Two Students Win HHMI Predoctoral Fellowships

Two current graduate students, Max Prigozhin of the Gruebele group and Junqi Li of the Burke group, were named recipients of a new international student fellowship from the highly prestigious Howard Hughes Medical Institute. The fellowship program, which is run via a nomination system, supports top predoctoral students in their third, fourth, and fifth years of their graduate studies.

According to their website, "HHMI chose to start this program—a $2 million commitment in its first year—because it recognized a problem: International students in U.S. graduate schools often have difficulty getting funding to support their studies. For example, they are not eligible for federal education and training grants, state scholarships, or other stipends that are reserved only for U.S. citizens. The Institute chose to fund the third to fifth years of graduate school because, by this time, most students have chosen a graduate advisor, identified a research project, and demonstrated their potential for success in the lab."

Li's research focuses around "a building block-based approach as a systematic way of making small molecules. The ultimate goal is to develop a platform for making small molecules in the same way that peptides and oligonucleotides are now made, so that even structurally complex chiral small molecules are freely available to the non-chemist for functional studies."

Prigozhin's PhD work is centered on "developing a technology that will allow [scientists] to use a sudden change in the hydrostatic pressure of a sample as a tool to study protein folding. In the long run, the goal is to construct a reliable atomicistic model and use it to aid the identification of novel drugs that will target protein misfolding and aggregation."

Sean B. Carroll, HHMI's vice president for science education, said of the program, "We hope, through these fellowships, to identify future scientific leaders. Recognition in the form of fellowships, particularly by organizations as well-known and respected as HHMI, can be critical tools for students as they apply to postdoctoral and faculty positions, which both Li and Prigozhin plan to pursue post-graduation."

When speaking to Li and Prigozhin about their fellowships, their gratitude and the impact of the program was clear. Prigozhin said of winning the award: "Winning this fellowship means that my efforts have been recognized by some of the most prominent scientists in the world. Support at this level is very encouraging. It is an incredible honor but also a responsibility because I was the only Russian scientist to be awarded the fellowship this year. It also reminded me that over the years I have been very lucky to find great mentors who supported me throughout the application process."

Li echoed Prigozhin's sentiments, adding, "The award is a tremendous encouragement for me for me as it is a recognition that the goals outlined in the research proposal are important. In addition, it frees me from having any funding concerns for my PhD career."

Information and quotes from HHMI from: http://www.hhmi.org/grants/individuals/intl_fellows.html

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