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Dear Colleague:

Science has recently published a special issue on "Minorities in Science" (November 12, 1993). One article raises the question, "Are Foreigners Freezing Minorities Out?" It presents a nativist-protectionist view that is worrisome. Administrators of minority programs at both white and historically black universities believe that the influx of foreign students is making it harder for native minority students to succeed in the sciences. How? Well, for one thing, foreign (Asian) students are awarded Research Assistantships, which, though they entail hardwork, give recipients the advantage of close contact with a professor, whereas minority students are given Fellowships, which, though they carry prestige and leisure, suffer the disadvantage of isolation. For another thing, foreigners, especially Asians, "are so humble... they will eat and sleep [in the lab]... because their whole body and soul is tied to this experience. Faculty members like this."

I've just quoted Israel Tribble Jr., who runs a doctoral minority program in Tampa, Florida. Mr. Tribble is too polite to come right out and say that Asian students are grinds. But let's face it: maybe they are. After all, many are descendants of shopkeepers and restaurant operators--jobs that, for success, require long hours of hardwork. Young people who transfer that work habit into the pursuit of science is bound to do reasonably well. By contrast, minority students tend to disdain grindship. One reason for their difficulties in the Graduate School is that their conception of what it takes to succeed is insufficiently petty bourgeois.

Let us, however, take another look at grindship. When you see a child working long hours at his stamp collection, refusing to eat or sleep because he is too busy locating an exotic specimen, you can call him a grind. But that's an external judgment. To the young philatelist, the hours spent squinting through a magnifying glass are not a grind, but self-forgetful happiness. So, isn't it possible that at least some foreign students who "eat and sleep in the lab" do so because they really love science--because science is their life and passion?

As children my brothers and I were taken to see the movie Madame Curie. Father, in his innocence, never doubted that a Frenchwoman could be a model for his slant-eyed sons. Marie Curie had, of course, genius, but she was also a glorious grind! She ate and slept in her lab. She ate so little that she collapsed in the classroom. (To oldsters: Remember Greer Garson in that role?) I saw the movie half a century ago. Curie's quixotic dedication, even more than her genius, continues to inspire me, as it ought to inspire all young people.

Best wishes,

*Y. Fu*