The People's Peking Man: Popular Science and Human Identity in Twentieth-Century China

Sigrid Schmalzer
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Can (or should) paleoanthropology be completely independent of socio-political influence? The answer might be no, whether we like it or not. *The People's Peking Man* presents a fascinating example of the interaction between the scientific field of paleoanthropology and Chinese politics by looking at the history of paleoanthropology in modern China (1898–2005). As a historian, not an anthropologist, Schmalzer was able to stay objective and provide a fresh view of paleoanthropology through her observation and analysis. At the beginning, an historian's narrative might not be familiar to paleoanthropologists who are more used to natural science writing. Schmalzer does an excellent job at providing ample evidence to support her analysis and discussion, based on her intensive interviews and literature reviews that show her profound knowledge of the Chinese language, culture, and paleoanthropology.

This book divides modern Chinese history into three eras: the pre-Mao Republican (Chapter 1), and the Mao (Chapters 2–5) and the post-Mao eras (Chapters 6–8). Chapter 1 covers the first half of the twentieth century when China was suffering from political turmoil both nationally and internationally. One of the main questions the Chinese intellectuals tried to answer during this chaotic period was why China became so weak and how China could become stronger. It was around this time period when Darwinism was introduced to China. The concept of evolution quickly became popular in the form of Social Darwinism rather than biological evolution. When Peking Man was discovered at Zhoukoudian in the 1920s, it gained international fame but no consensus was reached regarding its evolutionary status and importance. It was because the study of human evolution in China was still a new field with no solid methodology and theory as it had in other parts of the world. Peking Man was just an interesting fossil that might or might not be directly related to the Chinese people.

The situation changed rapidly with the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Chapters 2 to 5 convincingly show how Mao's China used paleoanthropology (represented by Peking Man) to promote and teach Marxist political philosophy to the lay Chinese people. The agenda Mao's government emphasized repeatedly was "labor created humanity," written by Engels in his 1876 essay "The part played by labor in the transition from ape to human." The role of manual labor—not mental labor—was considered the major evolutionary force. Darwin and Engels were used together to give a "one-two materialist punch" on the subject of human evolution. Darwin "demonstrated the commonality of humans and animals" and then Engels asserted "the primacy of labor" that made humans evolve in a different direction (p. 71). This "theory" about human evolution was mentioned in every single article published during the period of Mao's China. Labor became the core of human identity in Mao's China and Peking Man was used as an example of an ideal communist society (p. 94). Paintings and dioramas of Peking Man depicted primitive humans living in a peaceful and cooperative community in which both "men and women hunt together." Peking Man became a national ancestor and an icon of revolution.

An interesting aspect Schmalzer touches upon is the issue of racism and human evolution. Mao's China viewed racism as the equivalent of fascism and imperialism because in communist society everyone should be treated as equals (except the landlord and bourgeois). Despite the differences in motives, the Chinese movement of anti-racism under Mao parallels the anti-eugenics movement in the western societies after the World War II. Franz Weidenreich, a well-respected Jewish German paleoanthropologist who described Peking Man, was heavily criticized during this time period because of his argument about racial continuity. Weidenreich was one of the first researchers to recognize the morphological similarity between modern Mongoloids and Peking Man. His argument was far from the notorious polygenism but closer to anti-racism. He emphasized regional continuity to show the deep history of the Chinese. In the post-Mao era, Weidenreich's racial continuity argument gained popularity and was carried on in the form of multiregionalism, which the majority of the Chinese paleoanthropologists support to date.

Before the onset of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, paleoanthropology was mainly used for science dissemination and squelching superstition by providing "hard evidence" of Chinese ancestors, i.e., the Peking Man fossils, who lived in a communist society 500,000 years ago. Science was perceived as a new and modern tool that could help in building a strong communist country while superstition was something to be attacked and squashed. However, in the latter half of the Cultural Revolution, the focus shifted from emphasizing the actual fossils to promoting the *nature* of paleoanthropological research. The Cultural Revolution emphasized the importance of the masses which consist of workers, peasants, and soldiers. As a field science,

> "Paleoanthropology was especially easy to portray as a science based on labor, since it included so much dusty

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> work in the field, where shovels, picks, and wheelbarrows figured as prominent tools of the trade." (p. 140)

Paleoanthropologists were forced to learn from the masses. This was easier said than done. Although the local workers contributed tremendously to the excavation process, the untrained "mass" had little to offer in scientific analysis and discussion. Instead of risking their jobs and lives by openly admitting the reality, paleoanthropologists turned their focus to developing museum exhibitions and publishing popular science magazines to at least interact with the masses. While most science historians view the Cultural Revolution period as a "dark age" in the development of science in China, the author provides an alternative perspective. Schmalzer reexamines "science in the Cultural Revolution by taking seriously one of the stated goals of the time, the promotion of popular science" (p. 139).

Chapters 6 to 8 cover the change in paleoanthropology in the post-Mao era (from 1980s to 2005). "Spring time for science" had come. China opened its door to foreigners and as a result western theories on human evolution became available to the Chinese researchers. The once predominant propaganda "labor created humanity" started to disappear from the scientific literature. New voices and ideas emerged with the "freedom from forced participation in political activities" (p. 176). However, the field of Chinese paleoanthropology did not become completely free from the national agenda. Ethnic nationalism replaced communist theory and became a potent force in shaping modern day Chinese paleoanthropology. One of the well-known examples is the strong support of the multiregional evolution of modern humans by the Chinese researchers. Although nationalism certainly played a significant role, Schmalzer persuasively argues that nationalism alone cannot explain the Chinese preference for multiregionalism. I fully agree with her point here. Chinese paleoanthropologists often have been criticized by researchers who are not familiar with the Chinese paleoanthropological fossil records. Even within China, the majority of geneticists do not support multiregionalism and some western scientists strongly support various forms of multiregionalism. The communist propaganda has clearly affected and sometimes distorted the interpretation of the Chinese hominid fossils. Thus, it is understandable to be cautious about any influence by the state in scientific interpretation. However, it is unfair to ignore or denigrate a legitimate hypothesis by accusing Chinese paleoanthropologists of being blinded by ethnic nationalism when credible scholars from other countries also support this view.

Schmalzer dedicates an entire chapter to reviewing the post-Mao era research on yeren, the Chinese version of Bigfoot. She includes this section because she views yeren as a good example that sits on the border of human and animal, science and superstition, thus providing valuable insight in how people think of human identity. This is the only chapter I felt less enthusiastic to read. It is probably because of my personal background, being trained as a biological anthropologist not a historian. Even the author notices that "not everyone will agree that yeren research […] is a legitimate scientific enterprise" (p. 245). Except for this chapter, I did enjoy the book very much.

Some paleoanthropologists may not be convinced of how and why an historian's analysis of paleoanthropology is useful and important. For someone like me who is accustomed to reading about individual fossil descriptions and interpretation, this book was utterly refreshing because paleoanthropology was treated in a larger scale within social context. One of the best examples of how paleoanthropology has been influenced by socio-political circumstances can be found in the dynamics between evolutionary theory and religion. In China, evolutionary theory was accepted with no strong objection due to the lack of an "indigenous belief system that suffered quite so devastating a challenge from evolutionism as Christianity did in the West" (p. 5). The promotion of communist ideology naturally led to the suppression of the religious values. In contrast, the majority of the scientists in the United States are deeply concerned about the Intelligent Design argument made by some orthodox Christians. As a scientist, we are trained not to confuse or mix religion with science. As a scientist living in a larger society, however, we cannot completely ignore other people who claim the "authority to interpret human origins" (p. 4), especially when they start to influence scientific education. This kind of conflict arises because

> "[the scientists] have eagerly sought to define human origins in indisputably scientific terms, since people who understand themselves thus are wedded to science in a very powerful way. For similar reasons, religious leaders have often been equally adamant in their desire to introduce or preserve their own interpretations of human origins." (p. 4)

Paleoanthropology as a scientific field lies in the middle of this debate and thus cannot be totally separated from the socio-political paradigm of the time. Understanding the history of paleoanthropology can help researchers put their research into perspective and to focus on doing objective science. Because not a lot of books have been published on this issue, *The People's Peking Man* is a welcome addition.