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Developmental Studies on the Vertebrate Head Evolution

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The shape of the skull of the vertebrate head has always interested me, and I have always marveled at the process and mechanism of evolution that produced various types of heads that are adapted to specific environments and functions. In particular, the metamerical pattern of morphological elements, namely, the serial homology and metamorphosis of these elements were the most important concepts of my research. My research has been shaped by many factors and I will describe how it has developed and finally it ended up in the molecular developmental researches in which I am currently involved.

Beginning - comparative morphology

My research started at the Zoology Department, Kyoto University, where I was interested in vertebrate skull morphology and its evolution and development. Dr. Motoo Tasumi, my mentor, pointed out that I seemingly had an affinity towards the German morphological tradition first established by Wolfgang Goethe, the great poet. Dr. Tasumi had the inspiration to teach me German, which later proved to be an important tool for my research life; many of the seminal morphological papers were written in German. Just like those naturalists and transcendental comparative morphologists in 19th century, I tried to find traces of head segmentation in the developing skull of mice that I would observe under the microscope. Although I was not very productive those days, and did not learn any sophisticated techniques of contemporary biology, aside from the whole-mount staining methods of skeletons in small animals and some histological preparation, I still believe it was a very important time for my life, since I could polish my sense, so to speak, and skills for recognizing morphological patterns (Fig. 1). Actually, I am still looking at segments and patterns in the vertebrate head from a comparative morphological angle, though the current experimental methodology in my laboratory highlights restricted gene expressions and cell lineages.

The most interesting aspect was not the head segments (the only metamerical pattern I could ascertain was the pharyngeal arch derivatives) themselves, instead the loss of segmentation that I found in the neurocranial primordia of vertebrate skull fascinated me. Instead of postulating the segmental basic plan, I suggested that the entire neuro-



Fig. 1. Chondrocrania of the embryonic musk shrew *Suncus murinus*. Unpublished drawing I made in Kyoto University around 1983, based on whole-mount specimens.

cranial portion should be regarded as a sheet of mesenchyme that was folded ventral to the cephalic flexure (Kuratani, 1989).

Embryology and anatomy

Before I realized the importance of cellular level events in development, there was embryology, a cushion let me land softly onto the field of experimental studies. In the Department of Anatomy, University of the Ryukyus where I had my first postion, Drs. Shigenori Tanaka and Yuji Ishikawa suggested me to apply immunohistochemical techniques for morphological analyses of embryonic structures (Ishikawa *et al.*, 1986). Specifically, I stained the peripheral nervous system in chick embryos with monoclonal antibodies raised against neurofilament protein subunits, which gave me an opportunity to work on a series of descriptive embryological papers (Kuratani *et al.*, 1988ab, Kuratani and 1362

Tanaka, 1990ab; Kuratani, 1990). This method allowed me to observe fine caliber branches of developing nerves with a resolution that no previous description could have reached and soon I was attracted by the exquisite pattern of developing nerves in embryos. My basic interest had not changed at all - I was struck by the metamorphosis of cranial nerves that, like the skeletal system, were primarily formed segmentally from every other bulges of the hindbrain (rhombomeres), and distributed in each pharyngeal arches.

Besides the nerves, I also visualized the vascular systems and also performed three dimensional reconstruction from the histological sections to observe the distribution of mesodermal elements. Unlike the somitic segmentation that is restricted posterior to the otic vesicle, some of the cranial nerves (cranial nerves V, VII, IX and X, also known as branchiomeric nerves) were associated with the pharyngeal arches and seemed to show different pattern of metamerism from that of somites and their derivatives. Thus the embryology for me at that time, was the way to connect developmental biology and gross anatomy. This experience in Tanaka's laboratory (1985–1988) still influences my research, especially in the experiments to elucidate the evolution of the jaw of vertebrates (see below).

I was most fortunate that it was right at that time that Developmental Biology began to deal with the morphological pattern of organisms, from a cell and molecular biology vantage point. Most of all, the neural crest cells, the vertebrate-specific cell lineage, seemed to me particularly important, since these cells are responsible for both branchial arch skeleton and cranial nerves. I also relaised that only by studying abroad, was it possible for me to learn the specific experimental embryological echniques that deal with the neural crest.

Experimental embryology

In the Department of Anatomy, Medical College of Georgia, I started first postdoc life. Here, I learnt the construction of chimeras between chick and quail embryos and also neural crest ablation. Combining with my immunohistochemistry and these techniques new to me then, I analyzed the role of neural crest in the differentiation of thymus and morphological patterning of cranial nerves (Kuratani and Bockman, 1990; 1991; 1992; Kuratani et al., 1991). During this period (1988-1991). I also found that the postotic level of the neural crest gives rise to cells that migrate along both the head-specific and trunk-type pathways. I pointed out that each of these pathways prefigured glossopharyngeo-vagus and hypoglossal nerves, respectively, and I called the former (cephalic type) crest cell population the circumpharyngeal crest cells. They first populate the lateral body wall prior to the formation of postotic pharyngeal arches, and become the typical ectomesenchyme only after disappearance of coelomic cavity and subsequent establishment of pharyngeal arches (Kuratani and Kirby, 1991, 1992). I also emphasized that posterior limit of this cell population represents the S-shaped boundary between the head and trunk (Kuratani, 1997).

Another interesting developmental pattern I found was the even-odd-relationships between rhombomeres and cranial nerve roots (Kuratani, 1991). This paper strongly tempted me to expand my research field into molecular developmental biology, which appeared to hold the promise for the future of evolutionary embryology.

Coupling of molecular developmental biology and embryology

As Goethe first described, the most important concepts for animal morphology are metamerism and metamorphosis. In a modern context, both of these concepts are profoundly intertwined with the function of Hox genes. All metazoans examined so far contain a set of similar regulatory genes named Hox, each showing similar amino acid sequence. They encode transcription factors characteristically containing about 60 amino acids representing the homeobox, that recognizes specific sites on the DNA, regulating the transcription of its target genes. Thus the Hox genes can function as 'switches' that determine specific developmental fates for specific cell populations or tissue domains. Hox genes are found as clusters, and interesting is that in many organisms, Hox genes exhibit nested and coordinated pattern of expression along the anterior posterior axis of the animal embryonic body. Thus more 3' member of Hox genes among the cluster tend to be expressed more anteriorly, and those located in 5' region of the cluster are expressed more posteriorly.

In the vertebrates, *Hox* gene expression is often associated with segmental units of the embryos. For examples, in the trunk, somites (primordia of vertebrae and skeletal muscles) express varying sets of *Hox* genes at each axial level, and in the hindbrain, the vertebrate *Hox* genes show anterior expression limit at the boundary of rhombomeres. Moreover, the crest cells attached to these rhombomeres share the same *Hox* expression profiles, implying that *Hox* genes are the key to understand the position-dependent differentiation and evolution of the pharyngeal arches together with rhombomeres. Now the molecular developmental biology had started to use the same terminology that I had used in comparative morphology.

Thus, in June of 1991, I moved to Dr. Gregor Eichele's laboratory in Biochemistry Department, Baylor College of Medicine, where rhombomeres and *Hox* genes were one of the central research projects. Soon I started transplantation experiments of rhombomeres in avian embryos, and observed the behavior of neural crest cells and *Hox* gene expression. As I expected, *Hoxb-1* expression was rather cell autonomous in rhombomere 4 (r4) and it never changed after transplantation of r4 into other levels of the hindbrain. This graft also retained the capacity for neural crest cell production and cranial nerve root formation (Kuratani and Eichele, 1993). In other words, cranial nerve formation is

intrinsic to the rhombomeres, not dependant of the embryonic environment. This finding seemed to show, not only developmental, but also morphological importance, since classically the cranial nerves were thought to have arisen by metamorphoses of spinal nerves in the trunk, which also exhibit metamerism in their morphological pattern. However, it was realized that the spinal nerve was patterned through the mesodermal segments - the somites. Thus vertebrate embryo shows two distinct patterns and mechanisms for peripheral nerve segmentation at the level of molecular and cellular developmental functions, and I concentrated on embryonic expression patterns that might possibly have morphological and evolutionary significance. That research strategy, and using my skills in experimental embryology, were what I was expected to contribute to a future field of study (see Kuratani and Wall, 1992; Lutz et al., 1994ab; Kuratani et al., 1994; Qiu et al., 1994).

Back to the comparative embryology

During postdoc life in the United States, there remained a strong urge towards evolutionary research, which I knew was not easy to promote in that country. It seemed to me it was much easier in Japan and the timing also seemed right. My rhombomere study had come to attention of Shin Aizawa, a mouse molecular geneticist, who was then at RIKEN. He had recently moved to Developmental Biology Institute, Kumamoto University Medical School in 1994 and I joined his lab and started a collaboration on vertebrate head patterning. My first job was the morphological analyses of the skull in Otx2 haploinsufficiency mouse mutant, and I soon realized that the phenotype was complimentary to that of Hoxa-2, the gene expressed in the hyoid arch ectomesenchyme and pattern the stapes and Reichert's cartilage (Matsuo et al., 1995, 1996, 1998; Kuratani et al., 1997b; the mutant mouse was constructed by I. Matsuo). Namely, Otx2 (another homeobox gene that does not belong to Hox genes) is responsible for the rostral part of the mandibular arch derivatives, and its posterior part can be regarded as the Hox-code-default region, the part of the mandibular arch patterned by the absence of Hox or Otx transcripts. This study still has a great influence on my evolutionary study.

While engaging in some other collaborations, as well as avian experimental embryology (Kuratani and Aizawa, 1995; Shigetani *et al.*, 1995), I finally started research on lamprey embryology, which had been my long-lasting dream. Before going further, I have to mention Dr. Shigeki Hirano in Niigata University School of Medicine. Dr. Hirano helped us greatly to obtain lamprey embryos, at a time when it was not very easy to deal with non-model animal for embryological and developmental studies. I also harboured a strong fear about dealing with this animal; a number of scientists had already accumulated huge amount of descriptive studies by the early 20th century. With less knowledge and an incomplete understanding of this animal, I was more than tentative about a move into molecular level studies as other scientists used to. I then believed that any new techniques and ideas should be built upon sound bases of morphology and embryology. Thus I decided first to repeat all that I had done in chick embryos; that is, a morphological description of lamprey embryos.

I re-examined all the developmental aspects of the lamprey head histologically and immunohistologically (Kuratani *et al.*, 1997a; 1998; Ueki *et al.*, 1998). This series of work continued even after I moved to Department of Biology, Okayama University in the end of 1997, and our research finally started to look at developmental phenomena such as, patterning of rhombomeres, migration and distribution of the neural crest and *Otx* gene expression (Horigome *et al.*, 1999), segmental patterning of the mesoderm (Kuratani *et al.*, 1999), and expressions of some developmentally important regulatory genes (Ogasawara *et al.*, 2000, 2001; Murakami *et al.*, 2001, 2002).

Looking back now, I realize that my research in Okayama was a struggle, trying several different biological fields, or even different philosophies of zoology. I feel that it is not always easy to integrate and coordinate education and research even if they both deal with the same scientific logic. Students have to be taught the basics. However at the same time science as a business was getting tougher everyday. In my field, nothing was basic and worth teaching, except for some histology and animal taxonomy. Whereas the research theme in my laboratory, Evo-Devo, required the huge amount of knowledge not regularly taught in average national universities in Japan. In my struggle I tried first several possible ways, trying to look for particular research fields suitable for each student and postdoc. It was at that time that I tried to promote the comprehensive description of various vertebrate embryos such as sharks, turtles and sturgeons, for the last time in my career (Kuratani and Horigome, 2000; Kuratani et al., 2000; These two papers were awarded by Zoological Society of that year; Kuratani, 1999). In parallel, experimental embryology continued (Shigetani et al., 1999), and in my impression this field played the most crucial role in the realization of the importance of tissue interactions in the acquisition of evolutionary novelties, especially in the patterning and evolution of the vertebrate jaw. For my lectures in the department, I integrated experimental embryology and molecular developmental biology, and this was finally the most meaningful and exciting to teach.

In Kobe

Based on the experiments performed in Okayama, I could finally explain the jaw evolution as a process of topographical shift of tissue interactions, which is now called the 'heterotopic theory' for the vertebrate jaw (Shigetani *et al.*, 2002, 2005; also see Kuratani *et al.*, 2001; Kuratani, 2003ab, 2004). To complete this theory, it was also necessary for us to show that the lamprey also has the cephalic *Hox* code of the ectomesenchyme, with mandibular arch 1364

defined as the Hox-code-default state as in gnathostomes. We could successfully show that it was actually the case (Takio et al., 2004; Kuratani, 2004). Next, it was also necessary to show that the so called 'lamprey trabecula' was merely a rostral extension of mesodermal neurocranium, unlike in gnathostomes, which I could show by cell labeling studies (Kuratani et al., 2004). In addition, we also found that the heterotopic shift noted above was tightly linked to the evolution of hypophyses, in which changes in spatiotemporal regulation of growth-factor encoding genes was involved (Uchida et al., 2003). The lamprey project that I have been involved for almost 10 years now, has also provided us with new evolutionary theory of the vertebrate brain (Murakami et al., 2004, 2005), and of the skeletal muscles (Kusakabe and Kuratani, 2003; 2004; Kusakabe and Kuratani, 2005). It has been and still is guite fortunate for me that I could work with dynamic young researchers from various backgrounds, such as neurobiology, anatomy, muscle development, evolutionary genomics, cell biology, experimental embryology, molecular biology, and so forth for this animal species, making this project a very exciting one.

As another case of vertebrate novelty, I have also picked up the Chinese soft-shelled turtles, Pelodiscus sinensis, as the model for turtles, to describe the developmental changes that allowed them to develop the shells in these animals. Due to the dorsally shifted position of the ribs, topographical relationship between the rib cage and scapula has been reversed in turtles, obliterating the morphological homologies of skeletal elements. Thus the loss of homology is coupled with evolutionary novelties, since the former implies that these animals have cancelled the ancestral developmental constraints that assures the conserved basic architecture of the amniote body. Thus the establishment of novelty requires abrupt changes in developmental process to allow topographical shifts of skeletal elements. So far, we have shown, through the analyses of Hox gene expression, that the turtle carapace (dorsal part of the shell) can be regarded as transformed 'thoracic' vertebrae (Ohya et al., 2005), the turtle-specific pattern of muscle differentiation is intrinsic to turtle somites (Nagashima et al., 2005), and that the carapacial ridge (CR: the primordium of the carapace) involves cooption of regulatory genes that are also present in other vertebrate species by differential screening of CRspecific genes (Kuraku et al., 2005). This turtle project has been the major theme of our project since we moved into CDB, RIKEN.

For me, book writing is as important as research. This may even more important than writing original papers or short reviews. This is probably my classical leanings, but I do believe this is the best way for me to express the ideas I have developed. Actually, for the purpose of education as well, I cannot think of any other method more comfortable than writing a book. In the text book of neural crest cells I co-wrote with Dr. Noriko Osumi (Tokyo Medical Dental University at the time; Kuratani and Osumi, 1997), we tried a unification of developmental mechanism and anatomical patterns of vertebrates. Since then, however, the field of Evo-Devo has become more sophisticated and I felt the necessity of introducing more concepts from various different fields of biology, not only pointing out coincidental patterns between morphology and gene expression patterns. What I needed was not to illuminate the history of morphology, but rather to search for a new way thinking for the future. Particularly, it seemed very important for me to integrate the classical concepts of archetype, homology, recapitulation and the modern theories of genetics, tissue interactions, and gene functions in developmental patterning. My research on lampreys, with which I had not been familiar when I first had a vague idea of book writing in Georgia back in 1990, might have also motivated me to start writing a full-sized book on evolutionary morphology, and this institute (RIKEN CDB) was almost an ideal place for me to concentrate on this task. I finally completed Evolutionary Morphology in 2004 (Kuratani, 2004a) and its short and simplified version, Does the Ontogeny Recapitulate Evolution? in 2005 (Kuratani, 2005).

Here in Kobe, I am not a typical comparative embryologist, or anatomist, or even developmental biologist. I am basically a zoologist, and would rather be called an evolutionary morphologist, who loves various kinds of animals (particularly moths), and this is the most comfortable way for me to identify myself. Although, in old fashioned papers and text books, I take comfort of the somewhat classical but stuffy atmosphere of Natural History in 19th century, most typically embodied in Victorian London, I would not try to reanimate the dreams of those naturalists back into this century, and I would not wish any to live in that era. I believe that current evolutionary morphology is at its most exciting point ever, and most promising with the knowledge and technology that are available now, not with those back in 19th century. It has taken me quite a long time to formulate my ideas about evolution from a mechanistic point of view, for which I am grateful to all of my mentors and to all of my seniors, and I am grateful to the many friends that I could have through my entire career.

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