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SMPY Branch Established in China

The Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth (SMPY), established at Johns Hopkins in 1971, has set up "SMPY at Tianjin, People's Republic of China." A port, Tianjin is the third most populous city in China. SMPY at Tianjin is the second non-Hopkins base for SMPY. The other, started in 1986, is SMPY at Iowa State University. By next fall there will be a third branch, located at the University of North Texas and directed by Dr. Ann E. Lupkowski. Each SMPY is fiscally and administratively independent of the others, but they all strive to find youths who reason extremely well mathematically and help them get the supplemental educational opportunities they sorely need.

Heading the Tianjin SMPY is Professor Feng Cheng De of the Teachers Advanced Study College, Hong Qiao District, Tianjin 300123. Professor Feng and his wife, Yung Hua, are two of the leading mathematics educators in China. A major part of the work of the Tianjin SMPY will be preparing male and female students from about age 12 to compete for the six places on China's team in each year's International Mathematical Olympiad (IMO). In only its third year of competition China tied for second place among the 49 nations in the 1988 IMO, far ahead of the United States. One of the only four women who won a medal (silver) that year in the IMO was Professor Feng's student.

In China there are already almost 200 members of SMPY's "700-800 on SAT-M Before Age 13 Group." These youths scored better on the mathematical part of this college-entrance examination than 94 percent of male college-bound high school seniors in the United States do. By our standards, these 700-800M scorers are the top 1 in 10,000 of their age group with respect to mathematical aptitude. They have enormous potential for learning mathematics and related subjects such as physics and computer science far faster and better than is usually possible in most high schools. That is why they thrive on part-time educational facilitation outside their regular classroom routine. In China this facilitation is provided by Spare Time Schools. In the United States some combination of curricular flexibility and special academic courses evenings, on weekends, or during the summer is urged by SMPY. Professor (of psychology) Julian Stanley, the founder of SMPY and its current director at Johns Hopkins, believes that we can learn much from the Chinese about how to care better for youths who reason extremely well mathematically. Their success already is almost startling.

The Fengs' son, Zu Ming, is an 18-year-old graduate student in mathematics at Johns Hopkins, winner of the prestigious George E. Owen Fellowship. Another of Professor Stanley's "protégés" from China is Zhu Xiao-Wei, who received her Ph.D. degree in mathematics from Johns Hopkins last year at age 23. Dr. Zhu (Mrs. Harold Masters) is now an assistant professor of mathematics at the University of Oklahoma in Norman. Because of SMPY at Tianjin and other factors, the United States can expect from China a steady stream of graduate students in mathematics and related subjects, such as computer science, electrical engineering, and physics. They will be some of the intellectually ablest persons in the world, enriching our doctoral programs during a time when many of the brightest Americans prefer medicine, law, business, or politics to the long, austere trek for the Ph.D. degree and the usually lower incomes thereafter.

Also, it seems likely that a number of the best-performing foreign Ph.D. degree recipients will remain in the United States or collaborate with our scientists when they return home. Many of them will consider it a privilege, as Dr. Zhu does, to become university faculty members in fields where there is currently a shortage of trained talent. The United States must help train some of the world's talent, which because of population differences is far more plentiful in most other countries. For example, China has at least four times as many people as our country, and many of them are extremely talented in mathematics, sciences, or engineering. As always, America depends heavily on a constant infusion of able permanent or temporary immigrants. The People's Republic of China is the major new source of such people.