Interview with Piu Chan, MD PhD – Founder and President of Wincon China

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Every “sea turtle” has a different story. What’s yours, and how did you come to found Wincon?

I am a “sea turtle” just like other Chinese returnees. I’m a medical doctor and academic scientist leading some of the top projects in the neurodegenerative diseases field – but I also founded a company, which is pretty unusual in China where you can find people on either side, but rarely both. I was trained in China, had practiced neurology, and then went to the States for a two-year post doc. After that I secured a position at the Parkinson’s Institute in the Bay Area, and conducted clinical and translational research for almost a decade in the US. There are a few reasons why I came back to China, but the most important of them is that I feel there are many limitations to conducting translational research in the US. This relatively new field may hold the key to helping the pharmaceutical industry conduct more efficient clinical trials, which have generally become more complex in recent years.

However, translational studies can be expensive, which usually makes it difficult for US-based researchers to compete for NIH grants. In addition, clinical resources

are more difficult to coordinate and integrate. China, on the other hand, offers several advantages for conducting translational research: chief among these are the Chinese culture, large population and management infrastructure. For example, it is often easier to integrate and utilize clinical resources because most of the hospitals, universities and staffs are already supported by the government. Nobody has to think about how much salary they will request in their grants or how much to budget for the use of facilities and equipment. I returned to China in 2000 with two of my colleagues: a neurosurgeon specializing in Parkinson's disease, and a stem cell researcher, at a time when far fewer people were coming back. Our main goal was to pursue translational research, with a dream of really developing something new for our patients. We were welcomed by the government, with generous funding support and we were hired by the best neuroscience hospital in China, with access to many resources. But we soon realized that to really study promising new approaches for neurodegenerative disorders such as stem cells for treating Parkinson's and diabetes, we needed access to nonhuman primates.

Unfortunately, sufficient animal resources simply weren't available in Beijing. As a consequence, I surveyed multiple cities with non-human primate resources and related facilities throughout China. Ultimately I chose Guangxi because it's the largest export hub for primates to the West and offers a suffuciently large amount of high quality breeding animals of variable ages. Interestingly, China provides more than 50% of the global supply, of non-human primates and Guangxi accounts for about 60% of that figure. We rented a small building within a breeding farm but I soon realized that this lab was different from others I had built before; I couldn't just lock the door and come back to Beijing! This was 2003 and Wincon was born, when it became necessary to establish a company to hire technicians and talented scientists to take care of our animals and facilities.

What happened from that point forward?

I am proud to say that in 2006 Wincon became the first company in China to receive the coveted AAALAC accreditation for facilities housing non-human primates. This was an important milestone as it allowed our company to more easily collaborate on investigating stem cells, neuronal growth factors and new drugs with scientists from the Parkinson Institute, Stanford, Wisconsin, and UCSF in the US , This early work was funded by the Kinetics Foundation established by Andy Grove, the former Chairman of Intel. While continuing to receive grants from the Chinese Ministry of Science and Technology, we also expanded our research to develop more disease models and support academic projects at additional domestic institutions. At around this time, the potential benefits of non-human primate translational research in new drug development was being recognized and we were encouraged to make Wincon's resources available for the biotech and pharmaceutical industry. Further Wincon attracted interest from investors at this point, resulting in the modernized facilities that were completed by 2009. In 2010, we hired our first Business Development manager, resulting in increased awareness of Wincon as a CRO with unique capabilities.

And what exactly is the value proposition for Big Pharma, who can choose to go anywhere and partner with anyone?

As you know, over the past decade the Pharmaceutical Industry has been grappling with a tremendous challenge: the increasing rarity of new blockbusters while older drugs lose exclusivity as patents expire. The number of successful NDAs is very low and the heavy investment cost of failure after failure has driven the industry to look for new approaches and new business models. While most Big Pharma tried looking for new drugs through acquisitions this also has met with little overall success. As a result, large pharmaceutical companies have been pushed into cutting internal R&D costs, while increasing outsourcing services in part to reduce their overall financial burden. However, the fundamental issue remains: How to develop innovative and successful new drugs. We may need to change our conception on how to develop new drugs or therapies when we are moving into an era focusing more

on personalized medicine – improving the quality of life of individual patients based on treatments optimized for them. That's why we are now more dependent on having a better understanding of clinical characterization and biomarkers of diseases.

Wincon operates a unique translational platform exclusively focused on non-human primate disease models and services: these are aimed primarily at mimicking the clinical setting where disease mechanisms and impact on well being can be studied using assessments and biomarkers that can be easily translated back and forth between human and non-human primates. This is realized at Wincon through the participation of clinical experts who usually work seamlessly with patients, disease models and animal resources. Also key is close collaboration with hospitals and academic scientists, and continued support from the Chinese government. This enables a powerful model for true collaboration among government, industry, scholars, academic scientists, and business.

At Wincon, scientists on one side are supported by governmental grants to study mechanism and characterization of diseases. On another side, we also work with industry to better define disease models, biomarkers and assessments that will help companies to make the earliest informed decisions for new drug development. This is one key area that is lacking in scale for most big pharmaceutical companies.

Historically, Chinese CROs started in the chemical synthesis business but are slowly starting to move more into biology and toxicology like other Western CROs. However, Wincon is different and unique since our work is focused more on the later phases of new drug development, leading to improved clinical trials design, a key factor and a large source of risk for all large pharmaceutical companies.

What makes Wincon unique?

I like to call Wincon a "pre-clinical hospital." If you want to run a good hospital, you need good doctors with a good academic reputation, patients, and technologies that come together in a collaborative environment. The majority of Wincon's

scientists have medical training and a clinical background, and our disease models are unique, which means we have “patients” that are not generally available elsewhere It’s also important to realize that when we talk about “translation”, it’s not just about translating from mice to monkeys and then to humans – keys aspects of diseases have to be translated from humans into monkeys and then back. And that’s what Wincon does; we’re all experts, clinically, on the diseases, whether they’re our human or non-human primate patients.

You’re clearly strong on the science side. What about the money side? How have you made that shift to a more commercial approach?

In 2009, six years after its academic oriented research, Wincon expanded into the CRO business, which not only enables us to provide services to industry but also further empowers our capability to build the best translational platform. Wincon is unique because we work with pharmaceutical companies, who recognize our value and are willing to develop long-term business collaboration in order to retain our capability and expertise and resources. The idea to build Wincon is similar to building the Mayo Clinic, one of the best clinical services in the world. Patients want to avail of the best expertise and services to cure his/her disease no matter where it is and how much it costs. If Wincon can provide the critical and best services for assuring the successful development of new drugs, companies want to work with you in every niche. If you’re not the best, companies don’t come to you.

We certainly understand that currently Wincon provides only a critical part of the services that industry would need. We consistently think about our business model. In fact, the pharmaceutical industry is consistently looking for world-class integrated services. But it is very difficult to pull together different services while still retaining world-class quality of each service. Wincon would like to grow its business within its core competency. But Wincon is also forming alliances with CROs that have complimentary capabilities. Wincon is a solution provider – but we can be even more successful by forming the right alliances!

As a Chinese entrepreneur, give us a picture of where Wincon will be in five years. What do you want to achieve and how are you going to get there? Wincon will leverage its culture of innovation and unique resources to become a critical player in helping the pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries to develop novel drugs for diseases where there is significant unmet medical need.

Wincon will become the “Mayo Clinic” of pre-clinical translational research with rich expertise, unique disease models and world class facilities. We will work for and team up with most of the major pharmaceutical companies in the world. Wincon will be an important player in China for its initiatives in promoting innovative alliances combining government, scholars, academic scientists, industry and business together. Our patients are waiting for desperately needed new medicines and we will utilize every aspect of our expertise to help develop these new treatments.

As a final message to our readers, what do they need to know about Wincon?

Wincon is a very unique CRO company exclusively focused on non-human primate disease models. We offer a whole spectrum of translational services including biomarkers, behavioural assessments and imaging, which will help reduce the risk of developing your drugs by providing more reliable answer on that all-important question: “How will my drug perform in a clinical setting?”

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