

The Enlightenment of Joseph Priestley and The Enlightened Joseph Priestley (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977 and 2005), provides a detailed account of Priestley's multiple facets.

Popular historical narratives should not be blamed for distorting scholars' historical accounts; after all, each historical narrative is a reconstruction of the past, even those based on a detailed analysis of primary sources. Popular

historical accounts can convey a clear picture of the period and the characters, something achieved by the Open University video *The Publicity of Oxygen* (BBC, 1993). Some of them openly presented as fictions raise stimulating issues. This was the case with *Oxygen*, a play written by Carl Djerassi and Roald Hoffman that created a 'retro' Nobel to be awarded to the discoverer of oxygen. The discussions of

the Nobel committee as it decides between Carl Wilhelm Scheele, Priestley and Lavoisier prompt reflection about the mechanisms of discovery attributions. Historical fiction like this may be more useful and more pleasant than inaccurate pseudo-realistic accounts. ■
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KIM KYUNG-HOON/REUTERS

Stamping his authority

The Hwang scandal highlights the dangers of hyping science.

Martin Kemp

The repercussions of the falsification of stem-cell research by Korean scientist Woo Suk Hwang will reverberate around the scientific community for years to come. And the public dimension seems just as momentous, especially when we consider the mechanisms that elevated this former veterinarian, who was famous only in his home country in 1999, to become one of *Time* magazine's people of the year in 2004. Hwang's rise involved celebrity-minded scientists, state bodies in South Korea concerned with national prestige, funding agencies accountable to government masters, educational institutions bent on international competition, and journalists intent on good stories. They came together in a complex symbiosis to create a distorted image of scientific achievement.

Korea Post issued a postage stamp in Hwang's honour on 12 February 2005. Designed by Roh Jung-hwa, with a denomination of 220 won and printed in a quantity of 1.6 million, it was, the stamp tells us, specially issued to commemorate "the successful establishment of human cloned embryonic stem cells".

The previous stamp released by Korea Post

had shown nature on the island of Marado, with images of happy fish in azure seas, and the next was dedicated to the centenary of Rotary International. A further stamp for 2005 marked the sixtieth anniversary of Korean liberation from Japanese rule, an event of sufficient moment for any national postal service to celebrate. Later in the year, fusion was the subject — not fusion of the scientific kind, but of global cultures, symbolized by a knife and fork being handled as if they were chopsticks. Such was the heady philatelic setting of Hwang's stamp.

The long rectangle of the stamp contains on the left the expected graphics of high-tech cellular science, including the tip of a needle about to break through the wall of a human egg. A man in a wheelchair, silhouetted against the red background, rises triumphantly across the stamp to the right. He runs and leaps for joy in front of a purple cellular sun, before throwing himself into a woman's eager embrace. In a country with a large Christian population, the image of the cripple rising to walk carries clear connotations.

The tone of the scientific imagery on the left of the stamp is similar to that of James Brooke's article in *The New York Times* on

31 May 2005. "In the shadows of a darkened laboratory, a technician in a blue jumpsuit prodded and probed the egg's outer membrane...seeking to introduce a skin cell from a patient with an immune deficiency.

"Finally, on the third probe, the rubbery wall gave way. Magnified 250 times on a black-and-white screen, the egg could be seen making room for the new skin cell, with its new genetic code."

The right part of the stamp encapsulates the claims made in *Time*'s profile: "Hwang and his team at Seoul National University became the first to clone human embryos capable of yielding viable stem cells that might one day cure countless diseases." The stamp's implicit claims for a panacea for debilitating illnesses is just one of a vast number that make their way into the media when stem-cell research and human genomics are discussed.

The question raised by the stamp and other such visual and verbal hype is whether it is now possible to become a big beast in the international jungle of science without becoming ensnared in the perilous mechanisms of celebrity.

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