



Big in Japan

How come scientists are famous in Asia, and we get Kevin Federline?

Tom Waits isn't the only one. Heisuke Hironaka, Fields Medal-winner for some of the most difficult mathematical proofs of all time, has appeared in advertisements and on billboards in his native country. Leo Esaki is still popular, more than 30 years after he won the Nobel Prize in physics; he didn't even have time for a brief interview with *Nature* because of a packed social calendar.

David Howell, chair of the East Asian Studies Department at Princeton University, explains that in Asia, "There is a perceived connection between scientific achievement—measured above all by the receipt of Nobel Prizes—and a nation's stature in the world." Nobel Prizes are a metric on par with GDP, Howell says, as a yardstick of progress.

Asians fawn over what the scientists wear and eat (like American movie stars, they often get comped), as well as their private lives—their wives are hounded for gossip on how their husbands are with the housekeeping.

Nobel Prize-winning physicist Chen Ning Yang, 82, married a 28-year-old grad student and caused more of a stir in his native China than Donald Trump did when he wed Melania. As NASA and the Russian space programs falter, the Chinese can't stop lauding their taikonauts, who orbited the Earth last year, with elaborate ceremonies, myriad titles and trips to the Hong Kong Disneyland.

In Korea, the well-documented fame of

Hwang Woo-suk sent the nation into a fit of apoplexy when his fraud was revealed. Across the Sea of Japan, Koichi Tanaka won the Nobel for chemistry in 2002, and the media frenzy was enough to supplant the news of North Korea's having abducted several Japanese citizens. Tanaka made the rounds on all the talk shows, found himself getting mobbed by housewives and graced legions of magazine covers. In an interview with *Nature*, he described the celebrity treatment plainly: "Nobel winners are celebrated like sports stars."

While a great part of all the fervor is pure nationalist sentiment, another is simply besting the West. Robert Sinclair, chair of materials science and engineering and member of the US-Asia Technology Management Center at Stanford University, says, "It's the recognition that the Asian person is regarded as better than Westerners for particularly Western pursuits, which is most appreciated."

In 2001, the Japanese government drafted a state policy that focused on winning 30 Nobel Prizes in 50 years. If the results of a 2002 poll are any indication, it might work: Japanese boys aspire to be research professors more than to be baseball stars, a level of academic aspiration not seen in the West since the space race. Science celebrity has moved East, building a culture that treats Nobels like Oscars and new discoveries like home-run records.

—Joshua Roebke

RESEARCH

Science Says

New research comes out on all kinds of topics on a weekly basis, and occasionally gets picked up by the evening news. To those unfamiliar with the process of scientific discovery, the headlines must sound contradictory, even crazy. For the rest of us though, it's a bit of a game keeping track of what the latest studies suggest:

	Obesity
Out	Watching TV makes you fat
In	Viruses can make you fat
	Videogame Violence
Out	Video games increase aggression
In	Video games desensitize you to violent imagery
	Marijuana
Out	Pot makes you stupid
In	Pot improves memory
	Longevity
Out	Lifelong brain exercise halves the chance of developing dementia
In	Early retirement doesn't make you live longer
	Weird things with mice
Out	Mice can regrow their own organs
In	Mice brains can grow human cells
	Sex
Out	Modern society makes people too busy for sex
In	Having sex is the best way to prepare for a speech
	Genetics
Out	Individualized genetic treatments for disease could be on the way
In	Dancers are different in two key genes