

December 16, 1975

Dr. Gerald F. Winfield
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Washington, D.C. 20523

Dear Dr. Winfield,

Further to our correspondence of last October. As I may have already indicated to you there was no problem in locating the books whose titles you mentioned to me and I have been reading them with interest.

I did bring up the question of composting technology during my recent visit to WHO and I spent some time with various people in the Division of Community Water Supply. I was surprised to find that they had a rather negative attitude which I think I can fairly summarize as follows. They feel rather hopeless altogether about doing very much about scattered rural sanitation. Their most urgent problems are in fairly densely settled conurbations, where they feel that the handling and transportation of human excreta would pose insuperable problems. And they feel that apart from China, there would be insuperable cultural barriers about educating the local people about any constructive method of waste management.

They feel that there is not enough economic gain to justify going beyond the promulgation of fairly simple latrines as the principal method of waste management and they have been knocking their heads for years trying to get even this simple approach to be accepted.

As far as I know, there has been no systematic study of the means that might be used to encourage a more positive attitude about the handling of wastes through composting. Of course, many of these conceptions predate the two fertilizer revolutions: the development of crops that demand heavy fertilizer inputs for economic yield; and the sharply rising price of inorganic fertilizers.

I had a more rewarding conversation with Dr. Chang who is Deputy Director General at WHO in charge of health services and who although he had very substantial educational experience in the U.S. is also very familiar with developments in contemporary China. In essence he told me that the current practice of rural composting in China is made viable by very careful management and inspection. The compost heaps earn work credits and are inspected within the brigade to make sure that they conform both to sanitary requirements and

to efficient fertilizer value (not too much soil etc.). This systematic management is obviously the key to success. I am still trying to find sources for a more rigorous analysis of the hygienic implications of composting as actually practiced and may be getting some help to do that from Dr. Chang, but if you know the Chinese sources which are summarized in the NIH bibliography (HEW 73-439), you might be able to save me an otherwise extraordinary effort.

You may also be interested in the attached correspondence which deals with some of our problems in dealing with these issues in this country.

I do not know what next remains to be done and would certainly welcome your own observations.

Sincerely yours,

Joshua Lederberg
Professor of Genetics

JL/rr
Enclosures