

An interview with Shinichi Aizawa: President of the Japanese Society of Developmental Biologists

This August, the Society for Developmental Biology (SDB) held their annual meeting in Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA, jointly with the Japanese Society of Developmental Biologists (JSDB). The JSDB has recently increased their international profile under the presidency of Dr Shinichi Aizawa from the RIKEN Center for Developmental Biology (CDB). We caught up with him at the SDB/JSDB joint meeting to discuss the projects that the JSDB has been undertaking under his leadership to expand the activities of the society beyond the borders of Japan.



What are you working on at the moment?

I'm interested in head development, specifically focussing on questions ranging from anterior-posterior axis formation to the early regionalisation of the brain. I have generally used a mouse genetics approach in this work, but I have also become interested in phylogenetic aspects, and am working with non-model animals such as *Suncus*, pig, gecko, soft-shelled turtle and the lobe-finned fish *Polypterus*.

How long have you been President of the Japanese Society of Developmental Biologists?

I've been president for four years. At our society, the president of the society and chairman of each annual meeting are two separate positions. The president and board (14 members) are elected by the members of the society, and their terms last for up to four years. The president nominates the

chairman of the annual meeting with the agreement of the board members. I understand that this is different from the structure at the SDB, where the society president is also the head of the annual meeting.

How old is the JSDB?

The society was founded in 1968, and we currently have approximately 1400 members. More information can be found on the JSDB web site (<http://www.jsdb.jp/english/index.html>).

Do you have an annual meeting that all members attend?

We have about 700 participants at every annual meeting. In recent years, during my term as president, we've been putting strong emphasis on increasing the participation of other countries in the Asia-Pacific area. An Asia-Pacific Developmental Biology Network (APDBN) was launched about six years ago under the leadership of the former JSDB president Dr Masatoshi Takeichi (CDB Director), and we now hold the annual JSDB meeting as a joint meeting with the APDBN. Dr VijayRaghavan of the National Centre for Biological Sciences in Bangalore, India, is now chair of the network. This year, about 140 participants from other countries in Asia attended our annual meeting, and our meeting is becoming one of the hub meetings for the Asia-Pacific district. As a result, the official language of our annual meeting is not Japanese anymore, it's English.

How are your members finding the switch from Japanese to English as the language of the annual meeting?

People are getting used to it. Young people, especially, are adapting to English conversation. It's of course necessary to communicate with the participants from other Asian countries, who are now attending our meetings as well.

Other than the annual meetings, what does the society do for its members?

Besides the annual meeting, we also organise two major symposia, in alternating years. Our annual meeting is usually held in May or June, and our two other symposia are later in the year. One is an autumn symposium for young PIs – people who are going to be a PI or who have just begun as PI. The other event, in summer, is a symposium for PhD students and young post-docs.

Unlike the annual meeting, these two symposia are both held in Japanese. These smaller, local meetings allow participants to form closer relationships within the community and get to know each other better. Usually we have about 50 to 70 participants (including about 15 senior discussants) for these symposia. This year, we're holding a summer symposium for trainees, and next year we will have an autumn symposium for young PIs.

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Are you organising any activities for the non-scientific public in Japan?

We have an open symposium for civic education at each annual meeting. In the past three years, we have also made special efforts to contribute to the continuing education of high-school teachers. Our capacity in this activity is very limited, and the activity is co-organised with various organisations, such as the RIKEN CDB in western Japan, the National Institute of Basic Biology (NIBB) in central Japan, and Tokyo Metropolitan University (TMU) in the east. It isn't easy, but we hope to expand this activity across the entire country.

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Is there also a society journal?

Our official journal is *Development, Growth and Differentiation*, which is published by Wiley-Blackwell. The Editor in Chief is Dr Harukazu Nakamura at Tohoku University, who is well known for his work in avian mid-hindbrain development.

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You're collaborating on this meeting with the SDB. How did that come about?

When I started my presidential term, I planned several international collaborations. Aside from holding the annual JSDB meeting as a joint meeting with the APBDN, I also wanted to have joint meetings with western developmental biology societies. The first society we collaborated with was the French society (SFBD). That meeting was two years ago on the Giens Peninsula in France. Last year, many of our members travelled to Edinburgh, UK, for the Congress of the International Society of Developmental Biologists, and this year we have this joint

meeting with the SDB, for which about 90 Japanese scientists made the trip to Albuquerque. There are more international meetings coming up: next year we will have a joint meeting with the German society, and a year after that we will have a meeting with the British Society for Developmental Biology (BSDB).

What's the advantage of collaborating with all these different countries?

One major benefit of joint international meetings is that we can introduce our best and brightest to western scientists. That is the main purpose for us: I believe our society is doing a good job, but we do not have much chance to show what we do to people in western countries. By collaborating on international meetings, young students and post-docs are also encouraged to join foreign societies. We can expose ourselves more to different countries. And, of course, I believe that these are good opportunities to develop scientific collaborations and exchanges.

The JSDB also collaborated with the French society in May. Why did you have a second meeting in France?

Two years ago, our first meeting in collaboration with another country was with the French society. That was so successful that we had a second joint

meeting with them this year. By coming back every few years we hope to develop more frequent communication with European societies. Maybe, in a few years time, we can hold another joint meeting with the SDB as well.

Who is the next JSDB president and when will they start?

The next JSDB president is Dr Kiyokazu Agata from Kyoto University, who is doing extremely interesting work in the field of regeneration in planaria.

Can you name one goal that you would like the JSDB to achieve for its members in the next five years?

I really hope that our annual meeting becomes the hub meeting for the Asia-Pacific region, contributing to the growth of developmental biology in this part of the world and helping our own society to grow as well. At the same time, we are thinking seriously about how we can encourage research activities at local national universities in Japan; they have been facing many difficulties recently. We are at a critical time and at risk of losing our very foundations. An academic organisation is limited in what it can do, but this is a major issue in coming years.

Thank you for your time!