CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

TATSUYA HIRANO

The Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences

Transcript of an Interview
Conducted by

Andrea R. Maestrejuan

at

Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory
Cold Spring Harbor, New York

on

11, 12 and 13 December 2002

From the Original Collection of the University of California, Los Angeles

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

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Interviewee agrees to participate in a series of University-conducted tape-recorded interviews, commencing on or about December 11, 2002, and tentatively entitled "Interview with Tatsuya Hirano." This Agreement relates to any and all materials originating from the interviews, namely the tape recordings of the interviews and a written manuscript prepared from the tapes, hereinafter collectively called "the Work."

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University and Interviewee have executed this Agreement on the date first written above.

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TATSUYA HIRANO

1960 Born in Chiba, Japan

Education

1984 B.S., Biology, Kyoto University
1989 Ph.D., Molecular Biology, Kyoto University

Professional Experience

Kyoto University, Faculty of Science, Japan
1989 Postdoctoral Fellow, Department of Biophysics

University of California, San Francisco
1989-1993 Postdoctoral Fellow, Department of Pharmacology
1993-1995 Postgraduate Research Pharmacologist, Department of Cellular and Molecular Pharmacology

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1996-1998 Assistant Investigator
1998-1999 Associate Investigator
1999-2003 Associate Professor
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1989 Fellowships of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science for Japanese Junior Scientists
1989-1991 The Anna Fuller Fund Postdoctoral Fellowship
1992-1995 Leukemia Society of America Special Fellowship
1996-2000 Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences Grant
1996-present Recipient, NIH R01 Grant (GM53 926)
1998-2001 Recipient, Human Frontiers Science Program Research Grant
2001-present Recipient, NIH R01 Grant (GM63545)
2005-present Fellow, American Association for the Advancement of Science

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ABSTRACT

Tatsuya Hirano was born and raised in Chiba, Japan—a fishing village and an agricultural suburb of Tokyo—the youngest of three siblings. Hirano's father was a civil servant who educated local farmers about methods in agricultural production, obtaining his doctoral degree later in life and, after retiring from civil service, becoming faculty at the University of Tokyo; his mother was a housewife. Hirano's childhood, according to him, was rather typical; he had an early interest in the arts (he liked drawing and carpentry). He excelled in school and decided to pursue a college education in science.

He entered Kyoto University intending to study physics, but interest in contemporary advances in molecular biology pulled him much more in that direction. He was unaffected by his professors during college, as, according to Hirano, undergraduate education in Japan was much more self-directed than instructor-led. In this spirit, graduate students, unlike in the United States, usually stayed at the same university for their graduate degree as their undergraduate and only applied to a specific lab in which to work for graduate study (unlike the rotation system in the United States); Hirano remained at Kyoto University and worked in Mitsuhiro Yanagida's laboratory on the genetics of chromosome structure in fission yeast. Since there were no postdoctoral positions available in Japan, and even fewer faculty positions, Hirano decided, like many of his fellow graduate students, to undertake a postdoctoral fellowship abroad. Wanting to broaden his experience in his field, Hirano decided that he wanted to work in the United States and chose to study with Timothy J. Mitchison—someone Hirano considered one of the brightest cell biologists of his age—at the University of California, San Francisco. Hirano worked on chromosome condensation and the condensin complex in Mitchison's lab, all the while adjusting to American life and culture. From there, he accepted a position at the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory in New York, where he continued his research on condensin and cohesion.

During the interview, Hirano talks about his wife's role in his lab (she worked as a technician in several Japanese and American labs before joining his own), and balancing his career with his family life. In addition, he regularly compares the American and Japanese scientific systems, talking about the "brain-drain" issue and its impact on Japanese science. As the interview concludes, Hirano discusses the impact of cultural diversity on science; his mentoring style and its relationship to the mentoring he received; the privatization of science; and the role of the scientist in public policy. At the end of the interview, he speaks more about how he met his wife and about her career; the future direction of chromosome dynamics; and being an award recipient of the Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences.

UCLA INTERVIEW HISTORY

INTERVIEWER:

Andrea R. Maestrejuan, Interviewer, UCLA Oral History Program. B.S., Biological Sciences, University of California, Irvine; M.A., History, University of California, Riverside; C. Phil., History, UCLA.

TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEW:

Place: Dr. Tatsuya Hirano's office, Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory.

Dates, length of sessions: December 11, 2002; December 12, 2002; December 13, 2002.

Total number of recorded hours: 5.0

Persons present during interview: Hirano and Maestrejuan.

CONDUCT OF INTERVIEW:

This interview is one in a series with Pew Scholars in the Biomedical Sciences conducted by the UCLA Oral History Program in conjunction with the Pew Charitable Trusts's Pew Scholars in the Biomedical Sciences Oral History and Archives Project. The project has been designed to document the backgrounds, education, and research of biomedical scientists awarded four-year Pew scholarships since 1988.

To provide an overall framework for project interviews, the director of the UCLA Oral History Program and three UCLA faculty project consultants developed a topic outline. In preparing for this interview, Maestrejuan held a telephone preinterview conversation with Hirano to obtain written background information (curriculum vitae, copies of published articles, etc.) and agree on an interviewing schedule. She also reviewed documentation in Hirano's file at the Pew Scholars Program office in San Francisco, including Hirano's proposal application, letters of recommendation, and reviews by Pew Scholars Program national advisory committee members.

ORIGINAL EDITING:

Carol Squires edited the interview. She checked the verbatim transcript of the interview against the original tape recordings, edited for punctuation, paragraphing, and spelling, and verified proper names. Words and phrases inserted by the editor have been bracketed.

Hirano did not review the transcript. Consequently, some names and places remain unverified.

Carol Squires prepared the table of contents. TechniType Transcripts compiled the guide to proper names.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INDEX