

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

**KEN W.Y. CHO**

The Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences

Transcript of an Interview  
Conducted by

Helene L. Cohen

at

University of California, Irvine  
Irvine, CA

on

3-4, 7 June 1999

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

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

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Irvine, California 92697-2300

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

INTERVIEWEE

THE REGENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY  
OF CALIFORNIA

*Ken W.Y. Cho*  
(Signature)

*Dale E. Treleven*  
(Signature)

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## KEN W.Y. CHO

1956            Born in Seoul, South Korea on August 26

### Education

1979            B.A., Chemistry, Grinnell College  
1985            Ph.D., Molecular Biology, University of Pennsylvania

### Professional Experience

1986-1991            University of California Los Angeles  
                         Postdoctoral Fellow, David Geffen School of Medicine,  
                         Laboratory of Edward M. De Robertis

1991-1997            University of California, Irvine  
                         Assistant Professor, Department of Developmental and  
                         Cell Biology.

1997-present            Associate Professor, Department of Developmental and  
                         Cell Biology.

### Honors

1992-1994            March of Dimes Basil O'Connor Starter Research Scholar Award  
1993-1995            American Cancer Society Junior Faculty Research Award  
1994-1998            Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences Award

### Selected Publications

Cho, K.W.Y. and E.M. De Robertis, 1990. Differential activation of *Xenopus* homeobox genes by mesoderm-inducing growth factors and retinoic acid. *Genes and Development* 4:1910-16.

Cho, K.W.Y. et al., 1991. Overexpression of a homeodomain protein confers axis-forming activity to uncommitted *Xenopus* embryonic cells. *Cell* 65:55-64.

Blumberg, B. et al., 1991. Organizer-specific homeobox genes from *Xenopus laevis* embryos. *Science* 253:194-96.

Cho, K.W.Y. et al., 1991. Molecular nature of Spemann's organizer: The role of the *Xenopus* homeobox gene *gooseoid*. *Cell* 67:1111-20.

Blitz, I. and K.W.Y. Cho, 1995. Anterior neuroectoderm is progressively induced during gastrulation: The role of the *Xenopus* homeobox gene *orthodenticle*. *Development*

121:993-1004.

- Hawley, S. et al., 1995. Disruption of BMP signals in embryonic *Xenopus* ectoderm leads to direct neural induction. *Genes and Development* 9:2923-35.
- Watabe, T. et al., 1995. Establishment of Spemann's organizer formation: Conserved growth factor synergy between *Xenopus* and mouse. *Genes and Development* 9:3038-50.
- Candia, A.F. et al., 1997. Cellular interpretation of multiple TGF- $\beta$  signals: Intracellular antagonism of activin/BVg1 and BMP2/4 signaling mediated by Smads. *Development* 124:4467-80.
- Laurent, M. et al., 1997. The *Xenopus* homeobox gene *Twin* mediates Wnt induction of *goosecoid* in establishment of Spemann's organizer. *Development* 124:4905-16.
- Marques, G. et al., 1997. Production of a Dpp activity gradient in the early *Drosophila* embryo through the opposing actions of the *Sog* and *Tld* proteins. *Cell* 91:417-26.
- Scott, I.C. et al., 1999. Mammalian BMP-1/Tolloid-related metalloproteases, including novel family member mammalian tolloid-like 2, have differential enzymatic activities and distributions of expression relevant to patterning and skeletogenesis. *Developmental Biology* 213:283-300.
- Wunnenberg-Stapelton, K. et al., 1999. Involvement of the small GTPases XrhoA and XRnd1 in morphogenesis and head formation in early *Xenopus* development. *Development* 126:5339-53.



## ABSTRACT

**Ken W.Y. Cho** was born in 1956 in Seoul, South Korea; the eldest of three siblings. His father, a shrewd entrepreneur from a very modest background and his mother, the daughter of a well-to-do Korean family, both fled North Korea in 1945, following the Soviet takeover at the end of World War II. Cho's parents would later meet and marry in South Korea and eventually move to Japan when he was only five years old. Cho was therefore forced to learn Japanese rapidly in order to excel in the rigorous educational environment. His childhood interest in the sciences came from watching his favorite cartoon about a scientist.

Cho received his B.A. in Chemistry from Grinnell College in 1979. He elected to attend an undergraduate institution in the United States based on the advice of a family friend and because his Korean heritage severely limited his career options in Japan. Once again Cho was forced to rapidly assimilate a new language and culture, and often spent entire nights just completing reading assignments and homework. He matriculated into the Department of Molecular Biology at the University of Pennsylvania, where he conducted his research in Roberto Weinmann's lab at the Wistar Institute, and received his Ph.D. in 1985.

Cho began his postdoctoral research at the University of California, Los Angeles in 1986 in Dr. Edward M. De Robertis's Lab, where he became interested in homeobox genes and their role in the development of embryos. He studied these homeobox genes in *Drosophila* before switching to *Xenopus* and creating a cDNA library that would shed light on several new developmentally crucial genes; most notably *goosecoid* genes. In 1991 Cho was appointed assistant professor in the Department of Developmental and Cell Biology at the University of California, Irvine. His research there has encompassed an interest in the regulation of homeobox genes and goosecoid genes in the context of embryological development in vertebrates. Most of his research focuses on the implications of these genes on a specific group of embryological cells in amphibians, a group known as Spemann's Organizer.

Throughout his oral history Cho stresses the importance of choosing a career that one truly loves, and he hopes that his children will be happy in whatever career path they choose. He has received several award and grants, including a March of Dimes Basil O'Connor Starter Research Scholar award, an American Cancer Society Junior Faculty Research award, and most notably a Pew Scholars Program in the Biomedical Sciences grant, which he discusses in the oral history interview.

## UCLA INTERVIEW HISTORY

### INTERVIEWER:

Helene L. Cohen, Interviewer, UCLA Oral History Program. B.S., Nursing, UCLA; P.N.P., University of California, San Diego/UCLA; M.A., Theater, San Diego State University.

### TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEW:

**Place:** Cho's office, University of California, Irvine.

**Dates, length of sessions:** June 3, 1999 (109 minutes); June 4, 1999 (106); June 7, 1999 (60).

**Total number of recorded hours:** 4.6

**Persons present during interview:** Cho and Cohen.

### 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' 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, Cohen held a personal preinterview conversation with Cho to obtain written background information (curriculum vitae, copies of published articles, etc.) and agree on an interviewing schedule. She also reviewed prior Pew scholars' interviews and the documentation in his 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 technical background, Cohen consulted J.D. Watson et al., *Molecular Biology of the Gene*. 4th ed. Menlo Park, California: Benjamin/Cummings, 1987; Bruce Alberts et al., *Molecular Biology of the Cell*. 3rd ed. New York: Garland, 1994; Horace F. Judson, *The Eighth Day of Creation*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979; and recent issues of *Science* and *Nature*.

The interview is organized chronologically, beginning with Cho's childhood in South Korea and Japan and continuing through his undergraduate work at Grinnell College, his graduate work at University of Pennsylvania, his postdoc at UCLA, and the establishment of his own lab at University of California, Irvine. Major topics discussed include Cho's father's life and career in Korea and Japan, Cho's early schooling in Japan, his research characterizing the *goosecoid* gene, and the education of his two children.

#### ORIGINAL EDITING:

Ji Young Kwon, editorial assistant, 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.

Cho reviewed the transcript. He verified proper names and made a number of corrections and additions.

William Van Benschoten, editor, prepared the table of contents and index. Kwon assembled the biographical summary and interview history.

#### SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS:

The original tape recordings of the interview are in the university archives and are available under the regulations governing the use of permanent noncurrent records of the university. Records relating to the interview are located in the office of the UCLA Oral History Program.

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