

Peking Man

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by Eileen Meier

I have gotten good leads to material which fits into my collection by looking carefully at thematic exhibits not in my fields of interest.

In critiquing my Israeli pen friend's exhibit of the "Lion King" I saw a nice postal stationery item from the People's Democratic Republic of China depicting Peking Man in his chapter on Evolution.

I realized that Ron Berger's item would fit nicely into my display "Happy Chinese New Year" chapter on a short history of Chinese astronomy.

Turning to *Topical Time* I found an ad from Berti Sergio of Italy. I sent him a photocopy of Ron's page. Within a few weeks I received the desired item on approval.

I find the dealers who advertise in *Topical Time* to be very helpful and understanding of thematic collector's want lists.

Turning the Chinese postal stationery item over I was pleased to find that the Ministry of Posts had printed thematic information in Chinese and English about the commemorative pre-stamped envelope (reproduced on the next page).

I also checked the listing in the Encyclopedia Britannica for Peking Man. Britannica is a great reference for any subject. There are two versions, the Micropedia which gives general information and the Macropedia that gives additional detail on selected subjects.

I was surprised at the different emphasis of these Chinese and British information sources. The Chinese issued the postal stationery item for the 60th anniversary of the discovery of the first skull of Peking Man on December 2, 1929 at Zhoukoudian, Fangshan county near Beijing, the current name of Peking, by Pei Wenzhong (1904-1982).

Britannica gives the discovery credit to Davidson Black in 1927 for finding a single tooth. Turning to Britannica biographic information we find that Black was a Canadian physician and physical anthropologist. He served in China after World War I until his death as professor of embryology and neurology at the Peking Union Medical College.

Black had searched unsuccessfully for fossils of early man in Jehol, Northern China and Thailand. In 1927 at Chou-k'ou-tien, near Peking, he found a hominid lower molar. From this single tooth, Black inferred the existence of an unknown hominid. In 1932, he pointed out the close relationship between Peking Man and the Java Man.

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Later excavations of the Chou-k'ou-tien cave have proven the accuracy of Black's theory.

Britannica does not mention the Chinese fossil discoveries or their discoverer, the Chinese scientist Pei Wenzhong. These discoveries included 14 skullcaps, several mandibles, facial bones and limb bones, along with the teeth of about 40 individuals.

The Chinese postal stationery write-up states that Peking Man is an important link in the evolution of mankind. And "from ape to man" is a major chapter in the study of the materialist conception of history of Marxism. The discovery of the first skull of Peking Man (*Homo erectus pekinensis*) "is a great contribution to the research of the evolution of mankind."

Britannica gives facts that these hominid fossils date to the Middle Pleistocene, perhaps 350,000 years ago and they postdate Java Man. Peking Man is considered more advanced than Java Man due to having a larger cranial capacity, a forehead and non-overlapping canines. No mention is made directly of evolution — a theory proposed by Charles Darwin, a British scientist.

Darwin's book, "On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection or the Preservation of Favored Races in the Struggle for Life" came out on November 24, 1859 and all 1250 copies were sold out on the first day.

Darwin had mentioned man only once in the Origin. In the last chapter there is a single sentence, "much light will be thrown on the origins of man and his history."

For a well written account for the nonscientist on the evolution of the idea of evolution read "Blueprints: Solving the Mystery of Evolution" The book by Maitland A. Edy and Donald C. Johanson reads like a scientific detective story and is well worth your time. It was published in 1989.

The Chinese stress the Marxist materialist theory, while the British stress the scientific facts in placing the fossils in their correct placement on the time line of human evolution.

The Chinese issued their postal stationery on October 19, 1989. The stamp on the envelope features a bust of a female Peking Man and the cachet shows a living scene of Peking Man. Britannica verifies that the Chinese designs are correct, i.e., Peking Man had a well developed communal culture, practiced hunting, and used fire domestically.

The female Peking Man shown on the stamp holds a wooden object – seems to be lighter than clubs usually seen held by prehistoric men – perhaps she holds a digging stick in the gathering of edible plants and roots. The answer to its identification may be found in Britannica's reference to Peking Man (1975) by Harry L. Sapiro which tells the story of discovery, significance and disappearance of the fossils.

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Unfortunately the original bones were under study at the Peking Union Medical College in 1941 when a Japanese invasion was feared. An attempt was made to smuggle them out of China to the United States. The bones disappeared and were never found. The casts as well as specimens discovered in 1958 are available for study.

If your local library does not have this book, it may be available through interlibrary loan.

I mentioned in a letter to George Rohrer that I was doing this article. By return mail George sent me a used set of Cuba 1967 issue showing the Evolution of Man. George had bought the set in Canada as he could not buy it in the United States due to the embargo on Cuban products.

The printing on this set is very small so I went to our local library to use their 1996 Scott Catalogues housed in the reference section. I found the Prehistoric Man set and learned that the 4c value (Scott 1213) depicted *Sinanthropus pekinensis*. I will use that stamp in my follow-up article for *Old World Archaeologist*.

I checked all the China headings and found another issue – People's Republic of China (Scott 2346) for the International Union for Quaternary Research Conference. This stamp shows an early man and I have it now. The word Quaternary sent me to the library dictionary. Quaternary means the geological period following the Tertiary in the Cenozoic era, comprising the Pleistocene and Recent epochs.

Fellow stamp collectors like George Rohrer are wonderful people who will be very helpful with your research projects. Be sure that you include a stamped self-addressed envelope when you are writing to stamp collectors and stamp dealers seeking information.

I would greatly appreciate any other leads to Peking Man, whether it be informational or philatelic material such as stamps, meters, cancels, postal stationery, etc. A photocopy of the item would be very useful.

As usual I have learned new information about a philatelic item by research and had fun at the same time. Just start digging, one little area at a time and pretty soon you'll have the whole tell opened and the story becomes laid out for you. Just don't ever give up on a project because there's help from all of us.

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