



American Museum of Natural History

Choukoutien limestone caves near Peking, from which remains of Peking man and his life have been dug.

Peking man refound

New discoveries at classic site announced; finds recall a mystery

Through years of revolution, invasion and the Great Leap Forward, and Red Guard terrorists, a few quiet scientists have been patiently probing mainland China's ancient limestone caves with shovels, dental tools and paintbrushes to recover the bones of one of man's most famous ancestors—500,000-year-old Peking man.

The fragments of facial and frontal bones they've come up with, according to a New China News Agency report from Hong Kong, could be major finds. And there certainly is further chance that there will be more discoveries from the limestone Choukoutien site, about 27 miles southwest of Peking, where for the last several decades scientists have been unearthing pieces of ancient men.

The new discoveries are only latest bulletins of an extraordinary story in-

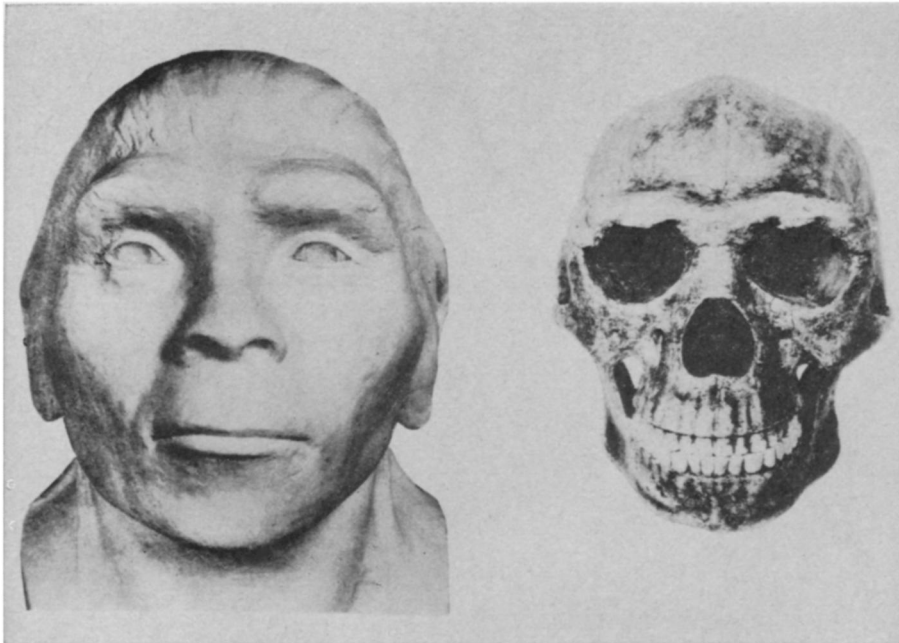
by Barbara Tufty



American Museum of Natural History

Reconstructed skull of Sinanthropus.

592/science news/vol. 92/16 december 1967



American Museum of Natural History

Face of man's ancestor may have looked like this, moulded from ancient skull.

volving an unsolved mystery, international accusations, and a slow scientific accumulation of facts about a man-ape that lived half a million years ago, with a relatively large brain box and an inclination to eat his fellows.

Peking man rates in the history of evolution sometime after the Java man, which lived some 1 million to 700,000 years ago, and before Heidelberg man, Neanderthal man and the Cro-Magnon man which lived some 40,000 to 50,000 years ago. These prehistoric people appeared on earth in the middle and late Pleistocene ages—long after the 20-million-year-old Kenyapithecus africanus announced last year by British anthropologist Louis S. B. Leakey (SN: 2/25), or the 28-million-year-old ape discovered in Egypt and announced last month (SN: 11/25) by Dr. Elwyn Simons of Yale University.

Many original pieces of Peking man have disappeared, yet scientists know a lot about him and his family. His brain was relatively large—about 1,150 cubic centimeters (modern man has about 1,450 cc.). He had thick skull walls, large beetling bony brows, and robust teeth. He knew how to use fire, and made crude stone and bone tools. From careful inspection of disordered human bones, scientists believe Peking man was a cannibal. For thousands of years, he frequented the vast limestone caves in the Choukoutien area, one of which is about 100 feet high and 500 feet long. Other predators sharing the caves included several members of the cat family, bears and hyenas—all of which brought in bones of other animals such as horses, camels, elephants, deer and sheep.

The discovery of Peking man begins when an ancient human tooth turned up in a Peking drugstore, along with dragon teeth or fossilized animal bones and teeth to be ground up for medicinal purposes and sold. Paleontologists of the period—about 1900—often found it rewarding to poke around in these drugstore bones, brought in by peasants from outlying districts. Tales vary about the actual finding of the first human tooth—some say a Munich professor recognized the yellow-brown relic around the turn of the 20th century. Others say it was later—in the 1920s, when a member of the American Museum of Natural History became interested in certain fossils, and gave them to a Swedish research group to send to Sweden, where the tooth was identified as human.

As news spread, many scientists throughout the world were drawn to the Peking area. Tedious years of searching brought only minor rewards, but enough to keep interest stimulated. In 1921, quartz tools once used by man were unearthed in the Choukoutien area. In 1923, a single human tooth was found, followed by another a few years later. A third tooth convinced Dr. Davidson Black, American professor of anatomy at the Peiping (Peking) Union Medical College, that a hitherto unidentified member of the developing human race had been discovered. The man was named *Sinanthropus pekinensis*, or the Chinese man of Peking. In 1928 scientists unearthed two jaws, skull walls, and more teeth. On Dec. 2, 1929, the first intact skull was found.

The locality continued to give up bits and pieces of Peking man, together

with other evidences of the way he lived—and by 1934, parts of at least 40 different men, women and children had been taken from the caves.

Then in 1937, the Japanese, invading North China, developed a keen interest in Peking man, and a still unsolved mystery in the history of archaeology was born. Excavation projects were then under the direction of Dr. Franz Weidenreich, well-known German anatomist with the Peiping Union Medical College, whose meticulous reports and plaster casts have yielded much information about Peking man. In 1941, Dr. Weidenreich took a set of these plaster casts to America, leaving the original bones as property of the Geological Survey of China, in custody of the Peiping College. He presented the casts to the Museum of Natural History in New York, where they remain.

About this same time, Dr. Wong Wen-hao, then director of the Geological Survey, became apprehensive about possible Japanese intentions, and ordered the original bones boxed and sent to the U.S. Embassy in Peking. Here they were entrusted to the U.S. Marines just as they were ordered to leave North China. The colonel in charge was told to treat the boxes as "secret material" and transport them with his personal effects, along with other Marine baggage, equipment and ammunition. The whole lot departed at five in the morning, Dec. 5, 1941, on a special train that arrived Dec. 7 at the port of Chinwangtao, where the liner *President Harrison* was sent to transport the Marines and their effects to the Philippines. That was the last anyone seems to know about the bones. The ship was grounded to hamper the Japanese, the Marines were captured and sent to prison camps; their ammunition and equipment disappeared, but were later seen in Japanese possession.

Where were the bones? Many people have been accused in a wild selection of guesses:

They were entrusted to American missionaries to take them safely away; they were slipped aboard a ship that was later sunk; they were tossed overboard as worthless junk; they were ground up by local Chinese for medicine; they were smuggled away by American scientists—a thesis Chinese Communists prefer.

Nothing has been proved. Nothing has been disproved. Scientists believe that neither the Japanese, nor Chinese, nor Americans know where the bones of original Peking man lie.

Meanwhile pieces of his fellow creatures continue to be excavated by Chinese scientists and set into a museum at the Choukoutien site, according to sparse reports that continue to filter out from China.