

February 7, 1969

Professor R. A. Brink
Department of Genetics
University of Wisconsin
Madison, Wisconsin

Dear Alec:

There are two things that impel me to write you just now.

Your student, Dr. Katherine Lu Shih wrote to me about the possibility of a post doctoral fellowship or position and I would be very much interested in having your appraisal of her before I go any further.

You may already have seen the enclosed piece on plant breeding. I don't know which side of the fence you might be on, which may depend mainly on how you happened to read it. (A sentence was edited out that had to do with the need for additional federal funding in plant sciences. This is an occupational hazard of column writing, and is usually motivated by pressure for space on the part of the newspaper. However, I can't complain that I have ever been very seriously distorted by it, and they have usually taken pains to check with me when that might have been an issue.) Anyhow, I do confess that I am somewhat chagrined at the very slow pace with which new fundamental biology is accommodated into plant breeding work, and it is really that good cause that I'm trying to further.

It occurred to me that no one would be better situated than yourself to write a thoughtful commentary on this confrontation and indeed, to suggest specific avenues of development that ought to be encouraged more rapidly than they are within the framework of the present system.

I thought even further about this in a current article reviewing the present status of work in mammalian hybridization and somatic cell genetics. It has taken over ten years for this to reach some serious fruition, but it irritates me even more to realize that the necessary antecedents to this line of genetic manipulation were already established in plant chimaera studies, e.g. Winkler, in the 1930's and earlier. The whole issue was, of course, badly obfuscated by the Russians' unsupportable claims for routine graft hybridization. But I still think it was somewhat of a disgrace that this area has not been followed up.

BRINK

I am absolutely confident that somatic cell fusion will play as important a role in plant breeding sometime in the future as it is beginning to play in mammalian genetics at the present time. (If you want a good recent rundown on this, and had not already noticed it, you might see an article from Green's group in Nature for December 21.) Let me know what else I might be able to do to stimulate you to react to this issue.

It is not changing the subject at all to ask whether your work on embryo culture of hybrids was ever taken up for practical breeding development as vigorously as you think it might deserve.

Sincerely yours,



Joshua Lederberg
Professor of Genetics

JL/jn
Enclosure