

A comic-book hero

Summarize yourself in the form of a title of a paper in Nature.

Rapid degeneration of an experimental biophysicist into an ad agent through competitive inhibition by young colleagues.

What was your first experiment as a child?

On a sunny day, my younger sister and I were strolling on the campus of the Japanese Imperial College. I had stolen a box of matches, with which we began to investigate if mechanical energy could trigger a chemical reaction. Minutes later, my sister pointed at a place a few metres away, where I saw a belt of black moving steadily away from us, leaving shrunk and curly grass behind. An adult came. The two kids walked away calmly, talking slightly too loudly about how they knew nothing. The lesson: detection of single fluorophores requires darkness.

Who has been the most important mentor in your career?

My father, in the most indirect way. I can count the number of words we have exchanged since I was born. Of those words, I still remember: "Geocentricism and heliocentricism are equivalent, except that the physics is simpler with the latter."

What makes a good scientific mentor?

I wish I knew.

Whose graduate student would you most like to have been?

Einstein, if I could rewire my brain. Peter Mitchell, to reconfirm that I can never be creative.

What single scientific paper or talk changed your career path?

Hugh Huxley's electron micrograph showing the sliding mechanism of muscle contraction. It was the first time in my life that I saw an 'explanation' in biology, the branch of science I had disliked most until then.

What book has been most influential in your scientific career?

Lubert Stryer's *Biochemistry*, a textbook that even a physicist can appreciate. It also teaches us how to write clearly: where Stryer fails to be clear, researchers in the field are to blame.

What gives you the most job satisfaction now? What are your major frustrations?

All I can do now is envy the (infrequent) achievements of my young colleagues made without my aid. Only bench work really satisfies me, but I no longer have the energy to sit down at a bench for more than five minutes.

What literary character would you employ as a postdoc?

Imaginary postdocs? No thanks.

What's your favourite conference destination, and why?

Aspen, for the obvious reason.

What book is currently on your bedside table?

The Tale of Genji, a 1,000-year-old novel by Murasaki Shikibu, recommended by a recent mentor of mine who teaches me thermodynamics. It is about noble women and men; the first two-thirds concerns the son of an emperor and the women he apparently loved. The ancient world is so different that I find no place for myself.

What music heads the playlist in your car or lab?

The soundtrack to *Flashdance*.

Assuming the dead can be raised and/or time travel exists, who from the world outside science would you most like to have dinner with?

If the food is excellent, anyone who speaks Japanese, or none. Otherwise, I would beg the company of Audrey Hepburn to see if she was as attractive in real life, too.

You are on a plane behind two students obviously going to the same conference, who start to talk about your work. What do you do?

I can only try to sleep.

What one thing would you rescue from your burning laboratory?

My laptop or human life? That is the question.

What's the best piece of advice you've ever received?

That a grant reviewer might appreciate your proposal if he/she feels that you are attempting something beyond your ordinary power.

Where and when would you most like to have lived or worked?

I would certainly enjoy staying in present-day Japan, now that dining has become less expensive. For work, a university on either the west or east coast of a United States that has no intention of bombarding others.

What do you most dislike about having research published?

Until I became a postdoc, I believed that doing research to publish was sin, just as artists should not paint for money.

Name one extravagance you can now get away with because of your eminence.

To excuse myself from a meeting for another (possible) meeting.



Kazuhiko Kinosita Jr

Kazuhiko Kinosita Jr is a professor of single-molecule physiology at Okazaki National Research Institutes in central Japan. He likes skiing, mountain walking, comic strips, sarcasm and irony.

What single discovery, invention or innovation would most improve your life?

A garbage annihilator. I live a single life in a small Japanese city, where every family must sort its rubbish into more than ten categories. Once sorted — and usually cleaned and packed — the various rubbish types must be taken to different stations. These are often a long way from each other, and tend to be open until 8:30 a.m. just one day a fortnight (kitchen waste can be taken to a station as often as twice a week on specified mornings). Newspapers, for example, must be tied with string, not bagged, and taken to a city hall kilometres away from where I live. I have heard of a university professor in a nearby city who resigned and moved to Tokyo (where life is less stringent) after he found himself cutting newspapers into pieces every night.

What do you do to relax?

I read comic strips. Actually it's not that relaxing because I am so absorbed by them.

What would you have become, if not a scientist?

A computer programmer. I would have tried to invent a new operating system.

What music would you have played at your funeral?

I have already told my last wish to my wife — that my death is to remain undisclosed for two months.

How would you like to be remembered?

An offensive guy, but not totally intolerable.

What's just around the corner?

Another rejection letter from *Nature*. ■