



# Speech on the PIFI Scheme and Experiences of Living in China

John Speakman

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Your Royal Highness, President Bai, distinguished guests,

It is an honour for me to address you today to introduce the PIFI scheme and just say a little bit about my own experiences living and working in China.

## How I ended up in China

Maybe I should start by explaining how I ended up in China. Seven years ago, I was on an internal flight from the Tibetan plateau back to Beijing with a colleague from CAS that I had been working with for a long time. At that point I was visiting China about four times per year for 3-4 weeks each time.

He said to me, “You know, you don’t have to keep visiting China like this.” I thought at first that he was trying to hint that he didn’t want to work with me anymore. But then he went on, “instead, you could work here and visit the UK.” He then told me about something called the Thousand Talents Program.

This idea kind of obsessed me. I spoke to my Vice Chancellor in Aberdeen who was fantastically supportive, and so I applied.

A year later I was in a meeting at the University of Oxford for the scientific organising committee of the International Physiology Congress when I got a text message. I surreptitiously looked at it under the table and it simply said “approved”, and with that short text began an adventure for myself and my family that has continued to this day.

## The PIFI and British scientists

During the time I have worked in CAS, I have really benefitted in a large way from the President’s



International Fellowship Initiative. The main part of this scheme provides money for students and post docs to come and work with PIs in the Chinese Academy of Sciences. Some of you may not be aware, but in China there is a quota of PhD students for each PI, and the benefit of this scheme is that it allows you to grow your group beyond the quota.

So far, funded by this scheme, I have had two postdocs join my group (one from Austria and one from Poland) and two PhD students.

I have found, however, that it is struggle to persuade post docs and students from the UK to apply. And I guess that is why we are here today to promote the scheme. I think it is fantastic that the Duke of York has agreed to add his name to the scheme in the UK to give it a higher profile.

## Why no Brits?

This is a real shame because the fellowships provide a really fantastic opportunity – not only for

study, but also as a cultural eye-opening experience. And as opportunities elsewhere may be declining, following Brexit, the UK needs to look towards these other options.

It's maybe worthwhile just exploring a little why UK researchers have this hesitancy. In my experience there are two main reasons they are reluctant. One is personal, and the other is work related.

First, the personal issue is that they are worried about the pollution. Beijing has kind of become synonymous with really bad air pollution. As an adopted Beijinger I personally think that is a bit unfair. Yes, the pollution is bad on occasion. But it is also good on occasion as well. For example, the day before I came here the PM2.5 levels in Beijing were substantially lower than in London. Unfortunately, the BBC never tends to report that for some reason.

Plus another thing is that because people know it gets bad sometimes they take precautions. The air in my office, labs and apartment for example are all HEPA filtered. So actually whatever the pollution is outside, I am probably breathing cleaner air than most people in the UK.

The second, work-related reason is that they have an attitude that Chinese Science is second rate. It's true that there are some poor universities in China. And they have garnered a bad reputation for things like generating fake papers and paying for western authors to come onto their publications. We have all read about these things.

I want to emphasise that CAS is a completely different kettle of fish. It is a world class organisation. In fact, CAS publishes more papers in *Nature* and *Science* than any other scientific organisation. The CAS labs are really well funded, and the quality of work they do rivals that anywhere in the world.

So I would encourage you, to encourage your best and most adventurous students to give it a try.

### **China dynamic life**

China is a dynamic and exciting place to live and work. It is a fantastic mix of ancient and modern. Everything is constantly changing. The rate of progress is dizzying. Western news outlets often talk about the slowing Chinese economy. But it is still growing at 6.8%! What does that mean when a massive economy is growing so fast? What it means is that the 'slowing'



Chinese economy still expands by the size of the Greek economy every 13 weeks.

To be honest, this is actually not all good news. One downside of this breakneck pace of change we have found is that there is a constant turnover of restaurants. In Aberdeen we have had a favourite restaurant for over 30 years. In Beijing you just can't do that. You dare not have a single favourite restaurant – because it is unlikely to still be there in two years' time.

In fact a restaurant near my apartment has put up a sign now to emphasise its longevity. It proudly says "established 2015".

But it's a small price to pay for an amazing experience that I wouldn't swap for anything. So in closing I will reiterate, please encourage your students and postdocs to take part. And don't forget the scheme also has openings for senior scientists as well.

Thank you.

### **About Prof. John Speakman**

Prof. John Speakman came to work at the CAS Institute of Genetics and Developmental Biology in 2011 as a Thousand Talents Professor. His main area of interest is energy balance, which involves many issues such as obesity, ageing and ecophysiological adaptations of wild animals. He has published over 470 peer reviewed papers including 11 times in *Nature* and *Science*. In 2016, he received the CAS Award for International Scientific Cooperation. He is a fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, UK Academy of Medical Sciences, and the European Academy of Sciences (Academia Europaea).