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## Letters

### Nothing new under the sun?

The tree peony article ("Peonies," SN: 7/28/84, p. 57) gives one the impression that European awareness of the Chinese plant began in 1880. A report of *Paeonia moutan* was first published in 1655 by Martinus Martini, a Jesuit missionary who was in China from 1643 to 1652. In *Novus Atlas Sinensis*, Martini reports that "Meutan" is found in its wild state in the mountains of the southwestern part of Shensi. Tree peonies were grown by gardeners and then shipped over 1,000 miles to Canton by river boats in open baskets without soil. In Canton

## This Week

- 164 Liquid Carbon: The Melting of a Diamond
- 164 Genes of AIDS-linked virus cloned
- 165 Infant death tied to dopamine excess
- 165 A mathematical surprise: Proving the Bieberbach conjecture
- 166 Of fibers clear, and pearls and beer
- 166 An enzyme commits chemical suicide
- 167 Litigation a threat to vaccine supply?
- 167 Alzheimer's report: Mapping cell damage
- 167 Sugar/water switch allows dry life
- 173 Dreams may be gone but not forgotten
- 173 Satellite planned for first extreme ultraviolet sky survey

## Research Notes

- 172 Chemistry

## Articles

- 168 What Mean These African Stones?  
Cover: Venus rises over stones at the Namoratunga II site in Kenya. The 15-minute exposure shows the almost vertical (at an angle of 3.412°) trajectory of the planet. The virtually vertical rise of celestial bodies at the location is an important part of the argument that Namoratunga II was used by the ancient Cushites to determine their calendar. (Photo: Scott Davis)
- 170 In Search of Speedier Searches



## Departments

- 163 Letters

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they were potted and sold, the price depending on the number of buds per plant. After flowering, the plants were thrown away, as the climate at Canton is too hot to allow winter rest.

Sir Joseph Banks, of Kew, England, had sailed as naturalist with Captain Cook to the Far East. Having seen Chinese drawings and having read earlier accounts, perhaps the report by the Jesuit missionary Pierre Martial Cibot published in 1778, Banks became interested in tree peonies. He engaged a British surgeon, John Duncan, to produce a Moutan in Canton. On April 4, 1787, Mr. Duncan sent a tree peony back to England aboard the *London*. The peony survived the voyage, and was planted in the Royal

Botanical Gardens at Kew in 1789. The plant, originally named *Paeonia moutan banksii*, lived until 1842 when it was destroyed in a building operation.

Rob Moir  
Curator of Natural History  
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Salem, Mass.

Correction: Cotton top tamarins are South American monkeys, not South African, as incorrectly stated in "Animal briefs" (SN: 8/18/84, p. 108).

SEPTEMBER 15, 1984

163