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Chinese Geneticists Are Far from Eugenics Movement

To the Editor:

The article by Dr. Xin Mao (1998), published in the September 1998 issue of the *Journal,* came to our attention just recently. Unfortunately, it misrepresented in many ways the real attitudes of many of the medical geneticists in China. We feel that it is necessary to speak out for ourselves. For instance, sickle cell anemia is as rare among Chinese as it is among whites. The statement that "sickle cell disease is very common in China" (Mao 1998, p. 690) is incorrect. Hence, there is no reason to require newborn screening for sickle cell disease in China (Mao 1998, table 1). Cystic fibrosis is also very rare in China. Hence, there is also no need to perform newborn screening for this disease (Mao 1998, p. 690). Population screening for defective alleles of the α-antitrypsin gene (i.e., the PiZ and PiS alleles) has revealed none in China, with the exception of one case with the genotype of M1S. Therefore, it will be meaningless to conduct genetic testing for α-antitrypsin deficiency among workers in very dirty workplaces (Mao 1998, p. 689). Actually, it will be very difficult to define "very dirty workplace." Mao also stated that "almost all respondents said that the goal of human genetics was 'improvement of the population quality, decrease of the population quantity, and furtherance of eugenic principles' and agreed that 'an important goal of genetic counseling is to reduce the number of deleterious genes in the population'" (pp. 692–693). We wonder whether any knowledgeable human geneticists will believe that human genetics can decrease the population quantity. We also doubt that the number of deleterious genes—especially "recessive genes"—in the population can be readily reduced. As for the term "eugenics," one should be very careful not to equate it with "you sheng" in Chinese, which means "to give birth to a healthy baby." There are many other controversial points in Mao's article. For example, his table 4 asks whether the country should have laws to prohibit disability discrimination. The original questionnaire, however, asked whether the country has or does not have laws to prohibit disability discrimination. The percentage given in table 4 will lead readers to the conclusion that Chinese medical geneticists do not favor the enactment of such laws! This letter will be too long if we try to list all of the controversial points in Mao's article. We are fully aware that, because of differences in culture, value systems, customs, religion, and demographic and economic situations, our viewpoints on many ethical issues may be different than those of our Western colleagues. This stresses the importance of dialogues between us to promote mutual understanding. All constructive suggestions will be heartily welcome, and we will be most grateful for all of them.

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Reply to Guo and to Chen et al.

To the Editor:

Ethical, legal, and social issues in human genetics are hot—but also complicated—topics in developed countries. Since my article (Mao 1998*a*) about Chinese geneticists' views on ethical issues in genetic testing and screening was published, it has attracted attention from the international scientific community and the media. Many gave positive comments on the article (Mao 1998*b*, 1998*c*; Coghlan 1998; Knoppers 1998), but others, such as Guo (1999 [in this issue]) and Chen et al. (1999 [in this issue]), expressed different views.

Ethical, legal, and social issues in human genetics are very sensitive inside China (as well as elsewhere), and there have been few Chinese scientists, either in genetics or in the social sciences, willing to investigate these subjects. For example, Chinese geneticists were invited to