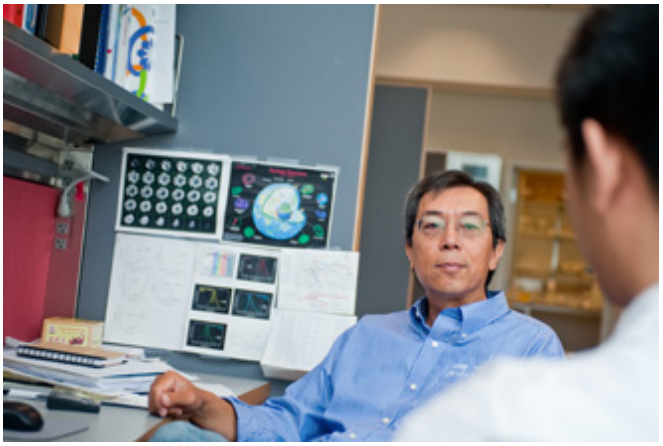

Robert Tjian
President

You know, there are a lot of people who enjoy reading about science and thinking about it and even theorizing about it. But it's a different breed, I think, who are completely captivated, I would say almost intoxicated, by working in the lab. They're basically hooked. And I still am to this day. I can't survive more than a few days without some data.

I think it's very hard to do anything intensely for 30 years unless you just absolutely love it. And so, to me, science is not work, it's just what I like to do.

One of the most advantageous things that happens when you become somebody like a Hughes investigator, which I was lucky enough to become in '86, is the fact that you don't have to spend a lot of your time trying to raise money.

For me, it was a flash of light. It immediately allowed me to do a series of experiments, which with very few exceptions, universities by and large were unable to do. And as a result, it allowed me to purify and clone the very very first human transcription factor.

Even more importantly, it allowed me to develop a style of science where every five years or so, the lab moves in different directions.

You know, where I am today obviously couldn't have happened without a tremendous amount of help from my mentors to begin with.

I got very, very lucky, and of the dozens of faculty members I could've ended up working with, I landed in Dan Koshland's lab. He was an extraordinary mentor, especially for an undergraduate for him to spend the amount of time that he did and you know, letting me work with two of his most brilliant postdocs. These guys ended up being my life-long friends, basically.

Going through it initially, you know, working with a Jim Watson or working with a Rich Losick, you just take it for granted. They're great guys, and I'm working with them, so what? And then you realize that there's a lot more to it, that these people are helping you throughout your career, way past the time you were in their labs.

And now it comes full circle, because recently in my 60th birthday symposium, which was organized by several of my postdocs, it became apparent that maybe my best success isn't the discovery of SP1 or T antigen or anything like that. It was the discovery of individuals whose careers, in many ways, will probably eclipse mine.

And so watching 80 or more of them sort of get together and talk to each other and make fun about the various idiosyncratic behaviors that I have and then seeing how that took their careers forward … that's a different kind of satisfaction, I would say at least as great as the satisfaction of making a discovery.

As a P.I., you have to be positive thinking. So no matter how bad things get, experiments don't work or techniques didn't pan out, or 85% of the experiments are not doing it, you can't get depressed … you're the final cheerleader in the lab, and if you go down, everybody else is going to go down with you [laughing].

So often, I think, I try to use those things, what somebody might consider to be a downturn or a challenge, as really an opportunity to rethink where you are.

It's a strange transition for me to go from 90% just doing science to having to spend a significant amount of my time doing administration, which I had always vowed not to do. But I think this is kind of a unique situation. So I'm surprised that I took the job myself. I really didn't think that I would want the job, nor would I be given the job. It's an experiment on both sides, I would say.

All photography, unless otherwise noted, by James Kegley