

Special Feature

The US Chinese Anti-Cancer Association and the National Foundation for Cancer Research recognize five young Chinese investigators with the 2014 USCACA-NFCR Scholar Awards

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To facilitate and strengthen collaborations among cancer researchers and physicians in the United States and China, the US Chinese Anti-Cancer Association (USCACA) and the National Foundation for Cancer Research (NFCR) have established the Scholar Excellence Award for the USCACA-NFCR Scholar Exchange and Fellowship Program in Basic, Translational, and Clinical Studies. From 2010 to 2013, 14 young Chinese researchers and physicians have been recognized by the award for their outstanding achievements in cancer research accomplished both during their training in the United States and after their returning to China^[1-3]. This year, 5 young scientists were selected on the basis of their significant contributions in translational cancer research. Here, we are proud to present these outstanding winners of the 2014 USCACA-NFCR Scholar Award:

- Dr. Yan Cheng, School of Pharmaceutical Sciences, Central South University, Changsha;
- Dr. Guoyan Liu, Department of Gynecology and Obstetrics, Tianjin Medical University General Hospital, Tianjin;
- Dr. Fengju Song, Department of Epidemiology, Tianjin Medical University Cancer Institute and Hospital, Tianjin;
- Dr. Yanxia Shi, Sun Yat-sen University Cancer Center, Guangzhou;
- Dr. Suling Liu, School of Life Sciences, University of Science and Technology of China, Hefei.

The USCACA and NFCR presented the award to these 5 awardees during the 17th Annual Meeting of the Chinese Society of Clinical Oncology (CSCO) held in Xiamen, September 17–21, 2014.



The ceremony of the 5th USCACA-NFCR Scholar Excellent Award was held at Sheraton Xiamen on September 19, 2014. Awards were presented by USCACA executive committee members: Drs. Shi-Yuan Cheng, Wei Zhang, and Li Yan. From left, Lawrence Cooper, Wei Zhang, Suling Liu, Yanxia Shi, Yan Cheng, Guoyan Liu, Fengju Song, Li Yan, Shi-Yuan Cheng, and Chao-Nan Qian

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The 5 winners were invited to contribute a brief summary introducing their academic background, highlighting their achievements in cancer research, and outlining their current research plans in China. All awardees have received excellent postdoctoral training under their US mentors who are active cancer researchers and USCACA members. The discoveries and findings from these talented young scientists have not only significantly improved our understanding of the mechanisms underlying the causes or progression of human cancers but also shed light on novel approaches to improve treatment and care for cancer patients. Our ultimate goal is to conquer cancer by encouraging the translation of experimental findings into novel cancer therapies, fostering collaborations in clinical cancer drug development, and sharing expert knowledge and medical practices between China and the United States.

Dr. Yan Cheng, School of Pharmaceutical Sciences, Central South University, Changsha



Dr. Yan Cheng is currently a Professor of Pharmacology at Central South University School of Pharmaceutical Sciences. Dr. Cheng received her PhD degree in pharmacology from Shenyang Pharmaceutical University in June 2009. From 2009 to 2013, she underwent her postdoctoral training with Dr. Jinming Yang at College of Medicine/Cancer Institute, Pennsylvania State University. In 2013, she was appointed as a Research Assistant Professor at College of Medicine/Cancer Institute, Pennsylvania State University.

Dr. Cheng has been actively investigating the molecular mechanisms governing cancer cell autophagy and apoptosis. Her accomplishments are well recognized in the field since her findings provided new strategies and rationales for improving effectiveness of cancer therapy. Dr. Cheng identified eukaryotic elongation factor-2 kinase (eEF-2K) as a novel autophagic regulator and investigated the molecular mechanisms underlying the modulation of autophagy by eEF-2K in response to anticancer drug treatments. These results underscore the importance of eEF-2K in cancer and the potential of this kinase as a novel target for prevention and treatment of cancer. Dr. Cheng demonstrated for the first time the role of Sirt3 in protecting mitochondrial DNA from oxidative damage and provided the evidence that targeting Sirt3 may enhance the sensitivity of tumor cells to radiation. Dr. Cheng also demonstrated that Akt inhibitors synergized with gefitinib in inhibiting tumor growth and proliferation by promoting a switch from autophagy to apoptosis, suggesting that combined administration of these drugs should be considered a new therapeutic tactic. This finding warrants further clinical investigations for treating patients with malignant tumors. Since 2008, Dr. Cheng has published over 40 papers. She is the first or corresponding author in 16 of these publications. In addition, she has co-authored 3 monographs. Because of her outstanding achievements, Dr. Cheng received a prestigious 2010 AACR-Merck Scholar-in-Training Award from the American Association for Cancer Research (AACR) and a competitive Postdoctoral Fellowship Award from the 2011 US Department of Defense (DOD) Breast Cancer Research Program.

After returning to China, Dr. Cheng has been continuing her efforts in cancer biology and pharmacology, elucidating the signaling pathways involved in the regulation of aerobic glycolysis, autophagy, and estrogen receptor in cancer cells. These studies will not only provide new rationales for developing more effective and better therapies for cancer but also identify novel therapeutic targets for anticancer drug development. Based on her meritorious achievements in cancer research both during training in the United States and after returning to China, Dr. Cheng was selected by National Natural Science Foundation of China as an awardee of Excellent Young Scholar Program, General Program and Young Scientist Program.

Selected Publications:

1. Cheng Y, Ren XC, Hait WN, et al. Therapeutic targeting of autophagy in disease: biology and pharmacology. *Pharmacol Rev*, 2013, 65:1162–1197.
2. Cheng Y, Ren XC, Zhang Y, et al. Integrated regulation of autophagy and apoptosis by eEF2K controls cellular fate and modulates the efficacy of curcumin and velcade against tumor cells. *Autophagy*, 2013,9:208–219. (corresponding author)
3. Cheng Y, Ren XC, Zhang Y, et al. Elongation factor-2 kinase dictates cross-talk between Akt inhibition-induced autophagy and apoptosis and modulates cytotoxicity of MK2206, a novel inhibitor of Akt. *Cancer Res*, 2011,71: 2654–2663.
4. Cheng Y, Ren XC, Gowda P, et al. Interaction of sirt3 with OGG1 contributes to repair of mitochondrial DNA and protects from apoptotic cell death under oxidative stress. *Cell Death Dis*, 2013,4:e731. (corresponding author)
5. Cheng Y, Zhang Y, Zhang L, et al. MK-2206, a novel allosteric inhibitor of Akt, synergizes with gefitinib against malignant glioma via modulating both autophagy and apoptosis. *Mol Cancer Ther*, 2012,11:154–164. (corresponding author)

Dr. Guoyan Liu, Department of Gynecology and Obstetrics, Tianjin Medical University General Hospital, Tianjin



Dr. Guoyan Liu is currently a Chief Physician of the Department of Gynecology and Obstetrics, Tianjin Medical University General Hospital. Dr. Liu received her PhD degree in gynecology and obstetrics from Tianjin Medical University in 2004. In 2011, she joined Dr. Wei Zhang's laboratory as a visiting scientist at the Department of Pathology, University of Texas University MD Anderson Cancer Center.

Dr. Liu's research area is primarily basic and clinical research focusing on ovarian cancer, especially drug resistance of the cancer. During the past 10 years, she has published several papers on chemotherapy resistance of ovarian cancer in several Chinese journals. In 2011, she obtained a research grant from National Natural Science Foundation of China (NSFC) on polyploidy and drug resistance. Under the direction of Dr. Zhang at the MD Anderson Cancer Center, Dr. Liu published a review paper on differing effects of *BRCA1* and *BRCA2* mutations on cisplatin response and survival in patients with ovarian cancer in *Pharmacogenomics*. She also contributed an editorial on *BRCA1/2* testing in China in the *Chinese Journal of Cancer*. During her training in Dr. Zhang's Laboratory, she studied the important role of a microRNA, *miR-506*, on ovarian cancer biological behavior and potential therapeutic interventions. She also provided important clinical insight to the

Cancer Genome Atlas (TCGA) Project on endometrial cancer and co-authored a TCGA paper on endometrial cancer published in *Nature* in 2013.

After Dr. Liu returned to China in 2013, she continued to collaborate with Dr. Zhang and demonstrated that *miR-506* could target CDK4/6, blocking FoxM1 that is frequently elevated in ovarian cancer and induce cellular senescence. This discovery was recently published in the *Journal of Pathology*. The image of her working model proposed in this paper was selected by the journal as the cover on the issue of June 2014. She also collaborated with colleagues in Dr. Zhang's group and investigated *miR-506*'s role in chemotherapy response. They found that *miR-506* regulates Rad51 and homologous recombination (HR)-mediated DNA repair, thereby contributing to the response to cisplatin and PARP inhibitors. In China, Dr. Liu plans to further investigate the comprehensive regulating network of *miR-506*. Additionally, she has successfully obtained research grants from NSFC and Tianjin Science and Technology Committee Foundation (TSTC).

Selected Publications:

1. Liu G, Sun Y, Ji P, et al. MiR-506 suppresses proliferation and induces senescence by directly targeting the CDK4/6–FOXM1 axis in ovarian cancer. *J Pathol*, 2014,233:308–318.
2. Liu G, Yuan B, Wang Y, et al. Clinicopathological study of vulvar Paget's disease in China. *J Low Genit Tract Dis*, 2014,18:281–284.
3. Liu G, Wang Y, Zhang X, et al. Endometrial carcinoma in a 15-year-old obese patient with persistent uterine bleeding. *Gynecol Endocrinol*, 2014,30:277–279.
4. Cancer Genome Atlas Research Network, Kandoth C, Schultz N, et al. Integrated genomic characterization of endometrial carcinoma. *Nature*, 2013,497:67–73.
5. Liu G, Yuan B, Wang Y. Exaggerated placental site leading to postpartum hemorrhage. *J Repro Med*, 2013,58:448–450.
6. Liu G, Yang D, Sun Y, et al. Differing clinical impact of BRCA1 and BRCA2 mutations in serous ovarian cancer. *Pharmacogenomics*, 2012,13:1523–1535.
7. Liu G, Zhang W. Will Chinese ovarian cancer patients benefit from knowing the BRCA2 mutation status? *Chin J Cancer*, 2012,31:1–4.

Dr. Fengju Song, Tianjin Medical University Cancer Institute and Hospital, Tianjin



Dr. Fengju Song is currently an Associate Professor at the Department of Epidemiology, Tianjin Medical University Cancer Institute and Hospital in Tianjin. Dr. Song received his Ph.D. degree in epidemiology from Tianjin Medical University in 2010. Subsequently, Dr. Song joined Dr. Jiali Han's group for cancer research as a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard University School of Medicine.

Dr. Song's research focuses on studying the epidemiology and etiology of cancer. Dr. Song was the first to provide convincing epidemiologic evidence of the association between higher caffeine intake and lower risk of basal cell carcinoma (BCC) in two prospective cohort studies, which was published in *Cancer Research*. Most importantly, his work has drawn enormous media attention and has been overwhelmingly reported in worldwide media. His findings may affect people's daily life and provide a novel lifestyle modification for skin cancer prevention because 20% of the American whites have BCC in their lifetime.

Another Dr. Song's significant publication is the study on secondary cancers among skin cancer survivors that was published in *PLoS Medicine*. He demonstrated that women with personal history of non-melanoma skin cancer (NMSC) were most likely to develop secondary cancers, including breast and lung cancers. These findings support the need for continued investigation of the apparent relationship between NMSC and subsequent secondary cancers. His data not only pinpoint to potential molecular mechanisms but also have substantial impact on clinical practice.

At present, Dr. Song leads a cancer research group working at Tianjin Medical University. He plans to build on his extensive expertise to establish a breast cancer cohort in Tianjin. The cohort will be an outstanding platform to facilitate the fully use of clinical resources in scientific researches. His future research will enable better evaluation of the factors associated with breast cancer progression and prognosis.

Selected Publications:

1. Song F, Qureshi AA, Giovannucci EL, et al. Risk of a second primary cancer after non-melanoma skin cancer in white men and women: a prospective cohort study. *PLoS Med*, 2013,10:e1001433.
2. Song F, Qureshi AA, Han J. Increased caffeine intake is associated with reduced risk of basal cell carcinoma of the skin. *Cancer Res*, 2012,72:3282–3289.
3. Song F, Yang D, Liu B, et al. Integrated microRNA network analyses identify a poor-prognosis subtype of gastric cancer characterized by the miR-200 family. *Clin Cancer Res*, 2014,20:878–889.
4. Song F, Zheng H, Liu B, et al. An miR-502-binding site single-nucleotide polymorphism in the 3'-untranslated region of the SET8 gene is associated with early age of breast cancer onset. *Clin Cancer Res*, 2009,15:6292–6300.
5. Song F, Qureshi AA, Gao X, et al. Smoking and risk of skin cancer: a prospective analysis and a meta-analysis. *Int J Epidemiol*, 2012,41:1694–1705.

Dr. Yanxia Shi, Sun Yat-sen University Cancer Center, Guangzhou



Dr. Yanxia Shi is currently an Associate Professor of Sun Yat-sen University Cancer Center. She obtained her PhD in oncology in 2004 from Sun Yat-sen University. From 1992 to 2010, Dr. Shi worked at Sun Yat-sen University Cancer Center as a medical oncologist treating cancer patients and conducted cancer research that was supported by the NSFC. From 2011 to 2014, Dr. Shi underwent her postdoctoral training with Dr. Lynda Chin, an outstanding investigator in cancer research, first at the Dana Farber Cancer Institute, Harvard Medical School, then Dr. Shi followed Dr. Chin and moved to the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center and continued her postdoctoral training with Dr. Chin.

Dr. Shi was involved in projects examining the role of tumor suppressor genes in human cancer. Her major research project entailed the construction and characterization of various *PREX2* mutations associated with human cancer and their consequences for tumorigenesis and development in transgenic mouse model. She was also involved in examining the significant role of *PREX2* in the *PTEN/Suv420h1* pathway in multiple types of human cancers. She and her colleagues demonstrated that *PTEN* antagonizes the interaction between *PREX2* and *Suv420h1*, a histone H4K20 methyltransferase. In settings of *PTEN* loss, or oncogenic truncating mutations of *PREX2* that abolish its binding to *PTEN*, *PREX2* complexes with and sequesters *Suv420h1* in the cytoplasm, resulting in reduced H4K20Me3 at the imprint control region on chromosome 11 and consequent down-regulation of known tumor suppressor *CDKN1C* (*p57KIP2*). Analysis of TCGA multi-dimensional genomic data in a large cohort of melanoma patient samples corroborated that *PTEN* deletion is associated with lower levels of DNA methylation at the differentially methylated region (DMR) and reduced *CDKN1C* expression. Her research achievements have been published in several high-impact biomedical journals, including one manuscript that is under revision in *Nature Cell Biology*.

Upon returning to Sun Yat-sen University Cancer Center, Dr. Shi continues to explore the molecular mechanisms underlying breast cancer tumorigenesis and drug resistance, with a special focus on *PTEN* signaling. She collaborates with Dr. Lynda Chin's team and Dr. Menghong Lee's team at the MD Anderson Cancer Center and explores the mechanism of obesity/type II diabetes mellitus (DM2) affecting the tumor biological processes and the prevention strategy in obese/DM2 breast cancer. She also conducts several clinical trials including the combination of metformin and endocrine therapy in breast cancer.

Selected Publications:

1. Xia Q, Cai Y, Peng R, et al. The CDK1 inhibitor R03306 improves the response of BRCA-proficient breast cancer cells to PARP inhibition. *Int J Oncol*, 2014,44:735–744. (corresponding author)
2. Cai Y, Xia Q, Su QG, et al. mTOR inhibitor RAD001 (everolimus) induces apoptotic, not autophagic, cell death in human nasopharyngeal carcinoma cells. *Int J Mol Med*, 2013,31:904–912. (corresponding author)
3. Shi YX, Tan YT, Yuan ZY, et al. Comparison of overall survival between the early use and delayed use of Trastuzumab therapy groups: a retrospective analysis of 128 patients with HER-2-positive advanced breast cancer. *Med Oncol*, 2012,29:39–47.
4. Jin Y, An X, Cai YC, et al. Zoledronic acid combined with chemotherapy bring survival benefits to patients with bone metastases from nasopharyngeal carcinoma. *J Cancer Res Clin Oncol*, 2011,137:1545–1551. (corresponding author)
5. Jin Y, Cai XY, Cai YC, et al. To build a prognostic score model containing indispensable tumour markers for metastatic nasopharyngeal carcinoma in an epidemic area. *Eur J Cancer*, 2012,48:882–888. (corresponding author)
6. Jin Y, Cai YC, Cao Y, et al. Radiofrequency ablation combined with systemic chemotherapy in nasopharyngeal carcinoma liver metastases improves response to treatment and survival outcomes. *J Surg Oncol*, 2012,106:322–326. (corresponding author)
7. Shi YX, Xia Q, Peng RJ, et al. Comparison of clinicopathological characteristics and prognoses between bilateral and unilateral breast cancer. *J Cancer Res Clin Oncol*, 2012,138:705–714.

Dr. Suling Liu, School of Life Sciences, University of Science and Technology of China, Hefei



Dr. Suling Liu is currently a Professor at the School of Life Sciences, University of Science and Technology of China. Dr. Liu received her PhD degree from Ohio State University in 2003. She then joined Dr. Max S Wicha's laboratory in University of Michigan for her postdoctoral training. During her training, Dr. Liu received a postdoctoral scholarship from US Susan G Komen Breast Cancer Foundation in 2005–2008, an AACR-Merck Scholar-in-Training award in 2006, an AACR Susan G Komen Scholar-in-Training award in 2010. In 2010, Dr. Liu was promoted to be a Research Assistant Professor at University of Michigan. As an independent principal investigator, she received several research grants from US Department of Defense (DOD), US Susan G Komen Breast Cancer Foundation, and AstraZeneca. In 2012, Dr. Liu was selected into the Chinese Thousand Youth Talents Plan and returned to China. In 2013, she received an Outstanding Young Investigator Award from the NSFC.

After obtaining her PhD degree from Ohio State University in 2003, Dr. Liu became interested in breast carcinogenesis and focused on cancer therapy in exploring novel treatments for cancers through targeting cancer stem cells, a subpopulation of cancer cells that are believed responsible for therapy resistance of human cancer. In the past decade, Dr. Liu studied the role of the Hedgehog pathway, the Notch pathway, *Bmi-1*, *BRCA1*, tumor microenvironment, and microRNAs in the regulation of human mammary stem cell self-renewal and differentiation by developing both the *in vitro* and *in vivo* model systems for breast stem cell research. Her outstanding researches have been published in top biomedical journals including *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *Cell Stem Cell*, *Journal of Clinical Investigation*, *PLoS Genetics*, *Stem Cell Reports*, *Cancer Research*, and other peer-reviewed high-impact journals, including a total of 41 research articles. In 14 of these publications, Dr. Liu was the first or corresponding author. Her publications have been cited over 2,500 times. Additionally, Dr. Liu has been serving as the scientific editors and reviewers for several SCI-indexed peer-reviewed journals.

After returning to China, Dr. Liu quickly established her research laboratory and assembled an experienced research team. The research focus of her new research team is still on the purification and regulation of breast cancer stem cells, with a new emphasis on translational studies. Dr. Liu's recent research on different states of breast cancer stem cells was published in *Stem Cell Reports* in 2014. One more manuscript of microRNA and breast cancer stem cells is in revision. In China, Dr. Liu's researches have been supported by several grants from the Organization Department of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, Chinese Academy of Sciences, NSFC, and the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST) of China.

Selected Publications:

1. Liu S, Cong Y, Wang D, et al. Breast cancer stem cells transition between epithelial and mesenchymal states reflective of their normal counterparts. *Stem Cell Reports*, 2014,2:78–91. (corresponding author)
2. Liu S, Patel SH, Ginestier C, et al. MicroRNA93 regulates proliferation and differentiation of normal and malignant breast stem cells. *PLoS Genet*, 2012,8:e1002751. (corresponding author).
3. Liu S, Ginestier C, Ou SJ, et al. Breast cancer stem cells are regulated by mesenchymal stem cells through cytokine networks. *Cancer Res*, 2011,71:614–624. (corresponding author).
4. Liu S, Wicha MS. Targeting breast cancer stem cells. *J Clin Oncol*, 2010,28:4006–4012.
5. Ginestier C, Liu S, Diebel ME, et al. CXCR1 blockade selectively targets human breast cancer stem cells *in vitro* and in xenografts. *J Clin Invest*, 2010,120:485–497.

About US Chinese Anti-Cancer Association

USCACA is a non-profit professional organization founded in 2009 (<http://www.uscaca.org>). With members from academia, industry, and government, USCACA facilitates collaborations among cancer researchers and physicians in the United States and China. Our current focus is on expediting novel cancer drug development by fostering clinical trial networks, sharing expert medical practices and knowledge of clinical trials, and providing education and training opportunities. USCACA collaborates with Chinese Anti-Cancer Association (CACA), Chinese Society for Clinical Oncology (CSCO), Chinese Medical Association (CMA), and Chinese Society for Oncology (CSO), as well as other professional associations. Our mandate is to improve cancer treatment through research, education, and collaboration.

About the National Foundation for Cancer Research (NFCR)

The NFCR, established in 1973 and located in Washington, D.C. in the United States, supports basic and translational research that is leading to cures for cancer. Research supported by NFCR encompasses all types of cancer. The NFCR promotes and facilitates worldwide collaboration among scientists to accelerate the pace of translation of laboratory discoveries into patient-benefiting clinical applications. NFCR's support of discovery-oriented cancer research in the laboratory is opening the way to better prevention strategies, earlier diagnostic techniques, and new anticancer drugs and therapies. The NFCR has provided over \$309 million for cancer research and cancer prevention education in the United States, Europe, and Asia. The NFCR is dedicated to bridging the scientific and educational gaps in cancer research, treatments, and prevention between the United States and other countries.

The Common Goal of USCACA and NFCR

The common goal of USCACA and NFCR is to improve our understanding of cancer and to provide more efficacious and safe treatment options to cancer patients through expediting novel cancer drug development that stimulates the translation of laboratory discoveries into novel cancer treatments. We aim to foster collaborations in clinical cancer drug development and share both knowledge and expert medical practices between China and the United States. The USCACA-NFCR Scholar Exchange and Fellowship Program provides a unique opportunity for young

Chinese scholars who have an interest in advancing their basic, translational, and clinical knowledge and skills. It also allows these scholars to establish long-term collaborations with leading scientists in the United States who can support their continued work and future success in China.

Acknowledgments

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Reference

- [1] Cheng SY, Yan L, Zhang W. Outstanding young Chinese scholars making an impact in the US and China: a joint award program of the US Chinese Anti-Cancer Association and the US National Foundation for Cancer Research. *Chin J Cancer*, 2011,30:357–362.
- [2] Cheng SY, Yan L, Zhang W. Five outstanding young Chinese scholars received the Third Scholar Award from the Asian Fund for Cancer Research (AFCR) and the US Chinese Anti-Cancer Association (USCACA). *Chin J Cancer*, 2012,31:357–362.
- [3] Hou L, Yan L, Zhang W, et al. Four outstanding young Chinese scientists received the 2013 Scholar Award from the US Chinese Anti-Cancer Association and the National Foundation for Cancer Research. *Chin J Cancer*, 2013,32:631–635.

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