

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

JOHN M. LEONG

The Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences

Transcript of an Interview
Conducted by

Andrea R. Maestrejuan

at

University of Massachusetts Medical Center
Worcester, Massachusetts

on

5-7 February 1997

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



John M. Leong

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INTERVIEWEE

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(Signature)

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Date 8/6/98

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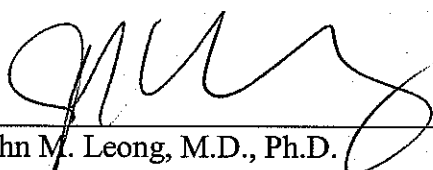
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JOHN M. LEONG

1957 Born in Berkeley, California on 23 January

Education

1979 B.A., Brown University
1985 Ph.D., Brown University
1987 M.D., Brown University

Professional Experience

1987-1990 Tufts University School of Medicine
Postdoctoral Fellow
1993-1995 Graduate Faculty Member, Department of
Molecular Biology and Microbiology

1990-1995 New England Medical Center
Assistant Professor of Medicine, Department of
Rheumatology and Immunology

1995-present University of Massachusetts Medical Center
Assistant Professor, Department of Molecular Genetics
and Microbiology

Honors

1979 Phi Beta Kappa
1985 Barry Rosen Memorial Award, Brown University
1992-1996 Pew Scholar in the Biomedical Sciences

Selected Publications

- Argos, P. et al., 1986. The integrase family of site-specific recombinases: Regional similarities and global diversity. *EMBO Journal* 5:433-40.
- Isberg, R.R. and J.M. Leong, 1988. Cultured mammalian cells attach to the invasin protein of *Yersinia pseudotuberculosis*. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA* 5:6682-86.
- Isberg, R.R. and J.M. Leong, 1990. Multiple β_1 chain integrins are receptors for invasin, a protein that promotes bacterial penetration into mammalian cells. *Cell* 60:861-71.

- Leong, J.M. et al., 1990. Identification of the integrin-binding domain of the *Yersinia pseudotuberculosis* invasin protein. *EMBO Journal* 9:1979-89.
- Rankin, S. et al., 1992. The integrin-binding domain of invasin protein is sufficient to allow bacterial entry into mammalian cells. *Infectious Immunology* 60:3909-12.
- Coburn, J. et al., 1993. Integrin $\alpha_{\text{IIb}}\beta_3$ mediates binding of the Lyme disease agent, *Borrelia burgdorferi*, to human platelets. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA* 90:7059-63.
- Leong, J.M. et al., 1993. A 76-amino acid disulfide loop of the *Yersinia pseudotuberculosis* invasin protein is required for integrin receptor recognition. *Journal of Biological Chemistry* 268:20524-32.
- Coburn, J.L. et al., 1994. Diverse Lyme disease spirochetes bind platelet integrin $\alpha_{\text{IIb}}\beta_3$. *Infection and Immunity* 62: 5559-67.
- Leong, J.M. et al., 1995. An aspartate residue of the *Yersinia pseudotuberculosis* invasin protein that is critical for integrin binding. *EMBO Journal* 14:422-31.
- Leong, J.M. et al., 1995. Hemagglutination and proteoglycan binding by the Lyme disease spirochete, *B. burgdorferi*. *Infection and Immunity* 63:874-83.

ABSTRACT

John M. Leong was born and raised in Berkeley, California, the third of three siblings. His parents are Chinese-American and had what John calls typical Chinese expectations for their children; viz., that all three should do well in school and attend Ivy League colleges, and that the boys, at least, should become doctors. This was particularly the case because John's grandfather was a dentist and his father a doctor manqué who became a mining engineer in order to support his family. John, however, was more interested in sports as a boy, playing tennis especially. He did well enough in school, though, to be accepted by a number of Ivy League colleges. He matriculated at Brown University in their Program in Liberal Medical Education, which grants both a BS and an MD degree in a shortened time period.

When he began college he was unsure what he wanted to do, but a class in molecular biology inspired him to become a research scientist. He decided to take time off from medicine in favor of earning a PhD. He entered Arthur Landy's lab, where he began working on $\phi 80$. During this time, he commuted for a few months to Mimi Susskind's lab at University of Massachusetts, where he worked with Philip Youderian on P22.

John accepted a postdoc at Tufts University, in Ralph Isberg's lab, though that lab had not yet been set up. There he worked on the *inv* gene of *Yersinia pseudotuberculosis*, from which he was nudged toward working on the Lyme spirochete. Deciding to accept a position in the medical school at Tufts University, he studied integrin binding and proteoglycan binding with *B. burgdorferi* in his attempts to characterize genes that encode ligands in *B. burgdorferi*.

Although he found that the clinical perspective provided by an MD degree made Lyme disease interesting, Leong felt that he thought more as a basic scientist, and he accepted a position at the University of Massachusetts. He has found that Lyme is a difficult experimental study and that there is a hostile political climate surrounding the study of Lyme, and he is thinking that he will work on enterohemorrhagic *E. coli*. He laughingly points out that there is more grant money in *E. coli*, too, an important factor for any scientist.

Although he likes his work, Leong says that he would also like to spend more time with his young daughter and his wife, who is a physician; and he would like to play more tennis. He believes that balancing act is faced by all two-career couples.

UCLA INTERVIEW HISTORY

INTERVIEWER:

Andrea R. Maestrejuan, Interviewer, UCLA Oral History Program; B.A., History, University of California, Irvine, 1988; B.S., Biological Sciences, University of California, Irvine, 1988; C.Phil., History, University of California, Riverside.

TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEW:

Place: Leong's office, University of Massachusetts Medical Center.

Dates, length of sessions: February 5, 1997 (87 minutes); February 6, 1997 (95); February 7, 1997 (76).

Total number of recorded hours: 4.3

Persons present during interview: Leong 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 Leong to obtain written background information (curriculum vitae, copies of published articles, etc.) and to agree on an interviewing schedule. She also reviewed prior Pew scholars' interviews and the documentation in Leong's file at the Pew Scholars Program office in San Francisco, including his proposal application, letters of recommendation, and reviews by Pew Scholars Program national advisory committee members.

For general background on the recent history of the biological sciences, Maestrejuan consulted J.D. Watson et al., *Molecular Biology of the Gene*. 4th ed. Menlo Park, CA: Benjamin/Cummings, 1987, and Bruce Alberts et al., *Molecular Biology of the Cell*. 3rd ed. New York: Garland, 1994.

The interview is organized chronologically, beginning with Leong's childhood and continuing through his education at Brown University and Tufts University School of Medicine and the establishment of his labs at the New England Medical Center and the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. Major topics discussed include the current state of Lyme disease research, collaboration and competition, the pressures of a science career, and the relevance of an M.D. degree for a research scientist.

ORIGINAL EDITING:

Gregory M.D. Beyrer, editorial assistant, edited the interview. He 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.

Leong reviewed the transcript. He verified proper names and made minor corrections and additions.

Jane Collings, editor, prepared the table of contents. Beyrer compiled the biographical summary, interview history, and index.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Early Years	1
Family background. Parental pressure to study medicine. Growing up Chinese-American. Early academic focus on science. Berkeley during the sixties.	
College Years	20
Begins the Brown University Program in Liberal Medical Education with unclear professional goals. Extraordinary dedication and talent demanded by a science career—Performs well at Brown. Meets future wife, Charis Cladouhos. Inspired by a course in molecular biology. Enters the Arthur Landy lab. Decides to leave medicine for PhD. More on becoming inspired by molecular biology. Attempting to characterize the $\phi 80$ site and its recombination proteins. Landy's motivational techniques. Works on P22 with Philip Youderian in the Miriam M. Susskind lab. Landy's role as mentor. Difficulties of cloning the left attachment site of $\phi 80$. Returns to medical school. Decides on a research career rather than continuing medical training.	
Postdoctoral Years	44
Applies for postdoctoral positions in a variety of different labs. Leong's contribution to the Ralph R. Isberg lab's <i>inv</i> gene work. Isberg as a mentor. Decision to stay at Tufts University. Looking at integrin binding and proteoglycan binding with <i>B. burgdorferi</i> . The importance of characterizing the genes that encode ligands in <i>B. burgdorferi</i> . Lyme disease as a problem that is both clinically relevant and technically challenging. Clinical perspective provided by an M.D. degree.	
Faculty Years	54
Research support at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. Establishing a scientific identity apart from Isberg. Attracting postdocs to the lab. How doing clinically based research is helpful in securing grants. The political climate surrounding Lyme research. Work on enterohemorrhagic <i>E. coli</i> . Leong's changing expectations at midcareer. Impact of increased funding pressures. Leong's ability to organize large collaborations. Difficulties facing two-career couples. Family life places constraints on time for research.	
Index	76

INDEX

A

ABC. *See* American-born Chinese
American-born Chinese, 9
Aronson, Stanley, 27
Arthritis Foundation, 59, 63, 64, 65
Asians, 30, 31, 33, 34
att., 37, 39, 40, 41
Awgupalli, Kishore, 61

B

bacterial pathogenesis, 46, 47, 49, 54, 57,
61, 62, 70, 71
Baltimore, David, 46
Barber, Bonnie Macbride (cousin), 33
Berkeley High School, 11, 23, 30, 32
Berkeley, California, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 9, 11,
14, *See*
Boekelheide, Kim, 58
Borrelia burgdorferi, 52, 53, 54, 71
Boston, Massachusetts, 46, 51, 52, 59, 61,
63
Botstein, David, 46
Brown Daily Herald, 32
Brown University, 17, 19, 20, 23, 24, 25,
27, 30, 31, 32, 39, 40, 45, 51, 57, 58, 72
Brown University Program in Liberal
Medical Education, 20, 25

C

Chen, Xi-Xi (second cousin), 6
Chen, Yun "Nina" (second cousin), 6
China, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 33
Chinatown, 9, 32
Cladouhos, Charis (wife), 10, 28, 30, 32,
46, 51, 59
Clinton, Chelsea, 10
Coburn, Jenifer, 53, 60, 61, 62, 69, 71
Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, 35
Confucianism, 10
Cornell University, 3, 18, 19, 34, 51
Cultural Revolution, 6, 7

D

Dartmouth College, 20
Davies, Wayne J., 41
DNA, 24, 37, 40, 52

E

E. coli, 41, 66, 67
Einstein, Albert, 35
Erban, John K., 71

F

Falkow, Stanley, 46
Fausto, Nelson, 45
Fifth International Congress on Lyme
Borreliosis, 66
First Independent Research Support and
Transition Award, 67

G

Gordon Research Conferences, 69
Grindley, Nigel D.F., 38

H

Harvard University, 19, 46
Herdeg, Kay Leong (sister), 1, 5, 14, 31
Herdeg, Klaus (brother-in-law), 34
Howard Hughes Medical Institute, 69, 74

I

integrin, 52, 53, 64
intimin, 67
inv., 47, 48, 49
invasin, 47, 48, 50, 53, 66, 68, 69
Isaacs, Kathy Macbride (cousin), 33
Isberg, Ralph R., 16, 35, 45, 46, 47, 48,
50, 51, 55, 60, 63, 69, 74

J

Jacobson, Allan, 56

K

Krieger, Monty, 46

L

Landy, Arthur, 24, 25, 26, 27, 34, 35, 36, 38, 40, 41, 44, 46, 55, 70
Lansing, Michigan, 4
lectins, 53
Leder, Philip, 46
Lederberg, Joshua, 13, 35
Leong, Bertie Chen (paternal grandmother), 5
Leong, Caroline (daughter), 12, 33, 69
Leong, Evelyn (sister-in-law), 10
Leong, Grace "Esther" (paternal aunt), 8
Leong, Gustave (paternal grandfather), 2
Leong, Kenneth (brother), 1, 13, 31, 41, 62
Leong, Milton (father), 1, 30
Leong, Tim (paternal uncle), 8
Leong, Wen-Yen Wei (mother), 1, 26, 30
Lesser, Cammie F., 43
Levinson, Daniel J., 68
Liu, Hui, 33, 61
Los Angeles, California, 9
Lyme disease, 50, 51, 52, 54, 55, 56, 57, 59, 60, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 71
Lyme, Connecticut, 50

M

Macbride, David (cousin), 33
Macbride, Wen-Chao (maternal aunt), 4
maltose-binding protein, 52
Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 11, 46
MBP. *See* maltose-binding protein
Mekalanos, John J., 46
Michigan State University, 4
MIT. *See* Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Mizuuchi, Kiyoshi, 35
molecular biology, 6, 24, 26, 34, 35, 46, 52, 61, 70, 72
Molecular Genetics: An Introductory Narrative, 24
Monod, Jacques, 35

Moratorium Day, 17
Morrissey, Pamela E., 63

N

National Academy of Sciences, 22, 74
National Institutes of Health, 50, 59, 63, 64, 65, 67
NEMC. *See* New England Medical Center
New England Medical Center, 50, 51, 55, 58, 59, 61, 64, 73
New Hampshire, 3
New York City, New York, 9, 34
Newton, Massachusetts, 32
niganaga, 10, 34, 35
NIH. *See* National Institutes of Health
Nobel Prize, 21, 68

P

P22, 39, 43
Page, David, 46, 47
Parveen, Nikhat, 61, 70
Passages, 68
Pereira, Miercio E.A., 53
Pew Scholars in the Biomedical Sciences, 1, 21, 52, 59, 63, *See*
Portnoy, Daniel A., 49, 51
proteoglycan, 53, 54, 64, 70
Providence, Rhode Island, 51
P'u-i, 10

R

recombination, 24, 35, 37, 38, 40, 41, 42, 44, 46, 55
lambda recombination, 35, 37
Reed, Randall R., 38

S

Salmonella, 39
San Francisco Bay Area, 3, 9, 31
Seasons of a Man's Life, 68
Seung, Edward, 33
Sheehy, Gail, 68
SIDS. *See* sudden infant death syndrome
Southern blot, 47
spirochete, 50, 52, 54, 55

Stanford University, 19, 46
Steere, Allen C., 50, 52, 56, 58, 59, 61, 65,
66
Steitz, Joan A., 38
Stent, Gunther S., 24, 25
Stilwell, General Joseph W., 5
sudden infant death syndrome, 8
Susskind, Miriam M., 39
Swarthmore College, 20, 47

T

Tangshan, China, 4
Trypanosoma cruzi, 53
Tufts University, 46, 47, 50, 51, 52, 55,
56, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 66, 72

U

UCLA. *See* University of California at Los
Angeles
UMass. *See* University of Massachusetts
University of California at Berkeley, 2, 4,
9, 19, 31, 34
University of California at Los Angeles,
51
University of Massachusetts, 16, 39, 40,
55, 59
University of Massachusetts Medical

Center, 1
University of Pennsylvania, 51
University of Washington, 4

V

Vargas, Lina Moitoso de, 52
Vietnam War, 13, 17
vitronectin, 52

W

Wei, Anton (maternal uncle), 8
Wei, Tong (maternal grandfather), 4
Wei, Wen-Ling (maternal aunt), 6
Western blot, 2, 66
Whitehead Institute for Biomedical
Research, 46, 47
Worcester, Massachusetts, 1, 63

Y

Yale University, 3, 19, 20, 38, 68
Yersinia pseudotuberculosis, 48, 50, 63
Youderian, Philip, 39

Φ

φ80, 37, 39, 40, 41, 43, 47