developing world; it is an encouraging message.” —Dr. Unuabonah, Nigeria

Dr. Unuabonah, a chemist from Nigeria and Young Affiliate of TWAS, was apparently encouraged by the high academic level of the lectures given during the academic sessions of the Meeting. Lightened with a smile of inspiration he told *BCAS*: “I must confess that I would not expect that, because you know in the developing world, the science may not be good, or not as strong as what you find in the developed world. But fortunately, I would say, what I’ve seen so far shows that we have science that is good, and that is occurring in the developing world.” He continued: “Some of the work I have seen here so far is really interesting, and for us the younger ones, it is a challenge. But it means it is possible to do science, good science in the developing world; it is an encouraging message. We need such encouragement. Also we need some support from the government, some support from the institutions, which do science as the best in the developed world.”

Dr. Unuabonah is not the only one who was impressed by the quality of the lectures given during the session of

Dr. Unuabonah is inspired by the good quality of science research occurring in the developing world mirrored by the high level of the lectures given at TWAS Tianjin Meeting. (Photo: SONG Jianlan)



the Tianjin Meeting. Most participants interviewed, varied in research areas and countries of origin, thought highly of the lectures, believing they were of very high academic level and very helpful for their professional development.

Among them is Prof. Xavier Caicedo, a mathematician from Colombia and Fellow of TWAS. The author found him reading a poster on the morning of September 20 in the corridor connecting the meeting rooms. “This is the only poster I found on my specialty. We have lots of biologists here, but mathematicians are really minority,” he said, a bit disappointed. When asked about the lectures, however, he expressed his satisfaction without doubt: “Oh, the lectures



are very good. I mean the level is very high. They are very impressive and interesting. Particularly the level of the ones at the conference with Chinese scientists is very impressive. So is that of the lectures by the people who won the TWAS Prizes or Medals. Some are on mathematics in particular, including the one by Mr. Shun-Jen Cheng, a Taiwanese mathematician.” Pointing to the list of lectures on the program he added: “And this one by Chilean mathematician P. L. Felmer on non-linear fractional elliptic equations is also very good.”

Dr. Safiriyu Idowu Ola, a biologist from Nigeria and Young Affiliate of TWAS, also enjoyed the lectures very much. Focusing on reproductive biology, he liked all the lectures, including those irrelevant to his own discipline. The lectures in genomics and stem cells, which were relevant to his own research, attracted his extra attention, though not exactly falling in his own area.

“I talked to a number of the lecturers. I talked to Prof. ZHOU Qi, expert in stem cells from the CAS Institute of Zoology, and a professor from the Beijing Genomics Institute, whose name\* I forgot... The lectures are very



Dr. Unuabonah discussing with the lecturer during the Q&A session of a lecture. (Photo: SONG Jianlan)

helpful to my own research. It’s a summary of the work they did over the last couple of years. So it gives us an idea of what they have been doing.”

Prof. Peter Ndimbirwe Mugenyi, an expert in AIDS research from Uganda and Fellow of TWAS, found the lectures in health very fascinating. “Other lectures, which are not in my own specialty, like in new particles being diminished, that’s in advanced physics, and the discovery in outer space, are outside of my specialty; but I found them very interesting.”

## Opportunity for Across-disciplinary Talks

“With an academy like TWAS, you get a broad spectrum of disciplines; it’s not only in your specialty, but in many other people’s specialties. So you’ve got a broad concept of science on a bigger scale than your own specialty.” —Prof. Mugenyi, Uganda

Unlike more specialized academic conferences, the academic conference of Tianjin Meeting involved dozens of lectures across many disciplines. This arrangement allowed people from different fields to talk in a general sense of science, and at the same time provided opportunities for scientists of the same area to meet and discuss at a deeper level. Most interviewed participants enjoyed the “general style” of the academic conference, asserting the importance of interdisciplinary exchanges.

Prof. Mugenyi appreciated the general perspective of the conference. “With an academy like TWAS, you get a broad spectrum of disciplines; it’s not only in your



Prof. Peter Ndimbirwe Mugenyi, an expert in AIDS research from Uganda and Fellow of TWAS, thinks highly of the academic sessions of TWAS Tianjin Meeting, emphasizing their importance in promoting exchanges between researchers of different disciplines.(Photo: SONG Jianlan)

specialty, but in many other people’s specialties. So you’ve got a broad concept of science on a bigger scale than your own specialty. It gives you a bigger perspective from a wide range of scientists,” he explained. Particularly he was grateful to the work of other disciplines for inspiring his own studies: “The meetings with other scientists give

\*He meant Prof. CHEN Huanming, expert in genome sequencing.

you ideas of how other scientists addressing their own problems. ... Actually it's virtually impossible to find so many scientists doing exactly the same as what you're doing, but you will find good ideas and innovation from other scientists, and also learn of alternative approaches, advanced technologies... There are a lot to gain from this conference."

Based on his own experience, Dr. Unuabonah stressed that scientists needed to talk across disciplines: "As a chemist, you have to talk to biologists, you have to talk to physicists, and you will find a way to solve particular problems. The problem is easier to solve when you meet different minds thinking about the solution by collaboration. So it is an encouragement that we all collaborate to bring solutions to some issues, some challenges that we found by ourselves not work."

Jalila Ben Salah-Abbès, an immunologist from Tunisia and Young Affiliate of TWAS, believed it was beneficial to understand what is happening beyond one's own field: "It's very important to access the many values displayed by scientists from different countries and different fields on



Dr. Jalila Ben Salah-Abbès, an immunologist from Tunisia accepts her appointment certificate for Young Affiliate from the Arab Regional Office of TWAS after giving a presentation on immunological value of an extraction from Tunisian radish. Her husband Dr. Samir Abbès, inducted as a Young Affiliate of TWAS in 2011, also gives a lecture at the Tianjin Meeting. (Photo: SONG Jianlan)

the basis of general science. It's very beneficial to see what Chinese and Argentineans are doing, and what Nigerians and other African countries are doing."

As a mathematician, Prof. Caicedo found some lectures beyond his research very interesting. Particularly he mentioned the awarding lecture by Prof. Yuk Ming Dennis Lo, winner of the Ernesto Illy Treiste Science Prize, about his work on non-invasive prenatal diagnosis for women. Pointing to the lecture list he also identified some other outstanding lectures: "There are many many interesting talks. For example, this one by A. B. Elgoyhen, Biology on the medial olivocochlear system and protection from acoustic trauma, and the one by V. Nagaraja on mechanistic and functional insights into various cellular DNA transactions."

However, some participants believed it would be much more helpful if the lectures were arranged according to the specialty of the lecturers.

Dr. Mubasher Jamil, a cosmologist from Pakistan and Young Affiliate of TWAS, found very few colleagues of his field at the Meeting: "So far the majority of lectures are about biology and earth sciences, not very relevant to my area. Some talks on physics are relevant, but I think it should be specific to some fields, like high energy physics and cosmology, and other topics like plasma physics. It's my perception." Therefore he suggested having people of the same field together in the same room discussing some more specific issues. "It would be much more helpful for my own research," he remarked. Despite this, he did not deny the benefits of meeting scientists from different areas, noting it is good for further understanding on a general science basis, and helpful for cooperation between scientists. "I think it is very useful, like meeting with Indian scientists, Turkish scientists... discussing something general about science, not particular research in some certain areas, but general discussion about science," he admitted.

## S&T Development in China Inspiring

**"For general interest, the conference is very useful for getting to know China, meeting Chinese scientists of different fields like material science and condense matter." —Dr. Jamil, Pakistan**

The session "Lectures on S&T Development in China" caught a lot of attention from the participants. The lecture by CAS Member OUYANG Ziyuan on the progress of China's

lunar exploration and the one by Prof. WANG Yifang on electron-antineutrino disappearance at Daya Bay were frequently mentioned as excellent by the interviewed participants.



Dr. Mubasher Jamil, a cosmologist from Pakistan and Young Affiliate of TWAS, seeks future opportunity to work together with Chinese colleagues. (Photo: SONG Jianlan)

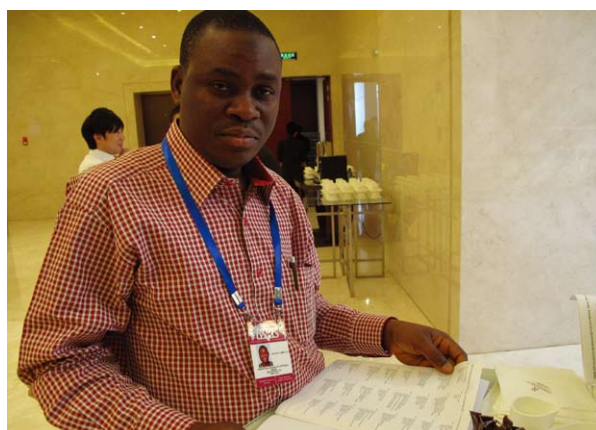
Some participants were impressed by the level of lectures given by Chinese counterparts of their own area. Dr. Unuabonah noted that some of the presentations given by Chinese scientists represented very good chemistry work from China, including the lecture on bio-inspired, smart, multi-scale interfacial materials given by Prof. JIANG Lei from the CAS Institute of Chemistry. “I was really impressed by that work. For us Young Affiliates, this is a challenge,” he commented.

Some participants showed strong interest in cooperating with Chinese scientists. Dr. Jamil thought the Tianjin Meeting very helpful for the cooperation between different countries and appreciated the opportunity provided by the meeting. “People of my field are working here in China at the Institute of High Energy Physics; I hope to meet them some time. In future I will visit that institute. I really like to meet people with that institute, the cosmology people.” He further expressed his wish to do some research as a visiting scholar at such institutes via some fellowship. Currently a visiting professor at a university in Kazakhstan, he was anticipating his next trip to China: “In the future I will go back to Pakistan and from there I will come for a longer time, for some months, via some fellowship and work with some Chinese colleagues. Though I have some other cooperation with different countries, like

Finland, US, and South Africa, I’ve never worked with Chinese people before; but I wish to work with them. It’s my first visit in China and I hope to continue the visit in future.”

He would like to apply for a fellowship next year to visit some CAS Institutes, like the CAS Institute of High Energy Physics and the Institute of Theoretical Physics (ITP). “Yes, I know some professors with ITP, like LI Miao, and CAI Ronggen, and also Prof. HAO Wei. For general interest, the conference is very useful for getting to know China, and meeting Chinese scientists of different fields like material science and condense matter. And I get familiar with Chinese culture, Chinese people too,” he smiled.

Dr. Ola is another participant who explicitly expressed



Dr. Ola did his postdoctoral research at the CAS Institute of Zoology in 2006 and now is visiting this institute again via the TWAS-CAS Fellowship for Visiting Scholars. (Photo: SONG Jianlan)

his wish to visit and cooperate with Chinese scientists. Actually he did his postdoctoral research at the CAS Institute of Zoology in 2006 and after the Tianjin Meeting he would start visiting this institute again via the TWAS-CAS Fellowship for Visiting Scholars. Dr. Unuabonah also showed great interest in the Dalian Institute of Chemical Physics, anxiously wishing to meet Prof. LI Can, a CAS Member and TWAS Fellow.

## Meeting for S&T Cooperation

**“It is very helpful. No doubt. One meets many interesting people, and makes interesting connections with these people, from the same or different continents.” — Prof. Caicedo, Colombia**

It seems that the participants welcomed this meeting as a great opportunity to meet colleagues from other developing countries and tie contacts for possible future cooperation.

When asked whether the conference was helpful for the cooperation between the developing countries, Dr. Ola responded positively with no doubt: “Yep, very helpful.





Prof. Xavier Caicedo from Colombia, a mathematician, thinks the Tianjin Meeting helpful for S&T cooperation between developing countries. (Photo: SONG Jianlan)

It's always helpful to bring top scientists together you know, from the developing world. And usually you have full discussions here. And probably you can make some personal contacts, from which maybe you can start some cooperation later." "And you can meet your colleagues from other countries doing similar things as you do, or from other areas," he added.

Dr. Unuabonah's response just echoed Ola's: "Oh yes, yes! It is very very helpful, because when I ask a question I will be able to talk to one or two persons about my research work. And then it seems to have been some good discussions about how we can cooperate. This is quite good. I think this is the main point of this conference to help people, to help scientists integrate and collaborate." "I think that is really useful for my own professional development too," Unuabonah went on to say: "In this special world you cannot do science alone, you have to collaborate with other people, you have to talk to them."

When the reporter met him, Dr. Unuabonah was on his way to the posters, where he found something that really struck him. "I will be looking at it. And I think I want an opportunity to work with the young ones. I believe that we have a future with the young ones," he concluded with a bright smile.

Dr. Ben Salah-Abbès was also very happy for the

opportunity to know new people: "I got to know many new people here. We talked and discussed our research. It's very important, especially for young scientists. Here they have some time to develop their research. They need the experience. We thank TWAS and CAS for giving us this opportunity to be here."

Her husband Dr. Samir Abbès, a biologist who was attending the same TWAS conference together with her, is also seeking opportunities to do cooperative work with scientists from China and other countries. He remarked: "I hope Chinese labs will do cooperation with Tunisia universities. I also seek the opportunity to cooperate with scientists in Madagascar, where there is a great lab in traditional medicines."



Dr. Samir Abbès giving a lecture on the ability of a clay mineral to remove toxin "ZEN" from contaminated food. (Photo: SONG Jianlan)

Prof. Mugenyi further confirmed the meeting's importance for S&T cooperation between countries as well as the development of TWAS itself: "I mean, this is how it survives. The future of TWAS, if it is all bound to attract the very best in science, and bring them together, and establish connections between scientists, then it is promoted. And as a result the developing countries will develop quicker, and catch up with the more advanced nations. This is the best way to accelerate scientific progress, so that we will catch up with advanced countries."

## Well-organized Conference

"I think it has established a standard. If other conferences can reach this standard, it would be excellent; but it will be hard for other conferences to reach this Chinese standard." — Prof. Mugenyi, Uganda

In consensus, all the interviewed participants praised the organization of the meeting with gratefulness, mentioning the warm reception at the registration, the

highly friendly and helpful volunteers and good English speakers available anytime anywhere throughout the venue.

Prof. Caicedo, who stayed at the Guest House Hotel



Dr. Samir Abbès and his wife, Dr. Jalila Ben Salah-Abbès, both Young Affiliates of TWAS, at the registration desk. They both think highly of the organization of the Tianjin Meeting. (Photo: SONG Jianlan)

in Tianjin, was very satisfied with the reception and services: “Wow, resplendent. I stay at the Guest House hotel, which is just behind this one\*, a hotel in the park. It’s very nice, very comfortable, and impressive. We are very well attended here.” When inquired whether he got any problem, he denied: “No, not at all. We got a lot of help from the volunteers, very nice!”

“Everything is working fine,” Dr. Unuabonah commented with great satisfaction: “Good from the scientific session, to dinner, lunch, breakfast... wonderful, excellent.”

Just as Prof. Mugenyi, Dr. Unuabonah also stayed at the Tianjin Guest House Hotel. “I told my friend yesterday: yes, it’s a five-star hotel, which is very beautiful. The reception is wonderful. The young ladies and young men (the volunteers) at the registration desk gave us a beautiful reception. Yeah, they are willing to help and always ready to help. I remember I came back at 2:00 am and I asked him for an adapter. He found a way to help me get one for my laptop. I found this very very nice.”

Impressed by the effective and neat organization of the meeting, Prof. Mugenyi appraised it as the best he had seen so far: “Yeah, it is very well-organized, with excellent hotel, very good hospitality, and helpful people wherever you go. It is very well organized. I think it has established a standard. If other conferences can reach this standard, it would be excellent; but it will be hard for other conferences to reach this Chinese standard. However I think we need to be inspired to reach this standard and be able to make it a normal standard for TWAS.”

Dr. Ola also thought highly of the reception and organization of the meeting, but he suggested some defects in the arrangement of talks.

“The ministerial session is helpful for the cooperation between developing countries and the strategy of TWAS. At least you share experience, you get to know if you’re moving in the right direction, and to know whether you’re lagging behind, when you have talks with all the countries, all the academies. But it might be better to have them in three days. We had too many talks on the first day. Because every speaker tended to extend their presentation, the whole thing was prolonged until 9:00 pm, leaving everybody very tired and hungry.” “But I think it’s a good meeting all in all,” he concluded.

Some participants showed interest in the host city of the Meeting, Tianjin, including Prof. Mugenyi. “I have not seen a lot so far, but from what I have seen, it is very good a city,” he commented after having some walks around the venue: “Walking around it is very good. It has very good walkways, very nice flowers, and is very clean. Maybe one needs to come here for a holiday,” he said, laughing.

Dr. Ola told the author that he liked the local people: “They are very friendly. Very friendly even if they don’t speak English. And they smile at me a lot when I’m in my native dress. They like it.” He felt at home in the city of Tianjin and enjoyed communicating with the local people with gestures.

Dr. Jamil, who was busy preparing for his lecture the next morning, told the reporter that he would like to visit the city a little bit if possible, but he could not. “I am leaving tomorrow night, but I will miss this place, and the people here,” he said with a smile glittering in eyes.



Dr. Jamil giving a lecture titled “Black Holes in an Accelerating Universe”. (Photo: SONG Jianlan)

\*By “this one” he meant the Renaissance Tianjin Lakeview Hotel, where the meeting was held.